

## **Urban Graffiti on the City Landscape**

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**Abstract.** An analysis of graffiti on the urban environment can serve as an excellent tool in understanding behavior, attitudes and social processes of certain segments of society. The thematic content of graffiti can provide valuable information on these groups that are not often in public view in the urban environment. Subcultures in our society that have gone against the normative values that the dominant culture has laid out have been overshadowed by the practices of popular culture.

Understanding graffiti can unveil hidden knowledge of these subcultures. There are several types of graffiti, each associated with a different type of culture, serving a distinct function. Gang graffiti in Los Angeles serves as an important text to understanding these groups, as the graffiti delineates space, and reemphasizes existing territory. It also serves as a tool of communication, as it constantly challenges the hegemonic discourses of the dominant, and it aids understanding the social and cultural meaning of these marginalized groups.

Interpreting graffiti through the use of photos will show how gangs from different ethnic backgrounds claim space, communicate thoughts and feelings, and express group and individual identity.

**Keywords:** *graffiti, territoriality, culture, Los Angeles, gangs.*

The word graffiti means “little scratchings” and it comes from the Italian *graffiare*, which means to scratch. For several thousand years, ancient cultures have engaged in this type of written expression (Reisner 1971; Abel & Buckley 1977). These scribbles have been said to provide a unique insight into society, because messages written through graffiti are often made without the social constraints that might otherwise limit free expression of political or controversial thoughts. From a historical standpoint, graffiti has been used by epigraphologists to reconstruct a history of both the people of Pompeii and the ancient Athenians (Abel & Buckley 1977:4). Archaeologists have also examined graffiti to learn more about the history of writing. Graffiti can also be traced back to the ancient Egyptians, who developed one of the oldest and most remarkable forms of writing in the world (Shillington 1989:97). Unfortunately hieroglyphics tell us very little about the social conditions of the region. For the rest of this paper, I will give a background on graffiti, with an emphasis on gang graffiti, and explore how the concepts of place, culture, hegemony and identity are interwoven through the texts of various graffiti expressions.

In the past psychologists, sociologists, linguistics, law enforcement, anthropologists, and geographers have studied graffiti. It has been examined and interpreted to understand adolescent personality (Peretti et al. 1977), ancient cultures (Reisner 1971), sexual attitudes, artistic style (Romotsky & Romotsky 1975; Feiner & Klein 1982), gender differences (Stocker et al. 1972), behavior, communication, female suppression (Bruner & Kelso 1980) and territoriality (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974; Alonso 1999). Recently our society has become more concerned with the criminal label that has been attached to graffiti in the urban environment (Maxwell and Porter 1996; Black 1997), but nevertheless graffiti is rich in information, that can be simply explained as outward manifestations of a variety of subcultures.

Graffiti is a common site in all metropolitan regions in the United States. It has even gained popularity in Central and South American as well as in European countries such as Germany, Spain, and Russia. Increasingly, it has been viewed as a growing problem for many cities in industrialized nations during the past twenty years (Chalfant and Pigoff 1987). Graffiti is typically perceived as vandalism; a public nuisance to be dealt with prohibitively by measures such as banning the sale of spray paint and making graffiti writing a criminal act (Hutchinson 1993:138). In New York City, where graffiti first emerged in the late 1960s, officials responded by creating special task forces to combat graffiti. Although millions of dollars have been spent on graffiti removal, much of the effort to abate this expression in New York City has failed.

Officials in New York City responded because they claimed that the order of the landscape had been disrupted (Lachman 1988:336). New York City subway graffiti penetrated all the spaces of the city, as these trains cruised through the four boroughs of the

city, from 205<sup>th</sup> in the Bronx to Far Rockaway. In New York the cause for concern was the spatial distribution of graffiti, being facilitated by the mobility of the train. In Los Angeles, however graffiti was not widespread during the late 1960s, because Los Angeles graffiti writers were mostly Chicano youths who were confined to segregated communities, where their writings did not threaten the order of the rest of city. In the fragmented metropolis of Los Angeles, where Chicano writers were mostly concentrated in East Los Angeles, Whittier, and Boyle Heights, graffiti did not penetrate mainstream social spaces of the city therefore efforts to abate this act were minimal.

Today these historical differences between East and West coast graffiti participation have dissipated, as Los Angeles has now become a major venue of graffiti expression. It has continued to be scattered across the city steadily since 1980. In 1989 while New York City spent \$55 million in graffiti clean-up efforts (Beaty and Gray 1987), Los Angeles County, was not far behind, spending \$50 million (Martinez 1989). By the year 2000, Los Angeles is expected to lead the nation in graffiti clean up, with the continued diffusion of youth cultures from New York and other east coast towns into Southern California via the Hip Hop popular culture explosion which began to migrate in the early 1980s (George et al. 1985:188).

Since Los Angeles contains diverse forms of graffiti, it serves as an adequate location to conduct a taxonomy of graffiti. I mention this, because today several different types of graffiti coat the surfaces of LA walls, and when doing an analysis of graffiti one must be able to differentiate between the various types. As the entire landscape of Los Angeles is browsed, several types of graffiti emerge. Each form of graffiti serves a different function in relationship to society, and they stem from different types of subcultures. To gain a better understanding of graffiti, I have created a framework that categorizes the distinct types of

graffiti observed in Los Angeles (Table 1). This taxonomy on Los Angeles graffiti can be applied not only to Los Angeles but also to several other urban environments throughout the US.

**Table 1: Taxonomy of Los Angeles Graffiti**

1. Existential
2. Tagging
3. Piecing
4. Political
5. Gang

*Political* graffiti is the most open system of graffiti, meaning that all who are confronted with these texts can understand the messages being conveyed. The writers of political graffiti geographically place their writings on busy thoroughfares, which guarantee an extensive viewing. This type of graffiti uses the general public as an audience to communicate ideas against the establishment. Political groups take advantage of graffiti as communication because it is the safest, the most economical and a highly efficient way of reaching a desired audience (Raento 1997:197). Political graffiti messages are fragments of truth (McGlynn 1972:353), a hurried summary of facts that include themes associated with labor conditions, freedom, political power, homelessness, unemployment, religious thought, and civil rights.

In Los Angeles, political graffiti is usually associated with critical social events, not usually part of the everyday landscape. For example during the Los Angeles civil unrest of 1992, political graffiti against the police department and the judicial system was evident (Figure 1), but the presence of political graffiti inscriptions are much more prolific under authoritarian governments (Chaffee 1989:39). Much of the analysis on political graffiti is



**Figure 1.** Graffiti written in response to the not-guilty verdicts of four Los Angeles police officers, who were accused of beating motorist Rondey King. This photo was taken on April 30, 1992 during the height of the Los Angeles civil unrest.



**Figure 2.** Five tags of individuals nicknamed Amaze, Sin, Rize, Sar and San. Notice the extreme stylization of the tag of Amaze, which would be unreadable to some. This photo was taken in San Francisco, June 1996, but this tagging is representative of how it is performed nation wide.

done outside of the United States in places such as Peru (McElroy 1997), Spain (Raento 1997), and Argentina (Chaffee 1989). Because of the large audience that political graffiti attracts, the state makes it part of their agenda to cleanse these places of the social commentary as a method of de-politicizing the marginalized. The government elite views such graffiti as “disruptive” and subversive (Chaffee 1987:39), but despite the efforts by the State, in places such as Peru, Argentina and in the Spanish Basque country, graffiti communication to the masses is still prevalent. All attempts to curtail the discussion pertaining to the political ideology of the marginalized, via graffiti messages, heighten the efforts of the repressed to proceed in producing their messages in opposition of the dominant.

*Existential*<sup>1</sup> graffiti is the most common form of graffiti, and similar to political it follows an open system. They contain individual personal commentaries, and it is sometimes referred to as expressive graffiti. Existential graffiti that can be subdivided into several subcategories depending on the thematic content (Table 2.). The most common are the racial and sexual scribbles. The geographical distribution of existential graffiti does not follow an identifiable pattern in the urban environment, but it can be consistently found in public bathrooms.

A study conducted in 1971 collected graffiti samples from the bathroom stalls of three universities<sup>2</sup> where most inscriptions were categorized as sexual or racist (Stocker et al., 1972: 361). When looking at the categorical breakdown of the occurrences of the different types of existential graffiti, a few patterns emerge. Looking at the sexual content of the sample, 14% of the male graffiti samples were homosexual with just 0.01% derogatory in nature. Ironically

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<sup>1</sup> This category was originally formulated by Stephen A. McElroy of San Diego State University, which was presented at the Association of American Geographers in Ft. Worth, Texas on April 4, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> The graffiti samples were collected from Southern Illinois University, a liberal campus, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, a conservative, and the University of Missouri, Columbia, neither.

most of the derogatory comments on homosexuality were recorded at the liberal campus. Comments regarding sexual invitations and request were recorded 12% of the time at the conservative campus while only 1.7% of such comments were found at the liberal campus. Almost 11% of the female graffiti samples consisted of homosexual comments with less than half of one percent derogatory in nature. Again the female derogatory declarations against homosexuality were more frequently observed at the liberal campus.

Another type of existential graffiti are those regarding race. These comments are usually always hostile, making references to racial elimination and supremacy. Males and females scribbled racist comments in equal proportions in this study, 3.6% of the time, and again the liberal campus recorded the most occurrences of racist graffiti. Of the female observations, not one racist comment was collected at the conservative campus. The male comments were more to do with racial elimination, while the female comments were categorized as hostile.

**Table 2: Existential Graffiti Categories**

1. Sexual
2. Racial
3. Love
4. Religious
5. Philosophical
6. Humorous
7. Non-sexual
8. Self

Regardless if the content is associated with love, sex, or racial remarks, existential graffiti represents outward manifestations of personality. These inscriptions depict ideas and sentiments that are usually taboo in the social life of the writer. The anonymity affords the



writer to challenge the normative values of the setting (i.e. university, school, neighborhood) without risking impeachment from the locale. For example, on the liberal campus where homophobic and racist ideologies are not publicly viewed as favorable, there appears to be a need for some to express these thoughts, which are more likely to be suppressed in a public setting. On the conservative campus, where these thoughts may be expected, they appear less frequently on the bathroom walls. Gonos et al. posited a similar notion about race by stating that as the word “nigger” comes to be less acceptable in a public conversation, we would expect it to become more popular in the graffiti of those individuals (1976: 42). Similarly comments regarding homosexual invitations and requests were more prevalent at the liberal campus because this language is not openly embraced.

At the liberal university, it appears that those who inscribed their thoughts on the walls constantly challenged the dominant discourse. Homophobic ideas and racist comments on the walls challenged what was considered moral and politically correct by the dominant class at the university. These anonymous inscriptions give us an insight about the racist and homophobic attitudes of the bathroom goers at the liberal campus.

**Tagging** is the most widespread type of graffiti that has been inscribed on the walls, buses, and trains of the urban environment, and every year it gains in popularity. As a stylized signature that a writer marks on the environment, tagging was born on the East Coast in 1969 and it is a component of the Hip Hop culture (Figure 2). This style of graffiti has attracted media attention because of its steady growth in popularity among youths and the high cost to remove it. Because of this, several strategies to control tagging have been adopted. This cultural activity eventually spread westward making its way to California, as Hip Hop was exported from New York City to major cities across the United States and the world during

the “Hip Hop” popular culture explosion in the early 1980s (Gonos et al. 1985:188). By the late 1980s graffiti became a public issue in Los Angeles as it did in New York in the early 1970s.

The purpose of tagging is about “getting up” in as many places as possible. For the tagger recognition as a prolific writer is an important goal. Through prolificity, fame and a sense of power are acquired by how many tags a writer can complete. Power is exercised by how writers make personal claims to the surfaces they tag. The writer also feels a sense of power by participating in an activity and culture that is so active and has such a visible effect on their physical surroundings (Brewer 1992:188). Taggers are also inspired to continue their exploits because of the rebellious nature of these actions. They constantly challenge the normative values of the popular culture, and as new strategies are implemented to reduce the incidences of tagging, they constantly figure new methods to counter them. As an example, to avoid the sharp barb wires found around freeway and expressway signs, graffiti writers have devised methods of circumventing these barriers. In an effort to complete a tag, one writer fell 100 feet from a freeway overpass, while he tried to lower himself with a rope to write his tag in the most inaccessible location (Chuang 1997). Successful attempts to mark ones name in the most obscure place adds to the writers recognition and fame.

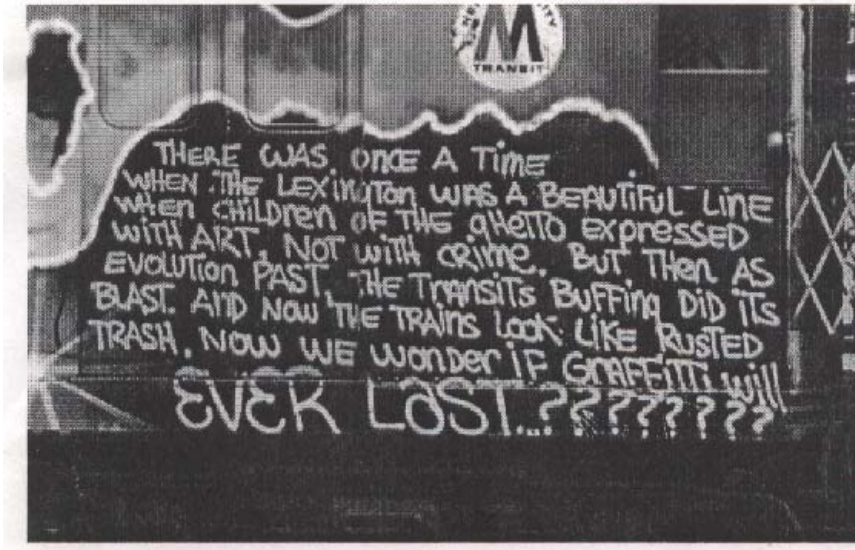
The popular view of tagging is that it is “dirty, obscene, and disease like” (Cresswell 1992:333). It is frequently referred to as an epidemic or a plague, but in fact tagging is part of the elaborate subculture of Hip-Hop, rich with its own fashion of dress, music and art. If we view culture as Jackson, and consider Hip-Hop culture, like any other culture “as the medium or idiom through which meanings are expressed” (Jackson 1989:180), tagging is an outward manifestation of that culture. Any attempts to suppress the activities of graffiti writers will

disrupt attitudes and behaviors, which is evident through their public messages on the environment (Figure 3).

Los Angeles began to adopt strategies to control this type of graffiti because they did not want their landscape to mimic that of New York City's. Los Angeles officials tried to ban the sale of spray paint, legislate new laws and even issue driver license suspensions to those who were penalized for graffiti offenses (Ingram 1989). All of these attempts to suppress graffiti have failed. Although the state of California has continued to develop harsher laws against graffiti, that recently sent a tagger to prison for four years (Levikow 1997), these efforts by the state have not served as a deterrence to eliminate or reduce graffiti expression in Los Angeles.

Reactions to taggers by the State can be defined as efforts of containment or what Halls explains as efforts to contain the subordinate classes [to] mold them to fit within the definitions of "reality" favorable to the dominant class (Hall 1977:332-33). The ideology of the dominant class has labeled this expression of subcultural resistance as deviant and criminal, linking it to violent crime. Deputies from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department have associated taggers and tagger groups as gangs who are connected to committing burglaries, car-jackings, narcotic trafficking, robberies and murders (Maxwell and Porter 1996:34), but a district attorney who prosecutes such cases stated that the link between taggers and "real" crime are just in our rhetoric (Lachman 1988:236). In fact, heavy drug use is almost nonexistent among serious graffiti writers, and activities involved with writing graffiti appear to be their only criminal behavior (Feiner and Klein 1982).

*Piecing*, another form of graffiti found in Los Angeles was also transported via the Hip Hop culture from New York City, but this style of writing is more than a just tag or a



**Figure 3.** Caption says: “There was once a time when the Lexington [train line] was a beautiful line when children of the ghetto expressed with art, not with crime. But then as evolution past, the transits buffing did its blast. And now the trains look like rusted trash. Now we wonder if graffiti will EVER LAST?????????”



**Figure 4.** A Piece taking up the entire handball court. The caption in the centers reads: “...the fun and laughter will never happen in Graffiti STOPS.” Photo taken in August 1985 in the Williamsburg community of Brooklyn, New York.

signature. Piecing (or *bombing* as it commonly referred to) is a decorative expression of the name that demands an artistic skill and understanding of aerosol paint control (Figure 4). Very few graffiti writers progress beyond tagging to produce the elaborate pieces. Taggers gain immediate notoriety by mass producing their signatures, but acquiring fame as a “piecer” is an accomplished ability requiring a technique and style more sophisticated than that of a tagger. Seconds are required to tag a name on a bus or a wall, but an average graffiti piece can take as much as an hour to complete, using up to twenty aerosol cans.

In New York City, this type of graffiti began in the early 1970s, but by 1982 piecing simultaneously existed in the art world and on the urban landscape (Lachman 1988:230). After a decade of buffing efforts and other unsuccessful anti-graffiti campaigns, art dealers began to commodify an art expression of this subculture. Temporarily, art gallery appeal displaced some of piecing from the urban environment and subway train surfaces to a more restricted space on a canvas. Officials from New York City thought that the financial rewards for graffiti writers might reduce the occurrence of graffiti on the city landscape. Even though piecing gained visibility from a new audience, city officials supported the gallery’s interest, because they viewed it as an abatement agenda against graffiti. Dealers reduced the art to a more restricted and physically smaller space, the canvas, taking away for some writers the magnificence and grandeur of a piece done without restrictions (Figure 4). This effort to commodify graffiti art was short-lived, because it did not completely displace piecing, and eventually art dealers lost interest (Silver and Chalfant 1984; Lachman 1988).

Historically piecing has been associated with Black and Hispanic youths from the ghetto, but today, especially in Los Angeles, piecers are white middle class youths from the suburbs (Beverly 1996:129). In Los Angeles piecing has been seen as nothing but obscene,

vile and a continuing defacement of property, destroying the proper significance of the carefully controlled urban environment, but piecing is both vandalism and an artistic expression of art. As Lachman mentions, this duality created a dichotomy of meanings of graffiti that stemmed from the notion of space (Lachman 1988:339). Accepting graffiti in the art world implies that if graffiti is in its proper place it becomes acceptable, and even profitable, but inversely graffiti in the urban space is a crime as it challenges hegemony and those who have authority over the urban space.

*Gang graffiti*, another category of written expression is the least challenged style of graffiti by the dominant class. It is not the type of graffiti that is scattered across the city as is tagging and piecing. In Los Angeles, gang graffiti was first observed in Mexican and Chicano communities prior to WWII. As gang membership began to increase in the early 1970s, so did the frequency of graffiti, but the occurrence of gang graffiti was still confined to the inner city. Today gang graffiti continues to be concentrated in the inner-cities of the African-American “hoods” and the Hispanic “barrios” of Los Angeles but several suburban communities in Los Angeles have seen both gangs and graffiti become part of their everyday environment. It functions as a way to communicate sentiments, express group identity, and to dictate rules of their socially constructed places.

A simple observation of gang graffiti will show that group identity and membership is of paramount concern (Hutchinson 1993:140). Written representations of the gang and/or gang member are always present. Hispanics will often write the name of the gang in an elaborate style of large letters referred to as “placas” (Romotsky and Romotsky 1975), and African-American gangs use more symbolism to convey identity, supremacy and territoriality in what they call “hit-ups” (Alonso 1999).

Hispanic gang graffiti or the placa, are sometimes extremely stylized, using an elaborate arrangement of letters and colors (Figure 5). The lettering style and iconography problematizes any attempts of interpretation by an outsider which is why there are very few studies specific to gang writing. These lettering styles, formed by indigenous barrio youth, have their roots in the mural tradition of Mexico. The most widely used lettering configurations are the old English style, loop letters, pointed, and box or square letters (Romotsky & Romotsky 1975: 67).

An accurate interpretation of gang wall writing of Hispanics, can aid in understanding barrio life and gang culture along with social changes in the community. The wall writing is an attempt to preserve Chicano gang culture as it represents a snapshot in time. The geographic nature of gang graffiti is also manifested through their writing, with names such as Eighteen Street and Florencia Trece<sup>3</sup>. The name of the gang gives meaning to place as an important part of gang identity.

African-American gang graffiti is less stylized, using block or square letters in what they refer to as “hit-ups.” In most instances their “hit-ups” are rendered in the most basic style of lettering (Figure 6). Threats to commit violence against other gang members are evident in their graffiti, and in some cases threats to against the state are apparent (Figure 7). Often, African-American gang graffiti is boastful, making claims of supremacy, threatening other gangs, and making territorial claims (Figure 8). Black gang graffiti lacks the sophisticated style of the Chicano “placas” but they have utilized an extensive collection of symbols and codes for communication purposes. The pit bull in the African-American gang culture of Los

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<sup>3</sup> Florencia is the Spanish equivalent for the street Florence Ave in Los Angeles where the F13 gang is based. Trece is the Spanish word for the number thirteen which represents a gang’s association with the geographical region of Southern California, or any region south of the city of Fresno.



**Figure 5.** A placa of a Hispanic gang that goes by the name of “Twenty Nine” on the east side of Los Angeles in 1996. Notice the large pointed letters and the two colors used.



**Figure 6.** African-American gang graffiti of the Six Duce East Coast Crips of Los Angeles. Notice the use of the basic lettering style. The spelling of six is done with a “c” to reinforce their Crip identity. The *arrow* is used among African- American gangs to express territoriality, and in this photo the author is stating that this “hood” belongs to the 62 ECC Crips (1996).





**Figure 7.** Gang graffiti of the Six Duce East Coast Crips of Los Angeles. At the bottom left their animosity towards the police are shown in the inscriptions “Police K” and “LAPD 187.” The “K” means Killer and “LAPD” is for Los Angeles Police Department and “187” means murder, from the California penal code. Law enforcement will view these writings as direct threats (1996).



**Figure 8.** African-American gang graffiti of the Campanela Park Pirus of Compton, California. The caption says, “Pirus Rule The Streets of Bompton Fools.” Pirus are an agglomeration of several independent Blood gangs in Los Angeles County. Of the thirty African-American gangs in Compton, Pirus account for ten, and in this photo they are claiming supremacy over the entire city, and dominance over the twenty other Crip rivals. Also notice how they replaced the letter “C” in Compton with “B” to reinforce their Blood/Piru identity. Photo was taken in 1996.

Angeles is always associated with the various Blood gangs (Figure 9), and the West Blvd Crips have made use of the Warner Brothers logo as a representation of their identity (Figure 10). Also depictions of a chicken and a slice of bread are symbols of disrespect that have been used as challenges against rival gangs. Even the gang hand sign, which was first introduced into the gang culture by the Slausons (Bell 1996:7), a gang from Los Angeles (1952-1965), has been incorporated into the graffiti of African-American gangs (Figure 11).

The idea of territoriality is perhaps the most important function of gang graffiti, and a close examination can uncover an accurate identifier of turf ownership. By reading the walls one could uncover a good approximation of the extent of a gang's territory (Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974:496; Sheldon et al. 1996:119). Those who understand these spatial conquests of the landscape are able to identify the social and spatial order of a community. This even applies to non-gang youths of an area, who take it upon their own initiative to understand and respect these socially claimed places in an effort to safeguard themselves and to stay clear of gang conflict.

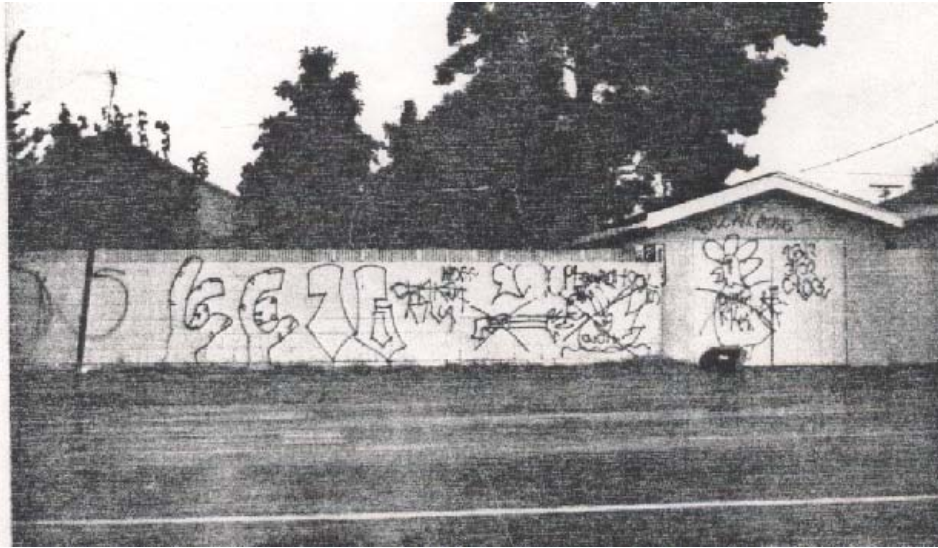
Gang graffiti serves to fulfill four potentialities of territoriality as described by Robert Sack (1986). A gang's *classification* of an area is in part defined by the geographical organization of gang writing in public space. Messages, slogans, and symbols *communicate* the extent of a territory and the location of boundaries (Figure 6). Some of the symbolism observed uses arrows and hand signs as a way of enforcing control by letting outsiders know that they are alien to a specific "barrio" or "hood." Finally the intentional defacement of a rival's graffiti *reifies* power, which is an explicit and visible act of supremacy (See Sack 1986: 32).



**Figure 9.** African-American gang graffiti of the Black P Stones, a Blood gang from Los Angeles. The pit bull is the mascot to most Blood gangs, and this painting is used as a territorial identifier to outsiders. Photo was taken in 1996.



**Figure 10.** African-American gang graffiti of the West Boulevard Crips from Los Angeles. They usually represent their gang by writing WB, and they have adapted the use of the Warner Brothers logo during a time when African-American television shows have become popular on the Warner Brothers Network (1995).



**Figure 11.** African-American gang graffiti of the 76 East Coast Crips from Los Angeles. They have used hand signs as a way to express gang affiliation and identity, and they have painted a duck and a chicken as disrespectful representations of two of their rivals (1996).

These claimed territories serve as an important component to the sense of identity for the subject (Entrikin 1991:302), and in this case, the subject being the gang, the turf as territory serves as a critical place where identities and representations form. Graffiti adds to the production of these socially claimed places, furthermore enhances the dialectical relationship between turf and the gang. For Hispanic gangs, the “placa” is what makes the claim to space and for African-American gangs; symbolism is used as a way to communicate spatial conquest via graffiti.

Ley has argued that many inner city youths who endure discomfort and stress, are the ones who seek to claim and protect a territory, because they have been systematically denied access to legitimate mastery over space (Ley & Cybrisky 1974:494). Many adolescents begin to believe that they can only gain recognition and respect by excelling at something “criminal”; gang activity. Jackson suggests that rather than seeing these cultures as deviant, a

radical alternative would probe the structures of inequality that generate and legitimize these patterns of behavior (Jackson 1989:70). Similarly Moore & Vigil found that gangs couldn't be characterized as transgressive or criminogenic, because most of a gang's activities revolve primarily around normal adolescent concerns (Moore & Vigil 1989: 28). The true transgressive act is the persistence and sanction of extreme marginality or "multiple marginality" which leads to the creation of a society of disenfranchised youth who develop these organizational structures (Ley 1975:264; Vigil 1993:102). As part of the street gang culture, they give meaning to their place by marking it with symbols of power and conveying fear through intimidating messages in the graffiti; an act defined as "criminal and cowardly." With a better understanding of urban behavior and the spatial organization of the segregated neighborhoods where gangs live, a thorough analysis of graffiti can help gain a deeper understanding about how and why gangs define place. More importantly the processes behind gang formation in the city and the role of the state may give us a more comprehensive insight into this subculture.

All types of graffiti provide a vivid and often unflattering insight into the hidden side of our society, but they also represent an intriguing, and an important source of information for those studying the behavior of human beings (Abel & Buckley 1977:1). How dominant culture responds to subordinate groups can be seen in how the state attempts to eradicate tagging by removing the tagger from society through incarceration. The geographic displacement of piecing was an attempt to remove piecing from the urban environment. As one dominant group tried to remove it from society, another dominant group moved it into art galleries. The spatial relocation confined the work of the graffiti artist to a more restricted form that reduced the art to canvas. Strategies to constantly fight against subordinate groups

and the criminalization of the marginalized have been unsuccessful at the cost of several million dollars. Constant attempts to label and stigmatize these cultural groups and their practices have only encouraged counter-hegemonic discourse as the dominant continues to view these cultures' actions as challenging the normative structure of the environment. In the event that a subculture makes an attempt to demonstrate or assert their identities in a way that challenges normative values, stronger responses will enter upon the framework of the State.

Graffiti can best be summed up in the words of Lachman:

“Graffiti in some forms can challenge hegemony by drawing on particular experiences and customs of their communities, ethnic groups and age cohorts, thereby demonstrating that social life can be constructed in ways different from the dominant conceptions of reality (1988:231-32).

Graffiti is a reflection of culture at work, and members of the elite are constantly pursuing methods to condemn subcultures for their alleged vulgarity (Jackson 1977:35). Graffiti is a fascinating reading, which can be used to decipher various youth styles (Hebdige 1977:3). These groups have evolved a wide repertoire of strategies of resistance, negotiation, and struggle (Jackson 1977: 54), and through constant resistance hegemony is never achieved.

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