

Paint on their lips

Paint-sniffers, good citizens and public space in Brisbane



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Abstract

This article describes structured responses to young Indigenous people whose paint-sniffing in Brisbane attracts public attention. It gives an emic account of the sniffers' responses to these processes and argues that paint-sniffing expresses their alienated and marginalized social status and is part of an encoded revolt against White cultural authority and its imposed norms. Foucault's view of freedom as the capacity to act and question the taken-for-grantedness of one's milieu (Dreyfus, 2004), and his notion of the body as the locus of power and control, are used to examine unequal power relations described here. Cohen's (2002) moral panic and Young's (1971a, 1971b) deviance amplification frameworks are used to examine the reactions of the police and of ordinary good citizens. We conclude that while dominant responses to paint-sniffing in Queensland rid inner Brisbane of paint-sniffing, they increase the young people's alienation and marginalization from society, thus reproducing the social conditions that lead to sniffing.

Keywords: deviance amplification, embodiment, Indigenous youth, paint-sniffing, power, resistance

Introduction

... what characterises the power we are analysing is that it brings into play relations between individuals (or groups). For let us not deceive ourselves, if we speak of the structures or the mechanisms of power, it is only insofar as we suppose that certain persons exercise power over others. (Foucault, 1982: 217)

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Community alarm at the practice of chroming¹ in Brisbane came to a fever pitch in 2003 when a group consisting mostly of Indigenous young people engaged in a range of behaviours (including open sniffing) in King George Square and the Queen Street Mall. These are major inner-city civic areas and the young people's actions were branded by the print media, police and the broader public as criminal, deviant and dangerous.

The media sensationally brought the issue to the attention of the public and politicians alike. As d'Abbs and Brady (2004) argue, media outbursts portraying Indigenous volatile substance misuse as evidence of social disintegration typically drive a range of short-term 'crisis' responses to the issue. The treatment of paint-sniffing in Brisbane is no exception. In a 2004 media release headlined 'MOVE ON CHROMERS – GET HELP OR GET OUT', 'outraged' Lord Mayoral candidate Campbell Newman declared the 'skyrocketing problem' of 'lawless', 'delinquent chromers in Brisbane's city heart' as 'disgraceful' and asked: 'Who is running this city?' Newman now runs the city and, by all appearances, 'won't stand' for this 'group of thugs' whose 'flagrant disregard for accepted standards of behaviour' continues to 'terrorise workers' because of an incumbent Council 'soft on law and order' (Newman and Quinlivan, 2004).

Newman claims awareness of 'the problems associated with youth and chroming' but found it 'profoundly disturbing' that 'wayward youth' who have a 'duty to conform' to societal 'standards of behaviour' do not 'know there are consequences for their actions'. His implication was that tougher penalties for anti-social behaviour are required since 'a slap on the wrist for criminal behaviour ... is not acceptable' (Newman and Quinlivan, 2004: 1).

Much attention is placed on the public space and law and order issues accompanying the issue of paint-sniffing in Brisbane. Media reports of particular sniffers' involvement in the criminal justice system, detailing inner-city rampages of assault, vandalism, theft and recidivism, were suggestive of crime sprees driven by urchin criminality amongst the entire group (Gregory, 2004a: 5, 2004b: 1, 9; Heffernan, 2004: 6). The news media repeatedly described the lawlessness of the young people in exaggerated and moralistic terms, explaining a variety of behaviours as the result of parental inability to 'instruct them on the virtues of education' and 'a respect for justice and law', arguing that parents instead taught the young people 'shamelessness, dishonesty and antisocial and abusive attitudes' (Gregory, 2004a: 5).

Hence the young people's 'fight is located in the fine meshes of the web of power' as Foucault commented in his studies of the mechanics of power (1980: 116). He also said that such studies of power could only begin 'on the basis of daily struggles at the grassroots level ... where the concrete nature of power became visible' (1980: 116). These young people made visible the concrete nature of power by their refusal to hide from the surveillance apparatus of the state, a refusal that made evident their disdain for

state discipline and dramatized their difference from and refusal to conform to the society that had never served them.

Their unruly and intoxicated public behaviour before affronted inner-city workers confirmed media and wider reports of the former's disregard for the law and led to the enactment of laws empowering police to remove young people found with paint in certain designated localities to a 'safe place' (Queensland Government, 2003). The research for this article occurred at this sensitive time in the relations between the young people and broader structures of policing and the wider community.

Methodology

This article is based on Honours research that utilized brief ethnographic methods with the group of young people who were the target of the media furore discussed earlier. It deals with material from 16 young people who participated in the study in 2004, all of whom were Indigenous and 15 of whom were aged between 14 and 18 years. Significant experience of public volatile substance misuse and 'sleeping rough' was a prerequisite for an invitation to participate. All the study participants had such experience and frequented an area under a bridge in an inner Brisbane park at night.

Access to the study group was enabled by an Indigenous Community Controlled Health Service that provided nightly outreach to the young people in the park. The researcher accompanied the service staff, enabling the young people to become familiar with the researcher and his aims. After a few nights of participant observation 'under the bridge', participants who were observed to sniff or consort with those sniffing were invited to participate in a focus group and in semi-structured one-on-one interviews. Question structures were a loose guide, allowing interviews to follow conversation-like modes of interaction also described by many Indigenous people as 'yarning'.

The study adhered to National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Standards for Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans, and to Standards for Research involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The notions of respect and equality within the overarching ideas of spirit and integrity (NHMRC, 2003: 8–20) were adhered to through consultation with, and inclusion of, Indigenous Community Controlled Health Services in research design and implementation. The researcher ensured ready availability of youth service referral information, should participants have become emotionally affected by the research.

Ethical approval for the research was given by the University of Queensland's School of Population Health Ethics Committee and a letter of support was provided by the Committee chairperson. In its letter of approval the School Ethics Committee concurred with the researcher's argument against seeking parental consent for the participation of minors,

given the estrangement of the young people from their parents and families. Consent was instead sought from the young people themselves, who were provided with a written information sheet that was also read out to them to avoid the possibility of discrimination against participants with literacy challenges.

Not good citizens: the construction of obnoxious and disordered selves

In order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance ... (Foucault, 1982: 211)

Undoubtedly, the young people who participated in the study have it bad. Profoundly marked by experiences of economic disadvantage, family violence and drug abuse, and the experience of belonging to a distinct cultural and class group, the young people's relations with non-Indigenous peers, wider society and its structures are fraught with difficulty.

Psychosocial assessments undertaken by a clinical psychologist on the same group of young people revealed that 100 percent have history of suicidal ideation, 29 percent have a history of at least one attempted suicide and 62 percent had symptoms of clinical depression (Butt, 2004: 10). Clearly, the young people experience low levels of well-being and for this reason come together often for collective self-medication to blot out a harsh reality:

... it just clears your mind y'know ... like if you got problems and stuff y'know, like you just ... when you fuckin' high and that, you just don't think about that stuff y'know.... That's why a lotta people do sniff paint, y'know, drink and smoke yarndi and shit ... they find it easier when they do that shit, they feel more relaxed ... (Mitchell, 17)²

They described multiple ways that their sniffing is the product of strained interpersonal relations, while simultaneously marginalizing them from family and wider society. For example, one young woman indicated she stopped playing sport at the point:

... when I realized that no one cares. I just sniff now. (Deanne, 16)

A focus on psychodynamic issues surrounding Indigenous volatile substance misuse (VSM) is common in the small body of literature on the topic (Butt, 2004; Carney et al., 2004; Carroll et al., 1998; Maruff et al., 2004; Victorian Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee, 2002). Epidemiological studies of VSM are also common in the literature, but young people's deceitful bravado or secrecy, the often clandestine or subterranean sniffing locations and the transience of sniffing in communities often render such studies inexact and contradictory (Maclean and d'Abbs, 2002).

This article seeks to redirect the discussion from the young people's well-described pathos and sniffing epidemiology, toward an examination of how

the responses that society has to them recreate the social conditions conducive to sniffing. This brings into question the helpfulness of the medicalized deviance discourse that concerned civic leaders, intellectuals and lawmen create about the young people. Further, through providing an emic account, the article corrects the imbalance in the portrayal of sniffing (disintegration of law, order and parenting) and sniffers (anti-social, harmful urchins) that saturates the public consciousness through news media. Thus the philosophical orientation of this article is to air the voices and actions of the young people who are subjected to the disciplinary gaze of the state and to the outraged concern of its agents and citizens.

Australian society has long sought, through a variety of means such as Christianization, hygiene regulations and the Assimilation Policy, to incorporate 'Blacks' into the dominant value systems that normalize 'ordered society' (Lattas, 1997: 2; see also Kidd, 1997). Many Indigenous people resist such attempts at regulation and control by embodying opposing values and, as others have documented, some Indigenous people may be observed enacting loudness and profanity in the face of quietness and politeness; drunkenness and disorder in the face of sobriety and good order; inattention to appearance in the face of grooming and elegance; and other priorities in the face of disciplined daily work (Cowlishaw, 1988; Cox, 2000; Lattas, 1997).

During this fieldwork, the young people were observed to loudly and publicly enact all manner of wild behaviour incorporating alcohol and other drug use, the resultant 'drunken comportment' (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1970 [1969]) and disputes. As the following shows, they were fully aware that their 'drunken' behaviour sits outside the sober bounds of the morally upright, esteemed majority:

Sometimes when we charged up and sniffed up we have fights amongst each other.... When they drink too much, they mouth gets out of control.... Sometimes other person like brothers or sister or Elders stop us. (Simon, 16)

The young people quoted in the following perceive their 'sniffed up' condition as an entry into their own world, ridden with an antipathy for, and well outside the domain of, sobriety and orderliness:

Yeah, we're different when we're not sniffed up. (Patrick, 14)

We're hypo, we get like hyperactive when we're sniffed up ... (Simon, 16)

But then when we got sniff in our system we're just like all fuckin' ... (Patrick, 14)

Fuck 'em we just in our own world! (Simon, 16)

There was equal awareness that their unruly conduct did not pass unobserved and, as the following quote attests, the young people act with one eye on who is watching:

Yeah lotta people used to look. ... It was weird though, to have people lookin' at ya while you're doin' it. ... Like I used to go 'Hey don't go fuckin' lookin' at me ... what, you never seen a blackfella before?' ... But they never seen a blackfella sniffin' before ... and that's why they lookin' ... (Sarah, 18)

The young people clearly read the anxious concern of passers-by caused by the formers' denial of social obligations to demonstrate orderliness through dress, manner, speech and other public behaviour:

Oh well, mostly they give us dirty look when we walk around in public with sniff, and like when we sit on the train. It's ... when we jump on, you can tell everybody's gettin' angry 'cos their face, all them White people, their face goes red ... (Simon, 16)

The facials ... and the way they look at us ay. (Michelle, 16)

How they turn around and swear at ya. ... Turn around and swear at ya when ya don't even really expect it ... (Anita, 14)

Keenly aware of their marginalized, alienated social status, the young people reject what they read as superiority on the faces of police and the public alike, as encapsulated in this sniffer's words:

Y'know, you look at us blackfellas, you know, like ... the unfortunate ones y'know ... and you think, well look at these [White] cunts, they think they better than us ... these pricks think they better than me, y'know ... fuck 'em ... (Peter, 16)

Such disapproving responses from the moral majority contribute to a deviance amplification spiral (Young, 1971a: 114), as social responses to the group each time they leave their park squat alienate them further from 'normal people' on commuter trains and elsewhere. Inspired by a sense of injustice at their historical and contemporary situation, they consciously and loudly reject expressions of disapproval from affronted 'White people' with more pronounced offensiveness. When asked to describe interactions between 'those who sniff and those who don't', this young person responded:

Sometimes there's aggro, it depends what person it is you're talking to ... like, just 'cos we're sniffers, fuckin' they don't like it that we sniff. ... I don't even carry on at them, like they carry on and when they carry on, when they wanna bring it, I'll bring it ... if they wanna ... thing – slug it out. ... I'll slug it out. If they leave me alone, I leave them alone ... (Joseph, 15)

Here it can be seen how mainstream reactions lead to more pronounced deviance. This young person who seeks to 'slug it out' with anyone who stares at them confirms media and wider opinions of the young people – a dangerous, lawless group best avoided or incarcerated. The more affronting the young people, the more reactionary society is, and subsequently the more outrageous the young people's defiance. When the discussion

continued in the vein above, the young people described their feelings about onlookers' 'dirty looks':

... Fuck 'em! (Anita, 14)

... Feels like we wanna smash 'em ... first we'll just say like – 'Whatta you lookin' at? ... like, look at this slut 'ere look.' (Simon, 16)

In the eyes of the public, such overt display of disreputable behaviour is scandalous. Not only does it rudely challenge norms of civility and respectability, but it is a defiant, encoded response to marginalization and, as Cowlshaw (1988) argues, is a response to the denial of dignity on the basis of the Other's appearance and manner. The young people's wild behaviour is the source of scandal in the populace at least in part because, as Lattas (1997) argues, they raise in White Australians the 'spectre' of 'monstrous acts of murder ... imprisonment' and other historical mistreatments perpetrated against Indigenous people on the basis of such difference (Lattas, 1997). As Cowlshaw (1988: 232) and Cox (2000: 216) argue, these loud and physical ways of relating constantly invoke the difference between Murris and White authority figures, and at the same time express the burden and frustration of racism.

These deeper points are often lost on an unreflective majority. The establishment reacts with outraged rejection to the young people's non-sanctioned affirmation of allegiance to their own contrary values. This rejection is directed not towards offending symbols but towards offending bodies, as in this morally outraged establishment view:

Confrontational behaviour – whether by gesture, speech or t-shirt slogan – is almost always offensive. There is room for tolerance in contexts such as the Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, but current community standards are affronted by intentionally intimidating or shocking conduct. The t-shirt can be a vehicle for gentle levity, but deliberate affronts are simply not acceptable. Those who perpetrate them are best avoided. (Sir Laurence Street [former NSW Chief Justice], 2005)

White community outrage at the subversive acts of a very few indicates that they perceive more than a minor threat to themselves and their established order (Lattas, 1997). It is this very fear and moral outrage within the establishment that underpins the over-policing of Aborigines and indicates the presence of moral panic among Whites (Lattas, 1997).

Sluggin' it out: The panopticon's failure and subsequent reactions of police and other good citizens

'The gaze is alert everywhere' (Foucault, 1979: 195) in Brisbane, with police patrols and countless cameras surveilling bodies, traffic and even hawks nesting atop office towers (1979: 200). Such constant surveillance

maintains a regime of rules, discipline and social control without necessitating displays of physical force or violence (Foucault, 1979: 200–2; McHoul and Grace, 1993: 67; Marshall, 1998: 237). The panopticon has failed to subdue disorderly Indigenous bodies in Brisbane because their disorderliness is a deliberate contradiction of the very aims of the disciplinary gaze itself. Thus the panopticon ironically forms part of the young people's audience, necessary for effective resistance to White cultural authority.

As was established by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, Indigenous people are subject to police scrutiny and experience the use of discretionary 'petty street offence' legislation at much higher rates than non-Indigenous people. White's (1999) investigation of high Indigenous incarceration rates reveals an over-representation of Indigenous people in court appearances for public order offences. Racism, corruption, misconduct and a culture of silence are also well documented among Queensland police (Cunneen, 2001: 143).

Good citizens' attitudes toward those infringing genteel behavioural norms are based on various assumptions about the offenders and the threat they pose to ordered rationality. As police are drawn from the general population they reflect these sensibilities, but they also have a position of power and authority to defend. These circumstances mean that discretionary decisions determining who should be policed and in what manner favour Aborigines less often than they do Whites, based as they are on value-laden distinctions between 'rough' and 'respectable' (Cunneen, 2001: 148).

Flaunting resistant personas characterized by public drug use and vulgar loudness, the young people are easily characterized by police as belonging to the 'rough'. When asked to describe police responses to paint-sniffing in inner Brisbane public space, this young person expressed awareness of the perceived immorality of their behaviour while also alluding to his perceptions of heavy-handed and targeted police actions:

They must have it in for us. ... Fair enough y'know, sniffin' ain't good but, it's your own thing y'know, like everyone has their own thing y'know, shit to do and that. ... But yeah, like just comin' in here and doin' it, but I think they [police] took it a bit too far, how they handlin' it ... (Peter, 16)

Police attempts to extend the orderliness of White cultural norms and the rule of law over the young people emerge as selective over-policing which, unsurprisingly, cultivates the recalcitrant, disrespectful and uncooperative demeanour police interpret as criminality (Cunneen, 2001: 148). Asked to describe their experience of police surveillance over them, the young people responded with resentment:

They always come down here [under the bridge] and annoying us for nothing ... (Simon, 16)

They think they can mistake ya for people they think you are but you're not, know what I mean ... just 'cos they see you're Black ay, just pull ya over for nothin' man. ... If it was somebody else man, walkin' past, y'know they'll let 'em go ... but if it's us man, they'll pull us up ... all the time. They're dogs! (Joseph, 15)

The police are all arseholes. They just harass ya for nothing. They just like ... I dunno, they wanna pick on someone ... you gotta have the colour skin White ... we gotta shed our skin just to walk down the street ... (Deanne, 16)

One night there, I was charged up, drinkin' rum straight in Roma Street ... coppers grabbed me there took me to the watch house, took us in the watch house. ... We were sayin' what you takin' us for man, ya fuckin' dogs ... no good they took me in a room, no camera there ... the cunts all come in, the sergeant there, the boss of 'em y'know, he come in, he hit me first and then that's when all the fuckin' coppers come in, when I fell on the ground off the chair, they started bootin' me, the cunts. And when they finished bashin' me, they just let me go man. ... After that I bashed some other cunt in the city that night ... fuck that, they bashed me in handcuffs ... (Joseph, 15)

Such over-policing is at times beyond mere surveillance and, rather than subduing disorderly bodies, gives birth to indignation that amplifies deviance (Cohen, 2002; Young, 1971a, 1971b). Hence the young people readily and angrily express ill will towards police:

They're dogs ... they're dogs ... they hassle us all the time, all the time, the fuck-heads. ... I hate coppers ... I hate coppers ... [into the microphone] I say it loud and proud busch, I hate coppers ... they're dogs! They try fuckin' get my name and shit all the time ... they give me hard day, they always fuckin' come up to me there, like, yeah what's your name mate. ... I don't wanna do it all the time, they do it 24-7 non-stop the cunt dogs ... wanna give us a rest ... (Joseph, 15)

Asked what they would do to police if there were no consequences for their actions, the young people responded with a range of poisonous fancies steeped in their own experiences of police brutality:

I wish any prick copper can just be in our shoes and just ... understand, y'know ... if I had one wish, I would make them get into my spot and see how they feel, like being treated like that ... have they arm twisted and their head bashed up against the wall, and being called a lowly Black cunt ... (Sarah, 18)

Kill 'em. Kill 'em with they own guns. Cunts. (Michelle, 15)

Handcuff 'em with they own cuffs man, and put 'em in the watch house ... put 'em in jail. So they can feel how we feel when they do it to us. (Michelle, 15)

I'd murder all the police in the world ... that's what I'd do ... (Joseph, 15)

Don't even go there bro! No consequences? I'd fuckin' shoot 'em down! Man, fuck I feel like ... Bin Laden junior, I go up and bomb the place! Not all of them, just the ones that I know that treated me really fuckin' bad y'know, like ... smashed me man ... (Peter, 16)

I'd hire all Black police. ... I'd kick the cunts off the force man ... get out cunt, I put my people in here ... just like that man ... (Mitchell, 17)

'Potentially harmful things': legislating the streets safe

The Police Powers and Responsibilities Act 2000 was introduced in response to the problems of loitering and petty lawlessness around shopping precincts. The Act enabled police to issue discretionary 'move-on' instructions to people whose presence satisfied certain criteria, clearing them from particular 'declared locality' areas such as malls, shops and other public areas, not to return for 24 hours (LGAQ [Local Government Association of Queensland], 2004: 5.1). Criteria for moving somebody on include causing anxiety to the public, interfering with business or being disorderly, indecent, offensive or threatening at the place (LGAQ, 2004: 5.1). The young people reported the laws were used to move them from Queen Street Mall:

How it used to be, if you was sniffin', it'd be like a move-on direction, say like if you was in the mall, you wasn't allowed in Adelaide St to Elizabeth St to George St and down the other end of the mall ... you not allowed in the mall at all for 24 hours ... (Peter, 16)

King George Square is 100 metres away from the Mall, but falls outside the locality declaration, preventing police from issuing move-on instructions there. During their period of gathering in King George Square, the young people camped in a squat underneath a nearby freeway exit, and moved between sniffing there and in King George Square. Thus, at this time, much to the chagrin of police and the wider community, the young people openly sniffed paint in the city outside the declared localities:

When I was sniffin' it was so mad, y'know, you could walk around and just be like whackin' on and everything. ... It was cool but now you gotta go and hide and sniff, and gotta watch out ... just have it up your sleeve and just ... now they just watchin' ya. (Sarah, 18)

The media storm aroused by the young people 'whackin' on' in city centre civic space pre-empted amendments to the 2000 Police Powers and Responsibilities Act specifically dealing with volatile substance use. Well before the introduction of the 2004 amendments, however, police escalated their surveillance over the sniffers, destroying their inner-city squat and 'flogging them around':

Just a while ago, y'know, like ages ago, the blackfellas used to do their own thing y'know, and the coppers do their own thing y'know ... everything was OK but then, after a while y'know, new coppers came in, just all went down the drain y'know coppers y'know just start hassling ya ... you can't stay under there. ... One time they came under there, smashed the place y'know, gave us a bit of a hassle y'know, flogging us around and shit. (Peter, 16)

The 2004 amendments addressed volatile solvent misuse by expanding the definition of ‘potentially harmful things’ (products harmful if ingested or inhaled contrary to manufacturer intent), previously limited to substances such as methylated spirits, to include solvents such as paint and glue. As one officer stated in a personal communication, there was not unanimous police support for the introduction of laws to deal with social issues. Nonetheless, the increased police powers legitimated the use of force against those who resist the imposition of orthodox cultural values by empowering police to perform on-the-spot searches on those suspected of being in possession of, inhaling, intending to inhale or having inhaled a potentially harmful thing (Queensland Government, 2003: 22). Police may seize the item if possessed without ‘reasonable explanation’ in ‘suspicious circumstances’ (Queensland Government, 2003: 21). An example of ‘suspicious circumstances’ is given in the Bill as:

... paint on the person’s lips. (Queensland Government, 2003: 22)

The amendments enabled police to detain the person suspected of chroming and remove them to ‘a place of safety’ such as a hospital or detoxification facility, or home if there is no likelihood of domestic violence (Queensland Government, 2003: 22). Importantly, neither the old legislation nor the new amendments make chroming an offence in itself, but the young people claim not to experience the new amendments in the caring manner they were framed:

But fuckin’ now [since the introduction of the new laws], it’s like um y’know sit there, you might be sniffin’ or something, they’d come over ... just say to ya, get up, y’know, start walkin’. ... They’d make it all look really good y’know, like they not doin’ nothing to ya, just tryin’ to cooperate with ya but they not really doin’ that. But they do, like, talk to ya nicely, just say they tryin’ to do some checks, walk ya down to the police station, and just fuckin’ belt ya. ... They love that new law man, the coppers. (Peter, 16)

This brutality is a perpetuation of the well-documented police persecution of Aborigines that has a far wider reach than just the lives of these young people, and demonstrates how little change has occurred since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (Wyvill, 1991). The inadequacy of law-and-order responses to issues marked by a complex interaction of factors such as economic and social inequality and alienation are obvious. Rather than addressing expressions of alienation by treating the young people in fair-handed and non-adversarial ways, police actions ensure and consolidate the young people’s outcast status and, as we have seen in the young people’s comments, social policy in Queensland has had effects opposite to those intended: their relations with police have eroded further and their marginalization from the wider community has deepened.

It seems this is not the lawmakers’ primary concern. As the law only applies in ‘declared localities’ where the general public shop, work and

congregate, the young people sniff paint in other places without risk of being taken away. This suggests that the law was introduced with the goal of addressing the public space issue of *inner-city paint-sniffing*, rather than the social issue of Indigenous youth paint-sniffing. The implementation of the laws effectively dealt with the public space problem: the young people now sniff paint unseen in a park under a bridge, with only marginal interruption from police:

I come down here a fair bit ... mainly for friends and sniffing. It's the only place that's all right for sniffin'. It's better here than the city – in the mall and King George Square you get pulled up by coppers and taken from there. (Rhianna, 14)

As Hutchings (1993: 358) argues, Indigenous youth 'run amok' in the streets in a powerful construction of their selves as disordered. As we have seen above, the imposition of laws and heavy policing against riotous use of public space in Brisbane leave the underlying causes for resistance intact but, for the young people, necessitate new space for the articulation of resistance. Stricter controls on public space make their bodies the last domain the young people may defile in an attempt to resist the imposition of dominant cultural values aimed at creating an orderly, submissive subject. The 'ultimate resistance' to attempts at systemic control over their lives and bodies for Indigenous youth is to scandalize 'establishment sensibilities' by effecting an outrageous appearance of drug-fuelled self-destruction (Hutchings, 1993: 358). Such violent assertion of the body as the locus of power denies the control of outside forces and allows the young people to assert and strengthen self-identity and direction over their lives (Hutchings, 1993: 358).

These forms of resistance are tragic. Their futility, as they increase the levels of state surveillance over the young people and reincorporate them into the folds of the legal-welfare structures they resist, becomes apparent to the young people whose attempts at agency exact a heavy toll and (at least in this case) attempt to generate legitimate means to refute state control (Hutchings, 1993: 358):

You think it's fun, man? You have your fun when you're young man, like fuck, but when you older it comes back on ya. I know man. That's why I wanna go school. ... I wanna get my certificates man, so I can get a good job ... then I can fuckin' ... drive around my car ... mad car ... coppers try pull you over. ... I got my licence and my car ... (Joseph, 15)

The panoptic ways of imposing disciplinary norms over deviant populations proliferate beyond the punitive and repressive police gaze described earlier and, for the young people, not all the attention attracted by their outrageous behaviour is negative. A host of 'caring' agencies surveil the park daily, providing a wide range of health and welfare services. Why go home to elude that gaze? To a young person whose life is littered with

mistreatment at the hands of family, the community and the state, the park becomes a place where positive attention is a benefit of defiling and destroying the body. One youth worker described these dynamics:

It's a way to just say, society doesn't cater for me, fuck society, I don't wanna be part of it. Y'know, OK, well here's a whole lotta kids who sniff, they all in the same situation as me, and they all having a good time, I'm gonna go have a good time too. They get caught up in it then, and for the first time in their life they see everybody trying to help them. Ay what's goin' on, everyone trying to help, what's goin' on, people starting to listen to me. ... People care for me, people wanna help me, pay me attention. If I go home today, all that's gonna go brrrt, down the drain. I don't want that. I need the attention, I need love and I need caring.

Who needs fuckin' shelter, shelter got me nowhere 'cos I never had no love, no caring, no attention. So what do I want? I rather sleep under the fuckin' stars and have people come around seein' me every day seeing if I'm all right, feeding me, clothing me, showering me, talking to me. (Indigenous Youth Worker)

In this way the young people negotiate the path between a rugged assertion of individuality, made through bold statements toward autocratic attempts to impose order, and self-medicated statements of vulnerability and demands for care directed at those who seek alternate, kinder means to impose order on their bodies:

People try tell me off for sniffin', but they can't. If they try tell me ... put that bottle down there, blaah blaah ... I just tell 'em, I'm old enough to sniff man, you don't tell me what to do ... you'll never fuckin' stop me from sniffin', you and me have a fight, cunt ... (Joseph, 15)

I think it is a cry for help. ... I really wanted help ... like I'd push people away but I still wanted their help. I didn't want them to give up on me. ... I think with these kids they just need to talk to someone about it ... they just need someone who they can connect with ... (Sarah, 18)

In the following story the young woman conveys that she doesn't see her body as the sum of her 'self'. She retains power by conceptualizing her self as an entity that will survive her body and remain malignant toward police (Cox, 2000):

One lady copper called me a Black cunt, I just turned around and connected her, busted her man. ... They said they chargin' me with assault, I said do it then ya dog, do it. ... She jumped in the paddy wagon for me. ... When she jumped in I just drove her straight in the face. ... She was wild, she said you little Black slut, wait till I get you into the police beat, I said bring it on then. ... Once they took me over there ... she came in, took her belt off thinking she was big woman. ... I picked the chair up, cracked it over her head. ... The men come in ... and they was rough man, they had me by the throat, I said do it ya dog, I'll come back and haunt all you dogs ... (Sarah, 18)

Conclusions

Following Fanon's (1967, 1980) analysis of the dialectic of colonialism, Cox (2000: 29) argued that, in the Australian context too, the colonized have turned the violence of history into an embodied rage that actively seeks to wreak havoc on the sensibilities and systems of 'the others' from elsewhere, while engaging in tragic acts of self-destruction. These dynamics were also evident in the context of inner-city chroming.

The range of orthodox responses to the young people's resistant behaviours has the paradoxical effect of increasing their alienation and marginalization from mainstream society, and their subsequent resistant acts. As Lemke reminds us: 'in his history of governmentality Foucault endeavours to show how the modern state and the modern autonomous individual co-determine each other's emergence' (2001: 191). Here is an instance of just this process since, through attempts to impose disciplinary norms upon the young people, the panopticon ironically forms part of the 'audience' for young people's resistance to White cultural authority and their resistance produces greater attempts at control on the part of the state. Wider hegemonic indignation at the young people's rebuttal of the culturally approved goals of work, achievement and material success leads to brutalizing impositions of authority against the young people. As we described, physical and verbal violence perpetrated against the sniffers left them angry and helpless, amplifying their resistance against the disciplinary norms of wider society.

Simply changing where the group enacts resistance represents a profound failure of social policy to address the health and welfare issues underlying paint-sniffing. It has not only led to the increased social marginalization of the young people but, in moving them to an unsafe location, has placed them at increased risk of harm. Preventing the young people from using public space as the site of resistance has resulted in their bodies becoming the locus of power, decreasing the likelihood of withdrawal from VSM.

But these points hold little sway for one of the chief instigators of the law-and-order response:

There are [safe] places to take them. The difficulty is they come back [to the streets]. Half their brains are fried, you take them there and try to rehabilitate them, it doesn't work. (The Hon. Peter Beattie, Premier of Queensland, in Gregory, 2004b: 1)

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Notes

- 1 'Chroming' is a colloquial term for sniffing paint containing chromium compounds.
- 2 Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

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