Understanding Graffiti and Street Art within Urban environments (Toronto)

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Abstract

Graffiti and street art in urban environments serve as platforms for expressions of social justice, documentation of historical events, and promoting sustainability values linked to the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development. Graffiti and street art, often regarded as forms of rebellious expression, have evolved into powerful tools for social and political commentary. Many artists such as Banksy, Toronto's own Jessy Pacho (aka PHADE) and Nick Sweetman (aka the Bee Guy) use these visual art forms to raise awareness about various issues of social justice and climate change not only aligns with the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development but offers valuable teachable moments. Graffiti and street art, through their ubiquitous and accessible nature play a significant role in highlighting social issues linked to these goals while engaging communities, prompting dialogue and inspiring action towards change.

Foreword

Graffiti and street art have been very controversial with perceptions ranging from criminal activity to a work of art. Yet these writings and images have critical implications for urban development, cultural expression, and community dynamics (Rogers, 2024). This research investigates these vibrant forms of public art in Toronto, focusing on their roles in advocating for social justice, documenting historical events, and promoting sustainability values. This study explores how these forms of artistic expression are educational, contribute to broader sustainability goals, and inform city planning strategies.

In recent years, urban planners and policymakers have increasingly recognized the importance of integrating cultural and artistic elements into cityscapes. Graffiti and street art are no longer merely seen as acts of vandalism but as vital components of urban aesthetics and social discourse (Bowen, 1999). Toronto, with its rich tapestry of diverse cultures, provides a landscape for examining these dynamics.

Relevance to Sustainability Goals

Sustainability in urban planning goes beyond environmental considerations; it draws attention to issues of social justice within an informal education platform (Bowen, 1999).

Street art initiatives provoke dialogue and action. Many graffiti and street art murals highlight issues of inequality, oppression, and disparity with an aim to promote social equity and inclusivity. These are aligned with SDG 11 and 16: creating resilient, inclusive communities; peace Justice and strong institutions. Other writings and murals bring to the forefront climate action provoking actions of care for the land, water and air. These are aligned with SDGs 13, 14 & 15.

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Graffiti and street art serve as a living archive, capturing socio-political issues. Documentation of events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter, and Pollinators not only incite people to take action but remind us about what was and sometimes still is. These images inform future generations of our past with hope to not repeat the mistakes of our forefathers (Ferrell Jeff, 2021). These artforms in public spaces function as platforms for education, encouraging discussions and inspiring action.

Relevance to City Planning

City planners have harnessed the power of graffiti and street art to enhance public spaces, encourage active transportation, support local artists and reduce vandalism (Boudreau, J. A., Keil, R., & Young, 2006). In Toronto, the Street Art Toronto (StART) initiatives support local artists in showcasing their skills and promote positive messages of equity, diversity and

[1] Sustainable Development Goals https://uwaterloo.ca/sustainable-development-solutions-network-canada/sustainable-development-goals-sdgs

inclusion. Street art projects transform neglected spaces into vibrant places that foster a sense of pride and belonging. Walking and cycling is fostered in places where there is visual appeal, thus, contributing to a more sustainable healthy lifestyle aligned with SDG 3: good health and wellbeing.

My research project aims to highlight contributions of graffiti and street art to Toronto's urban fabric. Examining artworks through the lenses of social justice, historical documentation, and sustainability, helps uncover valuable insights for sustainable city planning and community development. This study seeks to provide information to community stakeholders about the transformative educational potential of graffiti and street art.

My research focuses on the interconnections between graffiti and street art, and sustainability, education, and city planning. The main objective of this Major Project is to explore how graffiti and street art influence and are influenced by urban sustainability practices, educational opportunities, and city planning policies, management and strategies in Toronto. This research uses an interdisciplinary approach to view graffiti and street art through the lens of psychosocial and cultural perspectives (*Graffiti's Influence on Society*, 2019), educational perspectives (Sontakke, 2022), and city planning and aesthetic perspectives (Soergel, 2021). The main purpose is to explore how graffiti and street art raise awareness about sustainability goals and challenges and investigate city management policies relevant to graffiti and street art.

Literature Review

Graffiti and street art offer valuable insights about the concerns, tensions and desires within local and global communities (Tuck, 2009). Some of the tensions and desires are strongly linked to sustainability goals and practices (Wells & Lopes, 2022; *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2024). Graffiti and street art document moments in time, provide situational documented evidence and capture the stress and/or longing within specific pockets of society that may be local or global (Halsey & Young, 2006). Documentations in the form of graffiti or 'street art' may serve as informal and formal educational learning experiences (Ladson-Billing, 2017, Ch. 7). Using an interdisciplinary approach allows me to examine and view graffiti and 'street art' from different areas of study (*Hacker Definition & Meaning*,

2024) such as anthropological, social, cultural, historical, and artistic through observation of this art form within "zones of contact": spaces where stakeholders may interact with graffiti and 'street art' (Pratt, 2014, p173). Graffiti and 'street art' within social spaces may offer insights into past, present and possible future areas of challenges where cultures intersect, conflict, and contend with one another, often within contexts of significantly unequal power dynamics, such as those seen in colonialism, slavery, and the lingering effects that persist in many regions of the world today (Pratt, 2014, p.173). Graffiti and street art within specific spaces may exhibit challenges of social injustices experienced by marginalized populations, display the social identity of community members, instigate conversations and actions of change and influence perceptions of place, artists and residents.

Insights gained from this research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical (Sabourin, 2019), socio-economic (Gonçalves, 2022) and social identity of artists, residents and the community (Othen-Price, 2006). This research will also lay a foundation for understanding changing perceptions and impact of graffiti and street art (Beaton & Todd, 2015 Ch7) on urban environments, placemaking, education about community members, artist views, desires and concerns, and to explore policies and city management of graffiti and street art (*Finding Beauty: Toronto's Clean & Beautiful City Initiative*, 2007).

Research on graffiti and street art is strongly linked to values of sustainability, education and city planning (Chang, 2020; Sabourin, 2019; Sandals & Abbott, 2016)). Graffiti and street art often act as a provocation to instigate public discourse on issues related to themes of social justice and history. Many underlying themes of graffiti and street art are centred on forms of oppression, hopes and tensions experienced by marginalized and vulnerable populations (Averns, 2016; *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2024). Public discourse is a cornerstone in raising awareness and igniting discussions about the social and economic contentions and in prompting actions to create more inclusive communities (*Social Justice Murals: How Street Art Fuels Social Change*, 2021). Graffiti and street art also draw attention to climate change and spark initiatives to counteract the damage happening on earth. Collaboration between artists, local communities, and political bodies can build and strengthen more resilient, inclusive ways to formulate city planning strategies and develop informal and formal intergenerational learning environments (Avramidis & Tsilimpounidi, 2017; Beaton & Todd, 2015). City planning policies and management practices are important

aspects of exploring evolving perceptions of graffiti and ‘street art’. When city officials embrace and showcase graffiti and ‘street art’, it influences the publics’ perception. Research on graffiti and ‘street art’ can assist planners in contributing to policies that are more socially balanced, as opposed to gentrified, forms of artistic expression. Graffiti and ‘street art’ are part of place making (Chmielewska, 2017) and have a role in transforming urban spaces into vibrant expressions that reflect a community’s identity and foster social interactions and dialogues. The presence of graffiti may add to or decrease the value of a place based on perceptions. Whether graffiti and street art are seen as positive or negative, zones of contact provide insights into the local culture, history and identity of a neighbourhood, city and community. My research also explores the balance between control of vandalism (Bragagnini, 2021) and promotion of graffiti and ‘street art’ as legitimate art forms (*Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 485*, 2011).

Graffiti and ‘street art’ may be examined from various perspectives. Key perspectives that are relevant to this research are psychosocial, cultural, political, aesthetic and educational (Soergel, 2021; Sontakke, 2022). Examining graffiti and ‘street art’ through these lenses allows educators, policy makers and community members to appreciate the value and impact of this art form.

The psychosocial perspectives (Boyd et al., 2020, Ch.2) consider self-understanding, social relationships and relationships within an environmental context and offer a lens from which to examine the psychological and emotional aspects of graffiti and street art. From this position I examine how these art forms influence individual and collective perceptions, emotions and behaviours. This type of lens examines the ways in which graffiti and street art support a sense of belonging, empowerment, or social alienation within urban communities. Mental health and well-being are important aspects of this perspective and are used to explore the impact of graffiti and street art on individuals and the collective (Dar, 2013). From a sociological perspective (Boyd et al., 2020, Ch.2) I look at the construction of social identities, the negotiation of public spaces and placemaking, and the social networks established by graffiti and street art artists. The cultural perspective (Boyd et al., 2020, Ch.2) offers insights into the way individuals are shaped by their environments and other cultural factors. This allows me to examine the context in which graffiti and street art happen and the reciprocal influence between artists, and other community members. I analyze graffiti and

street art within the social environments where the art may be a form of resistance to local, national and global events and linked to sustainability.

In some cases, a political, legal and ethical perspective is employed to examine the tensions that arise from these art forms (Shamez, 2017)**.** When graffiti and street art writers claim public spaces, the outcome may reinforce perceptions of and associations with vandalism and criminal activities. This may then become a legal and/or ethical dilemma where political bodies feel obligated to investigate the balance between public and private, as well as community and individual rights. Consideration of the challenges among artistic expression, private/public property and community values underpin questions surrounding vandalism and criminal behaviours. Analysis of power dynamics between local political bodies, property owners and street artists are an important factor when examining issues of control, access and ownership.

The aesthetic perspective explores the artistic value and visual impact of graffiti and street art (Reid & Taylor, 2008). Academics in education may examine the formal elements, styles and techniques used by these artists and decipher how these art forms contribute to the discourse of art. They also interpret how graffiti and street art challenge traditional perspectives of beauty. Academics from disciplines such as politics and business may also examine how this art form impacts the cultural economy and urban development including the gentrification and commercialization of graffiti and street art.

An educational perspective on graffiti and street art offers a valuable bridge between informal and formal learning environments. Graffiti and street art can serve as an educational tool to promote cultural, social and political awareness and diversity, examine creative expression and visual literacy, investigate artistic techniques and skill development, and explore career development (Reid & Taylor, 2008).

Examining graffiti and street art from various perspectives allows me to work toward developing a workshop for educators, policy makers and community organisations aimed at enhancing their understanding of the psychosocial, cultural, political, aesthetic and educational impacts of this art form. This is one way I hope to mobilize this research in the near future.

Theoretical Frameworks and Literature Review

It's 2024, and the debate regarding graffiti as being art or vandalism (Bragagnini, 2021) is ever present and a backdrop to the challenges of racism, violence, and oppression. Toronto seems to be a hub of an 'emerging global education network' (Scott & Hamlin, 2016, p186). I build on works by Emdin & Sirrakos Jr. (2017) and McAuliffe (2012) while exploring the evolving perceptions of graffiti globally and locally. I am inspired by these authors and the contributors to the book 'Between the Worlds and Urban Classrooms' as the book narrates how people of colour in urban classrooms resist and develop pedagogies to serve as tools in the fight for intersectional justice (Emdin & Sirrakos Jr., 2017, p.xi). This is relevant to the history of perceptions of graffiti and street art rooted in Black history (Ladson-Billing, 2017, p. 83-94). McAuliffe (2012) explores the rise of the creative city, criminalization of graffiti and plans for public art which seem similar to what was happening in Toronto around 2013 and in other global cities such as Sydney, Australia. My study, as noted, uses social, economic and environmental lenses framed as an educational experience to explore graffiti and street art within the city of Toronto.

Although some sources suggest that graffiti started around the 1970's, other sources suggest it can be found in early Greek etchings and has been associated with engravings uncovered through archeological discoveries in various ancient cities around the world. Graffiti writings may be traced to cities in Egypt and the catacombs in Rome (*Graffiti Art: What Is Graffiti? Is Graffiti Art?*, 2021). These writings may be messages of warnings, documentations of events, and protest about some form of governance. Exploration of graffiti may lead to a deeper understanding of the differences and similarities of graffiti among global cities. Initial exploration from past perceptions of graffiti in the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's appears to be that of vandalism. Graffiti artists themselves may see the act of graffiti writing as claiming public space with intent to leave a message linked to some form of resistance (Maddox, 2016; Kumar & Levy, 2020). How does street art fit with graffiti? It may or may not be related. Graffiti is defined as writing (McAuliffe, 2012). A person must be knowledgeable about the writing style to understand who wrote the message and what the message says, while the interpretations may be more open to assumptions made by the general public. Street art is defined by more graphic images and in many cases is a copy of mainstream or fantasy imagery, and it may be larger in scale compared to graffiti writing. Both street art and graffiti writing are ways that protest can happen in a relatively peaceful form. Yet that is only my

perception. Some may view graffiti and street art as an aggressive assault on human eyes and public spaces.

What does graffiti teach us? When taught within the classroom, educators must be aware of cultural appropriation (Kendall, 2022). Emdin & Sirrakos Jr., (2017) suggest that educators must understand the history including identity, relationship, values and beliefs of graffiti which are rooted in hip hop culture. Graffiti, like hip hop music, has been a form of release from the tension and oppression experienced in 'black' communities. This form of expression created political and social tensions within cities across the globe and within Toronto.

McAuliffe's work, claiming '*cities such as Sydney declared wars on graffiti*', parallels experiences in the City of Toronto (McAuliffe, 2012 p.189). In 2011 Mayor Rob Ford seemed to target graffiti as an act of vandalism and called on businesses to join in cleaning and preventing vandals from "destroying the city" (*Mayor Ford Declares War on Graffiti*, 2011). Mayor Rob Ford was in his position from 2010-2014 and his tenure sparked many controversies. It is important to note that he grew up and lived in Etobicoke where residents experienced many social, economic and health challenges that Rob Ford seemed to understand. Perhaps the fight against graffiti stems from early experiences, unconscious drives and motives buried in the unconscious that surge up into conscious adults' practices (Kapoor, 2020). The framework that classifies graffiti as illegal and follows a strategy of law enforcement, removal and then engagement in managing graffiti as outlined by McAuliffe is the same strategic pattern used in the city of Toronto. First war was declared in 2011 with a crackdown on graffiti artists/vandals by enforcement authorities. Policy by-law 485 was amended to include definitions of street art and graffiti; the legal and illegal placement of graffiti and 'street art'; as well as the process of applying for permissions to produce graffiti and street art (*Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 485*, 2011). Part of the ammunition to fight in the war against graffiti and street art was the development of a smartphone App to assist the public in recording and reporting graffiti[2]. By 2012 the strategy of removal included fines to property owners if they failed to "clean up" graffiti. This meant that property owners not only had to monitor and prevent graffiti and street art from happening, but also pay for the cost of removing it. Therefore monitoring, clean-up, or fines were the responsibility of property owners. At the same time this was happening Mayor Rob Ford, who became a target

[2] https://toronto.citynews.ca/2012/04/18/ford-launches-anti-graffiti-mobile-app/

for many graffiti and street artists, cut funding to initiatives engaging youths to paint murals in Toronto (Bragagnini, 2021), even though engagement seems to be a more beneficial resolution for both the city and the artist. Prior to Mayor Rob Ford, Mayor David Miller established municipal priorities for his 2003-2006 goal of creating a *'Clean and Beautiful City*' initiative (*Finding Beauty: Toronto's Clean & Beautiful City Initiative*, 2007). Of particular interest was the establishment of a 'roundtable' group to partner with the community and advise Mayor Miller and Council on policies, programs and activities to create a *'clean, vibrant and beautiful city'*. Part of this initiative was to '*remove and transform graffiti*' (*Finding Beauty: Toronto's Clean & Beautiful City Initiative*, 2007p.1 para. 3, p.6). Toronto's Clean and Beautiful City initiative is important as it represents a shift in perception and management of graffiti as well as a blending of graffiti and street art as one for policy purposes.

This is where I believe perceptions of graffiti may have begun to shift to what I would call a colonization of graffiti. I see this as discrediting the beauty and appreciation of original graffiti writing within the population of graffiti writers. This merging graffiti and street art as one may have evolved naturally or may be intentional. If it's done with intent, it may be designed to transform the work of some artist such as Banksy into a politically established type of 'beauty'. This is exactly what many graffiti writers resist: 'political control' (Dar, 2013). Graffiti artists generally maintain anonymity. Being anonymous adds to the adrenalin rush which is an essential part of a writer's experience. The act of graffiti writing in public spaces, overcoming physical barriers to create large, bold, stylized, fantastical, colourful messages and not getting caught, increases dopamine levels and produces an adrenaline high. Graffiti writers seek admiration from other graffiti writers. Prestige is achieved by the unique style as well as position and place of their work. The written messages are used as a communication tool among other graffiti writers (McAuliffe, 2012). I believe that by transforming, removing, beautifying and controlling (*Finding Beauty: Toronto's Clean & Beautiful City Initiative*, 2007, p.1 para. 3, p.6) graffiti production means that a rich history of Toronto's heritage will be altered and lost in time. I wonder if it is farfetched to think of the beautification of graffiti, intertwining graffiti with street art and transforming original graffiti writers' messages, to gentrification. I feel the raw, original writer's work is becoming displaced and forced back into the underground. Perhaps appreciation and acceptance of graffiti as art is a strategy to cultivate a manicured version of graffiti by displacing the

writer's work into street art. Judging applications to produce graffiti and street art is one way this happens (*Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 485*, 2011).

Both graffiti and street art seem to be fused together representing the identity of youth culture, music, fashion and artistic skills (Ferrier, 2015). As McAuliffe (2012) suggested, graffiti and street art have become mainstream and, although there have been 'wars on graffiti', many city initiatives and engagements show that, today, graffiti is recognized as art (Keil & Ren, 2018, p.375). However, there is a distinction between graffiti and street art prior to the words beginning to be used interchangeably. Graffiti is rooted in a history of *'hip hop, breakdance and DJ culture*' where graffiti crews claim public spaces (Kumar & Levy, 2020). Graffiti, historically, was used as a means of resistance to injustices and like 'superhero' characters, writers call out social oppression by the systems in positions of power.

Learning about graffiti and street art generally happens in an informal way based on lived experiences within cities. The city can be used as a classroom for both formal and informal teaching and learning experiences (Hutchon & McLuhan, 2020). Observing graffiti and street art, engaging in conversations, and exploring various media platforms influences perceptions of graffiti or street art. Using an inquiry-based approach to learning matches well with the exploration of graffiti and street art, as well as history and culture (Hutchon & McLuhan, 2020). Informal learning about and from graffiti and street art may be meaningful, or become stereotypical beliefs established by systems of power, or fade away from memory. In contrast, learning formally about graffiti and street art, guided by thought provoking questions, can spark authentic discoveries and deep understanding may evolve with discussions of power and oppression, placemaking and identity, as well as culture and history. Perceptions of graffiti and street art pose many dichotomies such as vandalism or protectionism of space, deterioration versus beautification of landscape, or covert versus overt demonstration of resistance to issues of social injustice. Exploring the city using a pedagogy of inquiry-based learning (Hutchon & McLuhan, 2020; Maddox, 2016) allows for a growing understanding of a community's identity.

Graffiti and street art may define an urban landscape and the urban environment may influence the artist and in turn influence the type of artwork seen in urban spaces. Graffiti and street art artists mark territories in open spaces through their artwork (Maddox, 2016). Urban landscapes across the globe tell stories about environmental, social and political issues in an

open public setting. These artworks function as a log of unfolding events, bringing to the forefront undercurrents, repressed stories of inequity, racism, abuse of power, and many others that may be buried by powerful authorities within political, economic and social systems. Many of the attitudes that show through the representation of graffiti and street art are from oppressed voices. These voices need to be heard, yet not heard by the political leaders within global cities. For example, many people with Black and Indigenous ethnic roots with mental health challenges have experienced police brutality which ended death (Howard et al., 2023). Their voices, matched by a history of such experiences, have been buried however graffiti and street art amplify these voices, prompting activist to raise awareness with hope that the voices are heard and inspire action towards change.

Overt versus covert expression is another debate of art. Graffiti and street art engage communities in dialogue about the art itself. Sometimes the graffiti or street art stirs strong emotions about the messages while other times the discussion might be about the legal or illegal action of the artist. There are times when conversations are about how the artist achieves the 'task' of the artwork meaning the wondering of how this was achieved perhaps due to the location or position of the artwork. Either way conversations happen, and opinions are challenged, formed or changed as a result of 'zones of contact' referred to earlier. These artworks can send subtle messages, while at other times the messages are bold and 'in your face' so they cannot be ignored (Kumar & Levy, 2020).

Graffiti and street art may influence perceptions of spaces as decaying or as renewed. Associations between places and assumptions lead to bias or prejudices. For example, some places where graffiti and street art are prevalent may be dilapidated with a feel of neglect. Perhaps the buildings are abandoned, and youth appear to be unengaged or "hanging around idly'. Associations between place and the artwork are perceived as a sign of decay. It may influence impressions about residents in that specific area. False beliefs may form about people and get reinforced by the environment, then transferred to the artwork as a representation of deviance (Pugh, 2015). On the other hand, the same graffiti and street art displayed in a well maintained public urban landscape may have a different set of associations. Such an innovative expression of individuality and the art itself will be associated with a positive meaningful value and 'placemaking'. Spaces where community members influence the environment in a way that creates a sense of belonging may foster a

sense of pride and influence behaviour. Places where work is appreciated and valued in a positive way enhance community capacity building (Scott & Hamlin, 2016).

Specific Research Questions/Objectives

My research project 1) investigates the presence, perceptions and policies encompassing graffiti and street art in Toronto; 2) examine the relationship between graffiti and street art and themes of social justice, city planning policies and sustainability values and 3) explores the City's position and policies on graffiti and street art management. I am curious about stakeholders' perceptions of graffiti and street art including attitudes and preferences linked to desires and/or tensions provoked by these forms of expressions. I investigate psychosocial and cultural perspectives (*Graffiti's Influence on Society*, 2019), educational perspectives (Sontakke, 2022), as well as city planning (Soergel, 2021) and its impact on graffiti and street art management as well as aesthetic perspectives (Reid & Taylor, 2008). There is also a focus on exploring how graffiti and street art impact local communities, including the cultural, social and economic outcomes. Another important aspect in this research is to understand the artists' perspectives on and use of public spaces.

Objectives:

My study aims to understand how graffiti and street art raise awareness about sustainability issues and analyze relevant city management plans and policies in Toronto, from the perspective of artist, city planners, and community members. Because I am a participant-observer and my engagement with most of the research participants goes far beyond just interviewing them, my research takes the form of a project, whose is shared in this paper. The study includes observing themes of social justice, temporal documentation of historical events, and sustainability values. The methodology involves observations, documentation, interviews and qualitative (thematic) analysis.

The Goals of this project are:

1. To examine the relationship between graffiti and street art and themes of social justice, city planning policies and sustainability values.
2. To investigate how graffiti and street art raise awareness issues linked to the 2030 UN agenda for sustainability (*The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2024).

3. To explore the integration of graffiti and street art into city planning frameworks, examining how this form of artistic expression contributes to urban revitalization, enhancing public spaces and engaging communities.

Research Design and Methodology

My past involvement, as part of an experiential learning experience, with StreetARToronto allowed me to immerse myself in the vibrant world of urban street art. StreetARToronto (StART) is part the City's graffiti management plan, which includes a suite of programs, designed to reduce graffiti vandalism and replace it with vibrant, colourful, community-engaged street art(*Graffiti Management – City of Toronto*, 2024). 'Just Us' art callout is part of the StART program and invites local graffiti, mural and street art artists to submit proposals for funding[3]. Conversations with local artists who created public murals and street art projects for the 'Just Us' Art callout 2023 gave me insights into how artists' celebrate the city's diverse cultural heritage. This experience deepened my understanding of the intersection between art and urban spaces, highlighting the power of street art to transform and enliven neighbourhoods. Currently, I am involved, as a curator, with 'Just Us' Art call out 2024, an initiative that positions me at the heart of a dynamic hub comprising city officials, artists, and community members. This role provides a unique opportunity to engage in conversations, observations and documentations of the process in creating the artwork and understanding perceptions of different stakeholders. The City's website has existing policies and a collection of street art from the past three years that can be accessed https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/streets-parking-transportation/enhancing-our-streets-and-public-realm/streetartoronto/events-2/ . The 'Just Us' Art call is one of many city initiatives to engage artists. The following message conveys the themes of the 'Just Us' Art call.

> The 'Just Us' Art call 'invites concepts from street, mural and graffiti artists and artist collectives committed to diversity, equity, inclusion and inspiring positive change through who they are and the work they create. Project proposals should speak to historic and current social issues and movements within Black and Indigenous communities and social justice issues in

[3] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/just-us

> support of equity deserving groups and the importance, benefits and opportunities to build a better future through inclusion, collaboration and knowledge sharing'[4].

My project involves a multidisciplinary research design including a literature review, interviews with key participants including artists, youth/art program officials, and city policymakers, and participant observation, in order to gather relevant information, which is supplemented with analysis and discussion of the results.

I carried out a review of existing literature on graffiti and street art within urban environments in Toronto's public realm, including the historical and cultural context of these environments. Documents reviewed include city policies, municipal reports, and urban planning relevant to graffiti and street art. This review assisted me in understanding the city's historical approach and present regulations and strategies regarding graffiti and street art. Field observations allowed gathering photographic evidence and engage in pedagogical documentations within contact zones (Pratt, 2014). Field visits in public spaces with graffiti and street art provided an authentic immersive experience to understand the environmental context, themes and public interaction (contact zones). Field sites are located in the following areas: 3126 Dundas St. W (La Pupila), 693 Mt Pleasant (Moolight Murals Collective); 19 Brock Ave (Leone McComas); 1521 Gerrard St E (Ode T.O. da Og's; 1962 Eglington Ave W (Leyland Adams); 1066 Kingston Rd (Phillip Saunders), and 147 Dundas Street East (Born to Rise). Documentations on and images of graffiti and street art from Graffiti Alley, in Toronto, were also used as references to explore socio-political issues.

Data collection included interviews/case studies with/of community practitioners (StART initiatives: 10 artists, 2 property/business owners, 3 residents, 4 city officials) to explore city initiatives of positive social change for individuals and communities through participatory arts (Mkwananzi & Cin, 2022). Interviews were limited to artists who have or are developing relationships with the city's StART initiatives 'Outside the Box' and 'Just Us' (2023 and 2024) art call out. No personal information was used, and identity kept anonymous unless it was public knowledge. Written consent was obtained from all participants.

[4] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/just-us

The following questions guided my information gathering.

Questions for Artists

1. What messages or themes have you woven into your work and how do you hope they impact the community?
2. What inspired your work and the use of this space?

Questions for other community members (3 youth: 18-19 years)

1. How do you feel graffiti and street art influence the sense of community and public spaces in your neighborhood?
2. What are your views on the impact of street art on the city's image and its ability to attract tourism and business?

Using interpretive traditions[5] of qualitative research to study graffiti and street art allowed me to understand the meaning, contexts and impact of these art forms (Prasad, 2005). The reality of graffiti and street art exists as a social interpretation and a series of knowledge constructions where individuals make sense of their world (Prasad, 2005, p.13). Maslow and Blackfoot's (Feigenbaum & Smith, 2020) theories influence interpretations of motivations, placemaking and social identity of artist and community stakeholders. Bronfenbrenner's systems theory (Boyd et al., 2020, p.46-48) influences understanding the by-directional interactions between and among systems impacting perceptions and reactions to graffiti and 'street art'.

Field observations and literature analysis identified key themes of existing tensions, community collaboration and process outcomes of graffiti and street art. My observations and documentation noted themes, messages, and symbols related to sustainability and other social issues. Part of this research uncovered how community cohesion can be strengthened using an arts-based approach/method as a means of engaging a range of participants and create a platform for ethical witnessing of the peoples present and diverse historic experiences (Mkwananzi & Cin, 2022, p.7). Interviews gathered qualitative data on stakeholders' perceptions, experiences, and attitudes towards graffiti and street art in Toronto.

[5] Prasad, P. (2005). *Crafting Qualitative Research: Working in the Postpositivist Traditions*. M.E. Sharpe.

I used key findings from public documents outlining important policies, initiatives, and historical developments within the city. Analysis focused on identifying processes in city management plans, policies and community stakeholders' perceptions. I hope to share my results with city officials and policy makers in order to potentially inform current practices of management, regulation, and/or support of graffiti and street art in Toronto.

Human Participants

Ethics review was required. The research engaged human participants although the research had minimal risk. In fact, there were no anticipated risks to participants as part of this study. Questions will not include any information that may identify participants outside of existing public exhibitions. Confidentiality of all information collected was ensured. Identities of any participants were kept confidential by the researcher. No participants' names will be used in dissemination of this information. To protect privacy, participants were not asked for identifying information, such as name, date of birth or address. The electronic materials related to this study were encrypted and stored on a password-protected computer. Participants were not obligated to complete the study and could withdraw at any time.

As a participant observer, I had the privilege of having conversations and interviewing ten graffiti and street art artists engaged in StART programs in Toronto and were at Worth Gallery. Connections built from that gathering extended to phone conversation and some on site meetings. During these experiences, I gathered information, gaining insights into the messages woven into some of their art projects.

I engage in conversation with artist Jessey Pacho (aka Phade), who emphasized the need to draw attention to issues of social justice such as racial inequities, another group of artists who are called the Moonlight Murals Collective are committed to a message of 'we're better together" amplifying voices, standing in unity and solidarity against oppression. Another pair of artists worked on a piece titled 'Ode T.O da OG's and discussed their perception of Toronto as beautiful chaos and weave into their artwork self-truths. One of the artists who work on 'Ode T.O da OG's' talked about his own battle with mental health. I would not have interpreted the swirls within the mural as the dark tunnels of the mind. Another group

working on a project titled ‘Born to Rise’ talked to about resilience, courage and dreams. I gained insight about the piece they worked on that feature Aiesha Robinson who experienced her conflicted emotions about her identity and rise above it. I met with one business owner on the site where Jas9 and Alex were working on a project who said the artwork offers inspiration to others. Another property owner said it is attractive to their customers. I have engaged in multiple conversations with the City Management Team.

Findings

Observations, interviews and reviews of the writings on the walls in Toronto allowed me to draw three main conclusions:

1. Graffiti and street art serve as documentations of historical events (see Figures 1-16). Observations of initiatives ‘Paint the City Black’ 2020, ‘Frontline Heroes’ 2021 and ‘Pollinators’ 2016 document three important moments in time that not only impact Toronto but were issues affecting humanity on a global level.
2. Graffiti and street art address key issues related to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
    a. Documentations of ‘Paint the City Black’ are strongly linked to SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduce Inequities within and among countries), SDG11 (Inclusive, Safe, Resilient, Sustainable Cities), and SGD 16 (Peaceful Inclusive Societies, Justice for all, Accountable and Inclusive institutions) (see figures 1, 2 and)
    b. Documentations of Frontline Heroes are strongly linked to SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Health and Well Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and SDG 10 (Reduce Inequities) (see figures 7, 8 and 9)
    c. Documentation of Pollinators are linked to SDG 2 (Food Security), SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 15 Sustainable ecosystems and reverse Biodiversity loss) (see figures 4, 5 and 6)
3. City Documents, especially those since 2016, show support for the local artists, including funding and community partnerships through actions and the development of a suite of programs as a career ladder for local artists (StART).

These three themes are discussed further in the following sections.

Social Justice and Equality:

Toronto graffiti and street art addresses social justice issues, resonating with several SDGs, including SDG 5: Gender Equality, SDG 10: Reduced Inequality, and SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (Walsh et al., 2022). Murals and graffiti often highlight issues such as gender discrimination, racial injustice, and the struggles of marginalized communities. The raw and unfiltered nature of street art allows for candid discussions about these issues, by the creators and viewers of street art, which are sometimes washed and ignored in some realms of public discourse.

One example, comes from the 'Paint the City Black' initiative (Knope, 2020) where approximately 40 artist came together in a demonstration of solidarity sparked by what happened to George Floyd (Howard et al., 2023). Graffiti Alley, located south of Queen Street West between Spadina Avenue and Portland Street, stands as a powerful platform for resistance, protest and remembrance. One of the murals created during 'Paint the City Black' depicts a black panther with the words 'All Power to the People" (see Figure 1) , reminiscent of the Black Panther Party (*The Black Panther Party Challenging Police and Promoting Social Change*, n.d.). Injustice towards specific ethnic groups, rooted in a history of colonization, continues to replicate itself along with police brutality. The organizer of 'Paint the City Black' says "It's a lot of people understanding that now's the time to say something important"(Knope, 2020).

Remembering 'Black lives Matter' (Nakhavoly, 2021) was etched into the many murals along Graffiti Alley during the 2020 'Paint the City Black' initiative. One such mural depicted Jamal Francique (see figure 3). Jamal Francique family said he had mental health challenges including schizophrenia[6]. Not only was he killed by Police, but the records of events shows these were recorded inconsistently (Cassy, 2022). Messages on the walls of Graffiti Alley brings to the forefront the many mental health challenges experienced by specific populations with limited or no support. A graffiti mural with the words 'I Can't Breathe' (see figure 2) resonated not only with the Black community in Toronto, but with people across the globe.

Documented on the walls not only along Graffiti Alley but in many other public spaces are prominent instance of history that can be buried. However, from the silent wall messages are

[6] https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/siu-jamal-francique-1.5880683

loud and clear. The 'Paint the City Black' initiative created bold, loud and clear messages, on racism, injustice, inequality, and some would say hate. This reference to hate is not hateful graffiti but hate experienced by the Black community, Indigenous Peoples and other persons of minority groups. These messages, of the 'Paint the City Black' initiative were all sparked by the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis May 25 2020[7]. Experiences of mental health leading to unfavourable outcomes with police engagement are not uncommon and also resonates with my personal experience in 2022. I have come to the conclusion that Police cannot identify nor deescalate situations where someone with mental health issues such as depression, schizophrenia and suicidal tendencies is involved. The following two statements, in the 2014 report on the Ontario Human Rights Commission on police use of force and mental health allowed me to conclude that police brutality based on racism exist and is known; these statements are:

1) The Ontario Police College and police services should provide training to new and seasoned police officers on human rights and the duty to accommodate people with mental health issues or addictions. All officers, including new recruits and seasoned officers, should also receive training in crisis response de-escalation techniques used by specialized crisis response teams. (this is a recommendation 45)
2) Racialized persons who reasonably believe that they are being racially profiled can be expected to find the experience upsetting and might well react in an angry and verbally aggressive manner. A person's use of abusive language requires reasonable tolerance and tact and cannot form the basis of further differential treatment. (*Policy and Guidelines on racism and racial discrimination*)

This report in 2014 is six years prior to the experience of Jamal Francique in 2020 (see figure 3), Ejaz Choudry who also suffered with schizophrenia and died due to interaction involving the police[8] in 2020, Regis Korchinski-Paquet also with mental heath issues died involving police interaction in 2020[9]. Many other cases, such as Tyre Nichols experience in Memphis, January 2023 in the USA left the Black and other communities in Toronto stunned. The introduction of "Warning this story contains disturbing images and details…" before CP24 reports Tyre Nichols lost his life due to police brutality while calling for his mother[10], evokes

[7] https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/george-floyd-killed-by-police-officer
[8] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53141449
[8] https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/regis-korchinski-paquet-toronto-1.5593718
[10] https://www.cp24.com/video?clipId=2618181

the fear of police in Toronto felt by many in Black communities in Toronto. These news reports spark deep seated emotions of fear and distrust not only within the Black community, but across many other communities. Graffiti and Street such as the 'Paint the City Black' initiative is a form of peaceful protest against persons in position of power such as the police and institutions that maintain these persons in positions of power. The series of graffiti and street art murals done in the 'Paint the City Black' shows the historical documentations of Black experiences and linked to the UN Sustainable goals of peace, justice, and strong institutions, and a call to reduce inequalities.

La Pupila is a Colombian artist based in Toronto. One of the underlying themes in this artist work is feminine energy with an aura of melancholy. This is noticeable on the faces of the birds. La Pupila mural 'Migratory Birds' is located on 3126 Dundas St. W (see figure 10). The artist says 'this mural shows the complexities of migration'. She draws inspiration from the natural migration of birds and the survival of one is dependent on the flock. The mural is grounded in hopefulness of new possibilities[11]. This piece of work adds to the story of survival, diaspora due to migration, and feminine growth which is linked to the UN Sustainable goal on gender equality.

Environmental Awareness and Climate Action:

Another prominent theme is environmental conversations which is linked to SDG 13: Climate action and SDG 15: Life on Land

Artist Nick Sweetman, aka 'the Bee Guy' partners with many of Toronto artists together with local businesses and others such as the David Suzuki Foundation to bring attention to environmental education on Bees and other lifeforms within our Ecosystem. He says '*murals are a chance to put values on display as a society and pollinators are really important… sometimes it takes seeing something gigantic for you to really consider it*'[12]

Sweetman got attention for his graffiti work in 2015, when he spray-painted a traffic box with the words "Save the Bees", he spray-painted small bees on one side of the box while on the other side of the box he sprayed one big bee[13]. Sweetman passion for bees was ignited since then and became curious about the type of bees in Toronto. He says he learned that

[11] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/just-us La Pupila – 2023 (3126 Dundas St W)
[12] https://www.rewildingmag.com/nick-sweetman-mural-artist/
[13] https://www.rewildingmag.com/nick-sweetman-mural-artist/

there are more a hundred bee species in Toronto. His discovery and exploration of bees as pollinators inspired the numerous murals, he created across the city of Toronto since 2015.

It is important to note the context of environmental events happening prior to 2015. There was a drop in the bee population around 2012-2014. Ontario Beekeepers' Association called on Ontario's political bodies to restrict plant seeds with pesticide that were killing bees and other insects[14]. These treated seeds appear to have a direct correlation with the majority of bee deaths since 2012. Pollinators (bees), part of Ontario's ecosystem, was at risk and needed to be protected. Neonicotinoids, which are a group of pesticides used on farms and urban environments, is absorbed by plants which is then taken from the pollen and nectar by the bees. This nectar and pollen containing neonicotinoids are toxic thus killing and reducing the bee population[15]. Graffiti and street art documents the concerns of this time and the need to bring attention to the cycle of food production while highlighting the important role of Bees with ecosystems. Toxins in plants kill many bees and weaken their resilience to cold weather. Many bee populations did not survive the 2013-2014 winter in Toronto.

These events are part of the context for Sweetman experiences. His artistic abilities were recognized, and he was enlisted to create murals for neglected landscapes within the city. This increased his exploration and discovery of the varying types of bees in Toronto. I believe that Sweetman is an influencer and have been influenced by the environment in which he navigates. The recognition for his artwork and his desire to save the bees functioned as internal and external motivations for his artwork. His work on the mural 'Pollinators' located on 777 Queen street (see figure 5) as well as the Garrison Creek garage door project found on Felstead Ave (see figure 6) shows vibrant murals of bees, butterflies, and other insects. These murals did indeed transform the urban landscapes within these environments while promoting conversations about ecosystems. According to Stall-Paquet[16] Sweetman says even though he grew up close to Toronto's Humber River he did not always like insects. He grew to appreciate them by watching YouTube.

Another artist Stacey Kinder, have done multiple projects with StART 'Outside the Box' programs (see figure 4 for an example of her work) and create themes that include wildlife and climate change with a focus on education on local ecosystems. This artist believes

[14] https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/more-than-half-of-ontario-bees-died-during-harsh-winter-1.2716320
[15] https://xerces.org/publications/scientific-reports/how-neonicotinoids-can-kill-bees#:~:text=Neonicotinoids%20are%20a%20group%20of,making%20them%20toxic%20to%20bees.
[16] https://www.rewildingmag.com/nick-sweetman-mural-artist/

communities are stronger when community members develop a connection to the natural world[17]. She says "moths are overall indicators of healthy ecosystems" [18]

As Sweetman suggests "when these images are presented on a large scale, within public spaces we get it. The visual impact of pieces such as these may have a profound effect on the community and increase awareness, advocacy and participation in environmental stewardship". Many of these types of images inspire educational workshops, clean-up drives, influence consumer practices. The impact may be exponential.

Economic and Urban Development:

StreetARToronto (StART) is one of the connerstones of Toronto's efforts focused on transforming neglected spaces into vibrant, inclusive, and visually appealing urban environments. StART provides funding for local artist, encourage collaboration and engagement with community residents, business owners and organizations to develop murals that reflect the identity and values of the community[19]

> " *StreetARToronto (StART) is a suite of innovative programs intentionally designed to demonstrate the positive and powerful impacts of reconciliation, diversity, equity and inclusion, foster community engagement and civic pride, add colour and vitality to neighbourhoods, encourage active transportation, showcase Toronto artists and contribute to their skills development, mentor emerging talent, and create opportunities for positive engagement among residents, business owners and operators, artists and arts organizations."*[20]

Street art provides employment for local artists, rejuvenate neglected neighbourhoods, showcases cultural identity, functions as a tourist attraction (Boudreau, J. A., Keil, R., & Young, 2006). The concept 'creative competitiveness' in global cities may also

[17] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/artist-profile?recordId=reclpPIoz2mzCZgkr Stacey Kinder
[18] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/otb10 Outside the Box 2020
[19] *https://www.toronto.ca/services-payments/streets-parking-transportation/enhancing-our-streets-and-public-realm/streetartoronto/*

[20] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/about-start

impact funding and be part of the city's graffiti management plan. In 2011 City Council directed the General Manager, Transportation Services to establish a centralized 'graffiti function' to be responsible to coordinate, benchmark and report on all graffiti-related activities. This directive included Transportations Services to establish City-wide improvements, enhance Community and Graffiti Transformation programs as well as reduce graffiti vandalism[21]. Part of the graffiti management plan also included designating a laneway for graffiti artists to express their messages through their artwork in an uncensored manner. The laneway south of Queen Street West, between John Street and Bathurst Street was designated and exempted from the graffiti by-law[22]. City Council requested Toronto Police Services board to request the Chief of Police to prioritize the delivery of the new anti-graffiti education programs throughout Toronto's schools[23]. These directives were given in 2011-2012 however, I do not believe police officers are the best ones to deliver education on graffiti writing. The present City Management team have developed strong positive relationships with graffiti writers such as Elicser Elliott and Jessey Pacho (Phade), perhaps they are the ones to assist young people in understanding graffiti writing rather than police officers. For now, police officers need to focus on building trusting relationships with youth in Toronto. As President Theodore Roosevelt said, 'no one care how much you know, until they know how much you care". Maybe the youth would also relate better to people like Mercer on a rant through graffiti Alley. Meeting at a graffiti or street art wall, for a group rant, may provide a positive educational experience and a way release of stress.

Education and Advocacy:

The educational potential of street art is immense. Through workshops, guided tours, and discussions, street artist can educate the public about the SDGs related to issues of social justice, environment and climate as well as serve as documentation of moments in history, the importance of sustainable development and aligns with SDG 4: Quality Education, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (Walsh et al., 2022).

[21] https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2011.LS5.1
[22] Ibid
[23] https://secure.toronto.ca/council/agenda-item.do?item=2011.LS5.1

For example, StART project initiatives engage communities in the creation of public art, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility towards their environment[24]. These initiatives not only beautify public spaces but also serve as educational platforms, raising awareness about global challenges and encouraging active participation in finding solutions.

The StARToronto 'Front Line Heroes' art project not only pays tribute to Toronto's front line workers but functions as documentation of a social, political, economic events during a time when Toronto, and the globe, experienced the impact of the coronavirus pandemic (*StreetARToronto Celebrates Front Line Heroes*, n.d.). The murals recognized that frontline workers included our teachers and grocery workers, on the same level of importance as our health care providers. This type of awareness brings humanity, a gift of appreciation and gratitude, for the things people take for granted. Artist Jarus' mural on 575 Queen Street West (See figure 8) depicts, to me, a moment in time when the physical self is tired but the mental self shows resilience during the pandemic (*StreetARToronto Celebrates Front Line Heroes*, n.d. image pg. 13).

City of Toronto Graffiti Management Plan:

The City of Toronto's graffiti management plan is structured around three main components. These are prevention, enforcement and engagement [25]. This process is similar to processes of graffiti management in other global cities (Keil & Ren, 2017). Part of the prevention strategy is to discourage youth, who may be more likely to seek the thrill of the act, from engaging in graffiti writings. The idea was 'to educate' youth. However, this can be problematic as this may be viewed as colonized perceptions or influencing perceptions towards a negative view of graffiti and the relationship between graffiti writings and the artist. This type of education for the purpose of discouragement may be strongly influenced by graffiti as criminal activity (Landry, 2019). It is quite easy to make assumptions and associations between specific people and things. For example, before there was an appreciation for hip hop and rap music there was an association between the type (ethnicity) of people associated with that type of music (often colonized negative perceptions). These perceptions, often negative based on lack of knowledge and fear, are then transferred to art expressions of the graffiti writers. These perceptions included beliefs of idleness and criminal activities (Ferrell, 2021; Ilan,

[24] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/about-start
[25] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/about-start

2012). In the past, there was not much interest in knowing graffiti writers nor understanding their story or messages (Dar, 2013).

Engagement of artists in urban revitalization is a strategy that serves both economic and social growth. Toronto as a hub for creativity attracts tourist which supports economic growth (Boudreau, J. A., Keil, R., & Young, 2006). There is also interest in the artist behind the writings. One popular artist, whose work is showcased in Toronto, is the UK artist known as Banksy (Summer 2024). Graffiti seems to have merged with street art and is now part of contemporary pop culture (Bowen, 1999).

StARToronto (StART) originated from the Graffiti Management Plan endorsed by City Council in 2011 with a focus on four key areas: 1) deter graffiti vandalism, 2) support victims of graffiti vandalism, 3) support street art and artist, and 4) provide a central point of contact with expertise in graffiti and street art related matters[26]. A part of StART's vision is a commitment to developing street art and murals as a place-making tool to showcase diversity, inclusion and community engagement. This vision is directly related to SDG 11: make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable (Walsh et al., 2022).

It is interesting to note StART's timeline. In 2011 this initiative was launched, to engage artists and establish a suite of programs as a career ladder for artists (*StreetARToronto Celebrates Front Line Heroes*, n.d.). At that time what was most prevalent was the goal of enforcement to controll graffiti in Toronto. A "war on graffiti" was declared in April 2011 and the focus was on eradication[27].

Balancing Artistic expression and Public Order:

The tension between city management teams and artists together with the desire to engage artist and transform neglected spaces can be challenging. It is difficult to differentiate between controlling and embracing graffiti and street art. The challenge for the City of Toronto is balancing the encouragement of artistic expression and maintaining public order. The City's graffiti by-law can be contradictory to the vision of StART in supporting artists, business owners and community residents (*Toronto Municipal Code, Chapter 485*, 2011).

[26] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/about-start

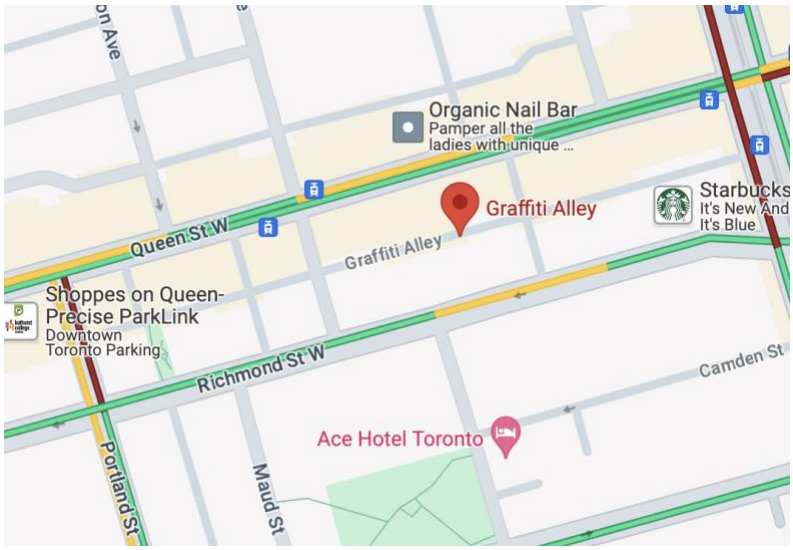
[27] *Mayor Ford declares war on graffiti*. (2011, April 7). CBC. Retrieved December 2, 2022, from https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/mayor-ford-declares-war-on-graffiti-1.10215

The enforcement of the by-law can be problematic when distinguishing between vandalism and appreciated forms of expression.

In the next section, photos and descriptions of Toronto's street art and murals document the themes discussed previously in the literature review and as a participant observer. The images are supported with notes on the artist, their inspiration and the social impacts of their work. Each image captures the artists' messages. The graffiti and street art functions as a conduit for reflection, dialogue and community engagement. These artworks, document historical events, sustainability and personal or community struggles, or a call for unity, peace and equity. The graffiti and street art showcases the diverse stylistic choices that define Toronto's graffiti scene.

Paint the City Black

The following three images (Figure 1-3) and documentation come from interviews and documentation recorded by the CBC[28]. I interviewed the artist Jessey Pacho, who validated the inspiration and accuracy of the information relevant to the 'Paint the City Black initiative. This initiative took place in 2020 within Graffiti Alley, which is located south of Queen Street West between Spadina Avenue and Portland Street.



A black panther pictured with the words 'All Power to the People.' (Turgut Yeter/CBC)

Figure 1 Jessey Pacho (Phade), 'All Power to the People'

[28] Artists transform Graffiti Alley with new murals in 'show of solidarity' with anti-racism movement | CBC News

The words "All Power to the People" that surround the black panther are indeed in honour of the Black Panther Party — a revolutionary organization known as being a "vanguard" of the civil rights movement. Jessey says "It's sort of a message that is important to bring in today's day and age with everything happening." [29]

Jessey, who was interviewed by the CBC (Knope, 2020), confirmed to me that the inspiration came from the injustice that happened to George Floyd in 2020. The death of George Floyd was a result of a police officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on his neck while by-standers watched for almost 10 minutes and pleaded for the officer to stop. It is important to note the senselessnees of the actions taken by the police in Minneapolis as similar incidents happened and continue to occur in Toronto and across the globe. The police responded to a call by a convenience store clerk who suspected George Floyd purchased cigarettes with a counterfeit $20 bill. What ensued was unbelievable to bystanders. George Floyd cooperated with the police; however, he resisted getting into the car, saying he was claustrophobic[30]. That incident inspired immediate action by artists in Toronto. Jessey, Moises and another artist (I did nto get their name) put out a call and within days more than 40 graffiti and street art artists came together with a clear message of "Black Lives Matter" (Knope, 2020). The report of George Floyd's death and the response with the 'Paint the City Black' happened during a time when many within black commuities already distrusted police and people continue to be very distressed about experiences of police brutality (Howard et al., 2023).

I gained insight about the artists, inspirations and emotions that are woven into the graffiti and streetart documented on the walls of Graffitti Alley during the 'Paint the City Black initiative.

A mural with the words 'I Can't Breathe.' (Submitted by Mike Schultz)

Figure 2: Mike Schultz, "I Can't Breathe" 'Paint the City Black.'

[29] Artists transform Graffiti Alley with new murals in 'show of solidarity' with anti-racism movement | CBC News Jessy Pacho and Moises Frank organized this event and within days 40 artists came together and engaged in the event.

[30] https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/george-floyd-killed-by-police-officer

“George Floyd, an unarmed black man whose death sparks protests across the globe after he was pinned under the knee of a police officer in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020” [31]

I showed a print of this image to a group of three youth (ages 18-19). One person said ‘it’s dark and I can’t look at it… I feel like darkness is all around”. One did not understand the words and one seemed to have figured it out and made reference to George Floyd. One youth said the words/image seems to replicate the feeling of being unable to breathe… and the darkness must be how it feels when life is taken from you. The discussion quickly turned to unfairness and experiences from school that involved police…I found it interesting hearing about the feeling of darkness and I am not sure that feeling was intended but then again maybe it was, I just did not ask the question of the artist.

Using public spaces as informal classrooms where multiple people have discussions can be intense. Here discussions of oppression, history, trust, respect, inclusion and equality may be ignited. These are the zones of contact where soci-political discourse may be challenged, promoting awareness and action.

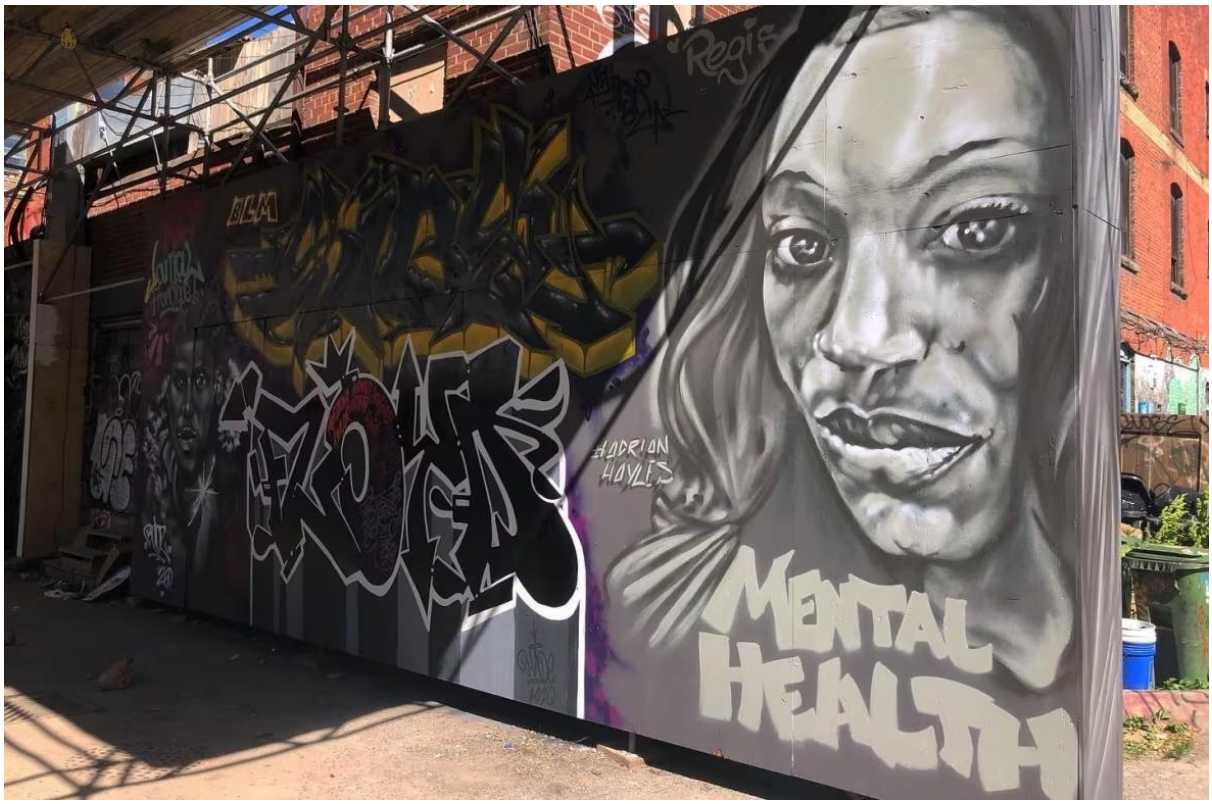


Figure 3: Artist Mike Schultz’s, “Jamal Francique” (one of the murals from Graffiti Alley ‘Paint the City Black’).

Jamal Francique, who experienced mental health challenges including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. He was shot during by a plainclothes officer during an arrest on January 7, 2020, he died 2 days after[32]. There are many cases when lives were lost due to mental health challenges and police interactions in Toronto. The inexperience and unpreparedness of police

[31] Artists transform Graffiti Alley with new murals in 'show of solidarity' with anti-racism movement | CBC News

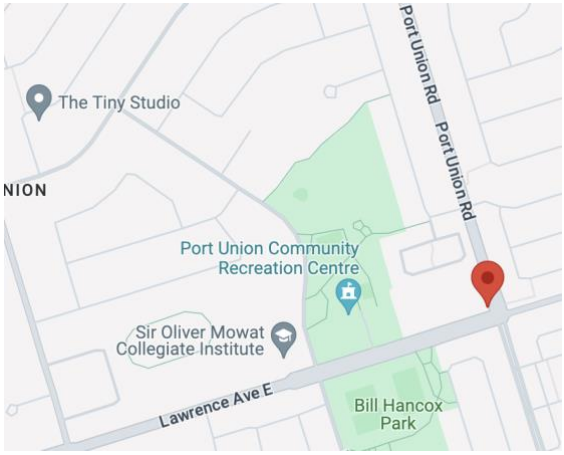
[32] https://toronto.citynews.ca/2022/07/08/jamal-francique-shooting-death-siu-peel-police-mississauga

officers to understand, support and manage situations involving mental health issues have led to many unnecessary deaths. Whether it's a lack of knowledge or prejudice, biaed values and attitudes rooted in colonialism, the outcomes of police brutality depicted in many of the murals along Graffiti Alley in the 'Paint the City Black' initiative are real and continue to reinforce feelings of distrust and increase fear between community residents and police officers. These murals sparked many discussions, raising awareness and provoking action locally and globally. Racial profiling, systemic racism and anti-black racism exist anywhere interactions happen between police and black people in Toronto. [33]

Sustainability and Environmental Awareness

Figures 4, 5 and 6 are related to environmental awareness.

Figure 4: Stacey Kinder 'Moths'Lawrence Ave E and Port Union Rd



Scarborough-Rouge Park

Artist Stacey Kinder paints themes that include wildlife and climate change with a focus on education on local ecosystems. This artist believes communities are stronger when

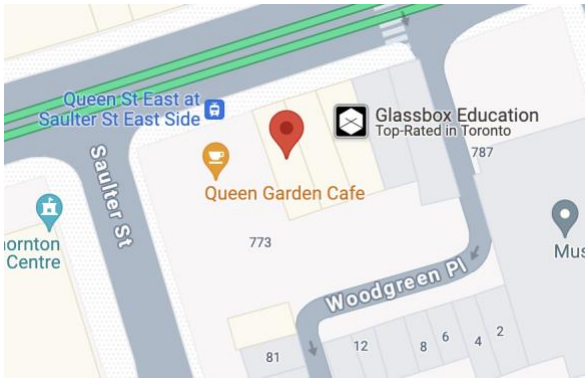
[33] Artists transform Graffiti Alley with new murals in 'show of solidarity' with anti-racism movement | CBC News

community members develop a connection to the natural world… Stacey says "moths are overall indicators of healthy ecosystems." [34] Stacey reminds us that moths share the same city spaces and pollinate flowers, feed on mosquitos and other 'pests' while being a source of food for birds and bats… this really shows the cycle of life within ecosystems where each living thing is interdependent on other living things. 'Outside the Box' is one of the programs offered by the City of Toronto StART initiative.

Artist Nick Sweetman's Mural: A Time for Pollinators 2016 (Location 777 Queen St E).

This is an interesting piece of work drawing attention to the important role bees play in the food chain. The location where this mural is located was considered neglected by the BIA (Business Improvement Area). After this mural was completed other local businesses in the area expressed interest in having similar murals done on their property

Figure 5: Nick Sweetman's Mural: "A Time for Pollinators"



Artist - Nick Sweetman - aka 'The Bee Guy'

Sweetman's 'Bees and Urban Pollinators' theme recognizes Riverside's hidden green spaces that maintain wildflowers and local hives, as well as the area's growing bee-keeping culture in the east end of Toronto. Pollinators are essential for food production and the health of a city's ecosystem. *The 'Time and Clocks' theme in the mural is an homage to Albert Edelstein, a long-time clockmaker and jeweller in Riverside who was integral to founding the Riverside Business*

[34] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/artist-profile?recordId=reclpPIoz2mzCZgkr

Improvement Area (BIA) in the 1980s [35]. This mural not only bring attention to the role of bees but documents historical information about a local jeweller.

In 2017 Sweetman partnered with the City and the David Suzuki Foundation to engage residents and paint garage doors. Home-owners who declined to engaged quickly changed their minds and became involved once they saw the images that were produced.

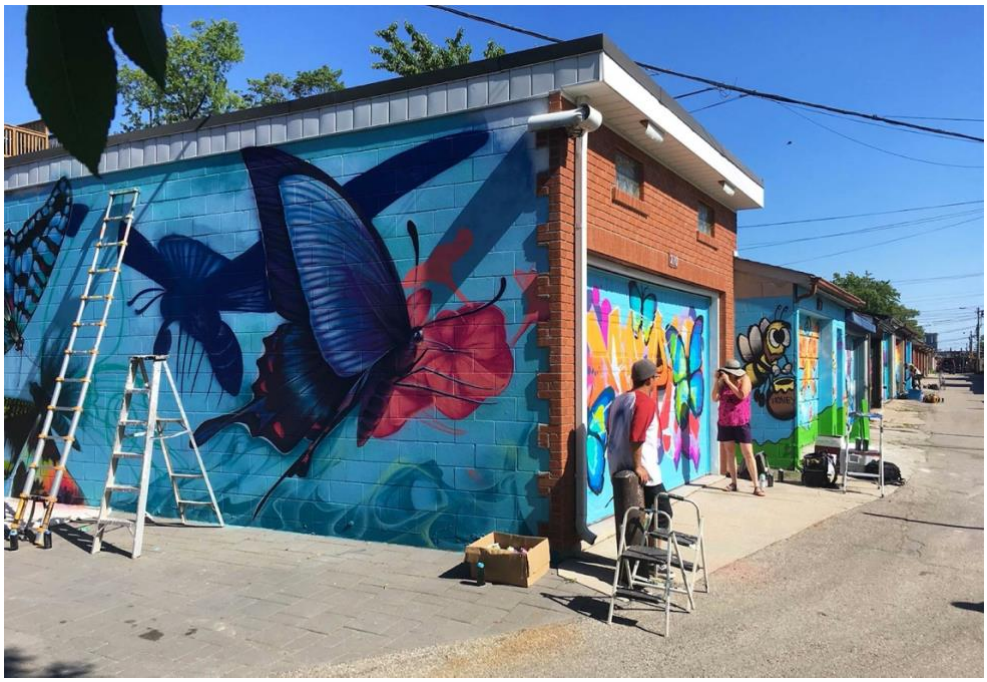
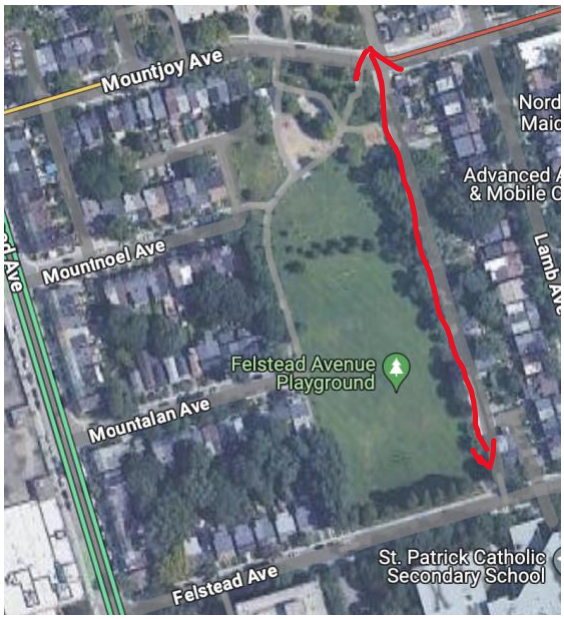


Figure 6: Felstead Park and Art Eggleton Lane



Garage door project along the lane (in red).

[35] https://riverside-to.com/40-years-40-stories-a-time-for-pollinators/

The 2017 Butterfly project on garage doors around the Garrison Creek Park raised awareness of butterflies and the 'Butterflyway' project, which focuses on pollinators and human dependence[36]. The Pollinator mural projects have sparked much more discussion about climate action, the decreasing number of bees, migrating butterflies and human impact on these lifeforms. [37]

Artist Nick Sweetman learned even more about the interesting world of bees as pollinators and the various species that existed in Toronto which increased his passion and love for bees and nature. His says he want to 'increase people's appreciation of nature and hope that they will want to protect it.'[38]

Front line Heroes - 2020

City of Toronto StART initiative celebrated the people who provided vital care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 7: Alexander Bacon (20 Maud Street, Toronto)
Photographer Katherine Fleitas

"This mural features a hand in a blue medical glove holding a flower. The flower is a representation of how delicate life is and the helping hand glove is a symbol of our diversity in the sense that we are all in this together regardless of race, gender or nationality. The simplicity of the design makes the message easy for people to grasp and

[36] https://davidsuzuki.org/take-action/act-locally/butterflyway/
[37] https://www.rewildingmag.com/nick-sweetman-mural-artist/
[38] https://muralroutes.ca/member/nick-sweetman/

shows the strength and resilience of people and that at the end of the day we are here to help each other. What works well with this design is that it covers a full spectrum of all the frontline workers. The wall is located on the North wing of 20 Maud Street, across the street from a park in the high density neighborhood of Queen and Bathurst with excellent visibility." (*StreetARToronto Celebrates Front Line Heroes*, n.d.)

Figure 8: Jarus (575 Queen St. Toronto)
Photographer Katherine Fleitas

'The artist encountered this Front Line Hero on a break in the parkette adjacent to the wall. He requested permission to take their photograph and paint their portrait based on the photograph.'(*StreetARToronto Celebrates Front Line Heroes*, n.d.)

This artwork reminds spectators about the people who served our communities tirelessly. It also represented families whose members were out serving others while exposed to uncertain health challenges and also experienced many obstacles in their way. This also reminds us about the fragility and resilience of humans…

Fig. 9: Jessy Pacho (aka PHADE) (2285 Danforth Ave., Toronto)
Photographer Katherine Fleitas

'The artwork consists of a rainbow gradient, in layered lettering, naming Frontline and Essential Services across the four societal pillars: Health Care Services, Transport Services, City/Community Service Providers, & The Arts Community. Services and personnel from each community are listed in repetition, to show strength in numbers and a sense of a united community.'(*StreetARToronto Celebrates Front Line Heroes*, n.d.)
This also brings to the forefront the varied type of services/people that are important cogs within the city's system, helping it to stay functioning…

Many instances during the pandemic experience remind me of a movie…

"The Land Before Time" … "*Once upon this same earth, beneath this same sun, long before you, before the ape and the elephant, as well; before the wolf, the bison, the whale, before the mammoth and the mastodon, in the time of the dinosaurs*". The dinosaurs were the giant beasts of the land only to find out they were in fact governed by the little leaves… the food source… that they were all in search of for survival.[39]

[39] The **Land Before Time** is a 1988 animated adventure **film** directed and co-produced by Don Bluth from a screenplay by Stu Krieger and a story by Judy Freudberg

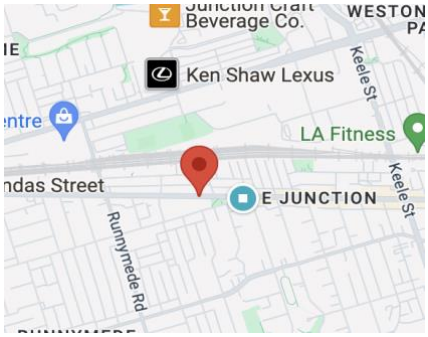
2023 ‘Just Us’ Art Callout

The following murals are all from the 2023 ‘Just Us” callout. The ‘Just Us’ program is part of the StART initiatives and ‘*invites artists from diverse backgrounds to submit proposals that support Black Lives Matter, justice for Indigenous Peoples and social Justice issues in support of equity deserving groups*[40]’

Artist La Pupila- Mural ‘Migratory Birds’ -2023

Figure 10: La Pupila ‘Migratory Birds’ (3126 Dundas St W, Toronto)

La Pupila shows Migratory Birds and depicts the “*complex journey of immigration, drawing inspiration from the enduring journey of migratory birds, the guidance of a compass, and the hope of unlocking of new possibilities, symbolized with a key… this serves as a call to question existing norms in immigration policies and attitudes*”[41]



3126 Dundas St W

This was an interesting piece, shown to a group of three youth, that led a into dialogue about freedom. The mural was presented to the group without any caption and asked: What do you feel when looking at this, are you comfortable sharing your thoughts. One person said it makes no sense why there are human faces on birds. Another one pointed out that it seems to

[40] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/just-us

[41] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/just-us La Pupila – 2023 3126 Dundas St W, Toronto

show freedom for women, and another added that they agreed. There was a thought that one was protecting the other within a circle of light. Another point was that humans can see themself in animals if in the circle of light… Humans have a choice. However, when the caption was shared two of the three say they understand the reference to migration of animals and humans… the group began to discuss loneliness and how it would feel to have no family and then the discussion turned into refugees in Toronto and the person who died waiting for shelter during winter. [42]

Moonlight Murals Collective -2023

Three artists produced this mural. All three identify as females, make up this group known as the Moonlight Murals Collective. What is interesting about this mural, funded by the city, is the political message woven within the image.

Figure 11: Moonlight Murals Collective (693 Mt Pleasant)

"*Majestic birds soar gracefully, symbolising the solidarity and strength of the Iranian diaspora. Each bird represents an individual voice, but together, they form an orchestra of hope, resilience, and determination for the freedom movement in Iran …The mural serves as a tribute to the strength and tenacity of this diaspora, showcasing their unwavering commitment to their homeland's aspirations.*"

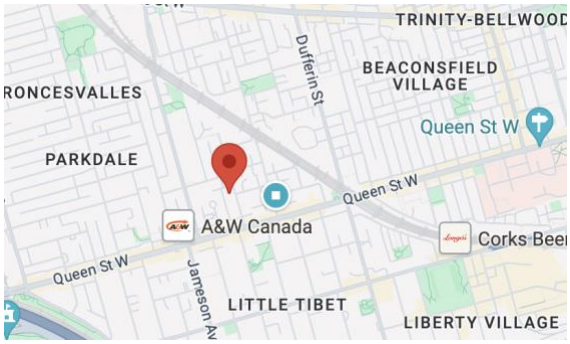
693 Mt Pleasant

[42] The original 2 questions: 1) How do you feel graffiti and street art influence the sense of community and public spaces in your neighbourhood? 2) What are your views on the impact of street art on the city's image and its ability to attract tourism and business? These questions did not seem to foster dialogue in this particular group of youth age range 18-19 years.

Artist - Leone McComas and Krystal Ball - 2023

Figure 12: Leone McComas and Krystal Ball (19 Brock Ave)

"Celebrating African and African Diasporic Heritage through culturally symbolic Fabric designs. Colourful and patterned fabric designs are a cultural feature across the African diaspora. Different countries and regions have distinct designs showcasing culture, identity, class, and tradition – adorned to mark occasions. These designs are often steeped in national history and their symbolism socially, and locally, understood, however the meaning is not commonly understood in Western society."



19 Brock Ave

This artist had done previous projects with the City. She started with the 'Outside the Box" program. She was then approached by BAND (Black Arts Network and Dialog), to do a mural on their fence … I asked Leone what inspired the bee, as the bee was not a part of the initial proposal … She laughed and told me her story of having lunch with a buzzing bee… which then manifested into their mural as 'Queen Bee'… not Beyonce just Bee …that I would not have guessed!

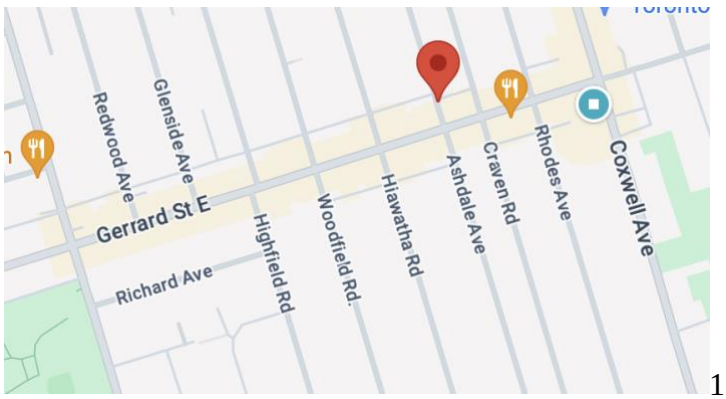
I met all the 'Just Us' 2023 artists in a gathering at Worth Gallery and gained insight into the relationship they have with StART. These relationships are based on respect, trust and appreciation. The management team is warm, accepting and supportive. Randy McClean and Carolyn Taylor interacts with artists using an artistic centered approach rooted in values of truth and reconciliation, inclusion, and diversity. They both said, "it takes time to build strong relationships, and relationships are valuable for community-capacity building". My experiences and interaction with this management team allowed me to understand their commitment to supporting artists to develop their career as artists. The owner of Worth Gallery is also a graffiti artist who has developed a positive relationship with the City management team.

Artist SOWL and Flips - Title ‘Vibe Mantra Scroll’ (Ode T.O. da OG’s) - 2023

Figure 13: SOWL and Flips ‘Vibe Mantra Scroll’(Ode T.O. da OG’s) (1521 Gerrard St. E)

The artist describes their work *‘The lines we draw in life define us. It comes from choices based in the seeking of self … tested through cultures, genetic background and elements of environment. Often experienced as a chaos of influence that forces the individual to make choices in light to form the “self… Complex is the equation of self. Amongst the chaos, there exists an undeniable influence for both artists spawning this mural: the influence of “Black American Culture.”*

They said that ‘the mural pays homage to hip-hop because they were raised in that culture … so we bring our own unique style into the mix… I like swirls and these swirls ties everyone together…” close up the notes and lines of songs are added into this mural that the artist say reflects their relationship to hip-hop culture and its influence on them. Flips says the music brings them back to life because “life can be rough,” they call the music ‘the healing tracks. Which is the relevance to ‘Ode T.O da OG’s’ (a lyric poem usually marked by exaltation of feeling and style, varying in length, and complexity of stanza-- Meriam-Webster dictionary)



1521 Gerrard St E

Artist Leyland Adams ‘Adinkra Cloth’ - 2023

Figure 14: Leyland Adams ‘Adinkra Cloth’ (1962 Eglington Ave. W)

"Adinkra cloth " Afro modernism in public art. This piece blends modern abstract art with a touch of Ghanaian textile patterns. The Akindra Symbol for Abundance is used to create cultural significance to the piece and to be used as a teaching tool and reminder to people of the African diaspora that our culture is abundant. Adinkra was a pattern sometimes worn by royalty during religious ceremony and was created by printing using local materials such as dye from plant extracts and stamps carved out of plan”

1962 Eglington Ave W

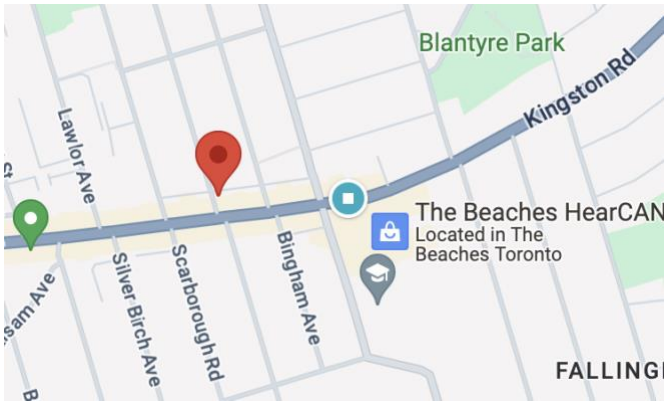
Leyland says “there’s a milieu of cultures, such as Portuguese, that define the identity of this community’ referring to 1962 Eglington Ave West. He used the fig leaf to show “abundance and perseverance” of the cultures and community identity.

Artist Philip Saunders ‘Love is Here’ - 2023

Figure 15: Philip Saunders ‘Love is Here’ (1066 Kingston Rd.)

"Love is Here", by Philip Saunders *features a man and woman immersed in nature sharing a moment of bliss in prayer and faith. Additionally, there is an illuminated heart ascending into the heavens representing their love. The work aims to capture the culmination of love and togetherness through the act of prayer. The style is one rooted in realism as the figures proportions are life-like. However, the skin tones are multicoloured to symbolize the diversity of mankind. The goal of this work is to invoke a sense of awe, wonder and grace in the viewer, I hope to spark a feeling of joyfulness and a loving embrace.”*[43]

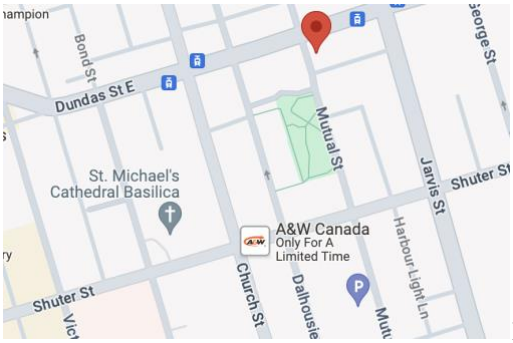
Philip says he wanted to put out a message of love rather than stand in protest. After speaking to him I learned about his relationship to music and the colours and style of the mural are reminiscent of the stained glass of the church he attended with his grandmother.



1066 Kingston Rd.

[43] https://www.streetartoronto.ca/just-us Phillip Saunders - 2023 (1066 Kingston Rd, Toronto)

Figure 16: Jas9 and Alex - Mural ‘Born to Rise’(147 Dundas St East)



147 Dundas St East

Artists Jas9 and Alex submitted this proposal for the Just Us 2024 callout to celebrate resilience and empowerment. The artists choose Aiesha’s journey of growth and confidence to serve as a beacon for young girls to embrace their uniqueness without reservation. The mural is done in black and white to show the contrasts and complexities of her journey. The essence of the project is a testament to strength and beauty found in diversity. Jas9 has done many murals that has high contrast designs with a focus on diversity, strength, resilience and the power of dreams. Jas9 is mentoring Alex to engage in the production of murals of the scope and size of large walls.

Further exploration allowed me to understand the depth of this mural. The young woman in the mural is Aiesha Robinson from Montreal who was diagnosed with vitiligo at 18 when white spots started to appear on her body. Aiesha wanted to spread a message of self-love. The mural stands as documentation of Aiesha’s journey, overcoming her conflicted emotions such as failure when her dream of playing basketball professionally was lost and her interest in school faded while at a time having a diagnoses of vitiligo. According to Vidal[44] Aiesha says she was depressive and contemplated suicide. Out of these conflicts the desire to rise and spread a message of self-love took root along the ‘Born to Rise’ initiative to support youth who are experiencing personal obstacles; they are encouraged to share their stories and support each other.

[44] https://theconcordian.com/2017/04/aiesha-robinson-was-born-to-rise/

Conclusion

This exploration of graffiti and street art in Toronto emphasized the profound impact of these artistic documentations of historical events and expressions that provoke dialogue on issues of social justice, sustainability and hope. The theoretical framework revealed the complex and powerful role graffiti and street art play within urban landscapes in Toronto. These forms of artistic expression allowed artist to address pressing social issues such as the oppression of Black communities have, the struggles of frontline workers, emphasising themes of racial equality, historical awareness and sustainability. This project shows that graffiti and street art not only transform urban spaces and/or express acts of defiance but weave in critical elements within the artists' work that provoke dialogue and waken a collective social consciousness about important issues. City management can recognize the value graffiti and street art brings to urban landscapes as cultural expressions of their community identity. As Toronto continues to evolve, embracing and integrating graffiti and street art can foster an informal educational platform where voices from the walls are heard to influence a more informed, inclusive and sustainable environment.

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