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The Skanner Newspaper, established in October 1975, is a weekly publication, published every Wednesday by IMM Publications Inc.

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The Skanner is a member of the National Newspaper Publishers Association and West Coast Black Publishers Association.

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Opinion

Graffiti Has Undergone A Massive Shift in a Few Quick Decades as Street Art Gains Social Acceptance

Graffiti has become so mainstream in recent years that auction houses, museums and entire art shows cater to street art connoisseurs and collectors around the world. Images in the news of young vandals responsible for marking walls have been replaced by sleek websites belonging to global phenoms such as Banksy and Shepard Fairey.

In cities around the world, graffiti is now associated with “street artists” rather than violent street gangs. Today, many cities, from Pittsburgh to Pretoria, invite street artists to help brand neighborhoods that are being revitalized and gentrified as legitimately hip destinations for business owners, home buyers and influencers. Some up-and-coming neighborhoods in cities like Dakar, Senegal; Mexico City; Brisbane, Australia; and Seoul, South Korea offer street art tours and host graffiti festivals.

The vibrantly colored walls in such places attract travelers to parts of town once deemed “sketchy.” These same neighborhoods are home to bookstores that carry graffiti coffee table books and universities that offer courses on graffiti art. I have taught such courses myself. But it hasn’t always been this way.

Stefano
BlochUniversity of
Arizona

The history of tagging

Before becoming an academic who teaches and writes about graffiti, I was a graffiti writer. I started tagging, or illegally writing my name — Cisco CBS — on surfaces across Los Angeles in the early 1990s.

“Law enforcement didn’t seem to understand what the writing on walls meant

At the time, local governments were cracking down on wall writers with anti-gang legislation, such as California’s 1988 Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act, and a variety of “broken windows theory” policing initiatives.

Law enforcement didn’t seem to understand what

the writing on walls meant or who was behind those cryptic images and personal monikers. Many residents couldn’t read or understand it either. Graffiti was interpreted as gang-related and, therefore, territorial and violent. Vandals were targeted with well-funded anti-graffiti task forces and police crackdowns on taggers like me.

It was not enough, it seemed, to rightfully charge graffiti writers with vandalism. Rather, police and district attorneys, backed by a morally panicked public, were making an example of graffiti writers, charging them with felonies, giving them six-figure fines and sending them to prison for illicitly marking walls.

By the end of the 1990s, as the violent crime rate in cities across the U.S. declined and gentrification increased, new residents felt they could safely move into lower cost, “up-and-coming” neighborhoods.

Local governments turned to gang injunctions, a restraining order targeting alleged gang members, to help rid neighborhoods of the remaining taggers and wall writers who were labeled gang members and were painting political wall murals.

The Guadalupe, or La Virgen, was used to signal the

Chicano community’s faith in God’s protection, delivering them from the violence of the streets at the hands of gangs and police alike. But such murals, often done by local graffiti artists who were themselves deeply rooted in the Chicano community, were forced to make room for “street art” in the context of neighborhood change and urban redevelopment.

As real estate prices went up, the Guadalupe murals came down, symbolizing local displacement by gentrification. While physical displacement was being experienced firsthand by long-standing residents, the transformation of the walls in these communities symbolized a broader cultural change. By the early 2000s, politically neutral street art images replaced depictions of social struggle, Chicano/a history, and community life.

Graffiti made legit

By 2011, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles hosted the first-ever museum survey of street art and graffiti. At this time, I was finishing my dissertation on the “Changing Face of Wall Space,” which explored graffiti in the nearby neighborhoods of Echo Park.

Read more at [TheSkanner.com](https://www.theskanner.com)

Big Chance to Cut Climate Pollution from Big Trucks

The interstates built in the 1950s and 1960s killed the vitality of the communities where people of color and the poor lived, from Overtown in Miami to the Hill District in Pittsburgh to the South and West Sides of Chicago. The disruption and segregation of those communities happened by design.

The harm continues to this day for the residents who remain in those neighborhoods. Because the highways run through their backyards, those people are at point blank range for the pollution from the millions of vehicles driving the interstates burning fossil fuels.

Transportation accounts for more than a quarter of the climate damaging gases this country makes, more than any other sector. An estimated 72 million Americans live in close proximity to trucking routes and they are disproportionately people of color or living with low incomes.

We have an unprecedented chance to change this longstanding disregard for so many Americans’ health and well-being, and we must grab that chance if we want to reduce vehicle pollution enough to reach our goal of cutting carbon emissions in half by 2030.



Ben Jealous

Guest
Columnist

While heavy duty vehicles — think delivery trucks, garbage trucks, buses, and tractor trailer trucks — are only 6 percent of the vehicles in the United States, they produce

“We have an unprecedented chance to change this longstanding disregard for so many Americans’ health and well-being

a third of the climate pollution from transportation. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has proposed new rules that would sharply reduce the carbon dioxide that heavy duty vehicles will be allowed to belch in their exhaust and pave the way for more trucks and buses that have no emissions.

The comment period for these new rules ended Friday, so the EPA needs to finalize them quickly. As we saw last year with other common sense air pollution standards for trucks that the EPA adopt-

ed, special interests and the politicians they support will oppose any regulations that have a chance to avert climate disaster. The EPA must stand up for communities most damaged by truck and bus pollution.

The stricter rules should add momentum to changes already happening in that part of the economy. Manufacturers like Daimler, Ford, Navistar, and Volvo have pledged to increase the number of

zero emission trucks they sell and big volume shippers including Amazon, FedEx, and Walmart have said they will cut their air pollution.

The available models of zero emission trucks are up more than a quarter from three years ago, and their cost is expected to drop 40 percent in the next four years. Seventeen states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have agreed to a plan to boost zero emission truck sales with an initial target of 30 percent by 2030.

Beyond the new federal rules, we have extraordinary

incentives that are part of the historic infrastructure and clean energy packages that President Biden and Congress approved over the last two years. We’ve pledged to spend \$1 billion by 2031 on zero emission heavy duty trucks and another \$5 billion by 2026 on clean school buses. We must have the bigger stick of tougher regulation, but for the first time we have meaningful carrots from these incentives.

We’ve finally as a nation started to acknowledge the scope of the change it will take to preserve our fragile and already damaged planet. But the interest in the status quo is strong among those who gain from it like Big Oil companies reporting record billions in profits. We can’t turn our attention away now, assuming that recognizing the problem will undoubtedly lead to the right actions to address it.

Sixty years ago, neighborhoods in Manhattan, Washington and New Orleans fought back successfully against being divided and paved over by interstates. Finishing the job of ending the pollution from those highways’ traffic will take that same commitment on our part.