

BREAKING BOUNDARIES: INTRODUCING CHICANO GRAFFITTI ART INTO

THE COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my parents, Abelardo Loya and Oblira Loya. And to my sister, Tina Felisa Loya-Villarreal.

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Thank you Dr. Mejía for your contribution to my education. I would also like to thank Dr. Jackson and Balzhiser, I would not have finished my studies without your help.

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Chapter I

FRAMEWORK FOR THE ACCEPTANCE OF CHICANAS'/OS' LITERACY IN COMPOSITON STUDIES

This research is not new; graffiti art has been investigated before. Writing this thesis, rather, is coming to a conclusion about my position within the academic institution and how I function within that system. There are many other Chicanas/os like me who face many of the same questions, experiences, and challenges that I have faced in my academic endeavors. To identify the Chicana/o population more specifically, the term identifies people of Mexican descent living in the United States who are otherwise often broadly lumped together with other people of countries of Spanish speaking people. Jeffery M. R. Duncan-Andrade in *An Examination of the Sociopolitical History of Chicanos and its Relationship to School Performance*, defines Chicana/o as “stemming from [his] self-definition, [his] personal usage, and inclusion and critique of others’ definitions. . . [;]the term Chican[a]o has purposes in two different contexts. . . [:] the term can be used to describe one’s political identity, or it can be used as a definition of one’s socioethnic identity” (577-78).

To break the boundaries I feel are so entrenched and that have kept academia and the Chicana/o community disconnected from each other, I propose a curriculum based on using graffiti as a cultural marker. A rhetorical analysis of cultural competencies within the Chicana/o graffiti art community allows me to articulate the discourse of the

community. A community discourse is made up of its community literacies or its ways of knowing. The articulation of the rhetorical discourse of the Chicana/o graffiti art community is the focus of this thesis. The rhetorical discourse of this marginalized community and its art genre is one that is often misunderstood.

Graffiti art dismantles the previously established definition of public art. Paleolithic archeologist Dale R. Guthrie says, “Why has not the idea of art as an adaptive trait, which activates and exercises our creativity and ability to innovate, seemed more obvious or more popular? Perhaps it is one of those things that loom too close—the subject is too familiar for the objective eye to see behind it . . .” (394). Is it that graffiti is “too close”? Is it that it is too much a part of the everyday? Are the actions of the people within the community too strong or too weak to be heard clearly? Graffiti is about awareness, a consciousness; it represents an awareness of cultural history and a preservation of the past, and yet often is about innovation. Graffiti artists who write their name represent self-awareness.

Graffiti artists, spray can artists, bombers, taggers, graffiti writers, street artists, writers, scribes, vandals represent a potential list of names given to people who create forms of art by using spray paint as their primary medium to create a distinctive urban style of art. At this point, it is important to clarify what I mean when I refer to *graffiti artist*. It is important to understand, first, that many people who create graffiti prefer to be labeled in particular terms. Some artists prefer the title of graffiti artist, while others may prefer the title of aerosol artist. I will distinguish these artists as *graffiti artists*. Because I am specifically discussing the creation of *pieces*. To narrow the scope of this thesis, I discuss what is called in the graffiti art community, a *piece*, which is short for

masterpiece. A piece exclusively describes the letters used to create a graffiti artist's name, and not, for example, the creation of a character. Graffiti artists create their pieces legally and create murals.

Although many oftentimes view graffiti as a crime of vandalism and often accompanied by a number of other stigmas, like violence, drugs, and gangs, the rhetorical practice and process of creating works of graffiti art have been transformed into an art form that transcends its marginal stigmatized borders. Historically, graffiti has materialized as an art form: from its early claims of gaining status and recognition to now being a multimillion-dollar enterprise. Because of this historical development, I propose to analyze graffiti rhetorically as an important genre of cultural discourse. As graffiti artists create art as a tool to help their audience understand the complex experiences and ideologies of the graffiti writer community, for the purpose of this thesis I will focus on Chicanos within that community. Moreover, the rhetorical study of graffiti art in college composition classes can scaffold learning for students who have been marginalized by their colonialist pasts.

For instance, graffiti art can be studied in first year composition classes for its historical, artistic, and political past, which can then open students' perspectives so as to more critically analyze their positionality inside and outside the academic institution. Many students are unaware of the history of their race and ethnicity, but at the same time, according to Elaine Richardson, "youth are aware of the dominating forces but do not possess the critical tools necessary to totally escape internal victim blaming for their predicament" (43).

While the mainstream educational system, in recent years, has made efforts to include ethnic awareness in its curricula, what is oftentimes missing is the essence of what a multicultural education should do or provide for the student. According to Sonia Nieto and Patty Bode in *Affirming Diversity: Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education*, the goal of a multicultural education is “promoting access to equal education[and] . . . providing students . . . [a] high-quality education . . . [and] the opportunity to become critical and productive members of a democratic society” (10). The difference between a curriculum not based on ethnic awareness and what is typically meant by a multicultural education is one that may lead to narrowing the achievement gap. The outcomes of using such a curriculum are still novel in most college educational settings; its curricula are still mainstreamed to a canonized curriculum even when trying to implement a multicultural curriculum.

I would like to extend my pedagogical approach and the principles for support beyond the use of multicultural education or multiculturalism. College students should become viable members of a global 21st century society in which they are able to navigate through the rapid changes of technology and communication and in which students will need to possess critical thinking skills. In this thesis, I will therefore analyze graffiti to uncover and reevaluate rhetorical aspects of graffiti art and the literacies associated with the art form within the Chicano graffiti community of the US. I am looking for cultural competencies within the Chicano graffiti art community to build a curriculum based on the rhetorical discourse of that community’s participants. Therefore the cultural competencies of the Chicano graffiti art community are the focus here, and a curriculum based on these competencies will not be discussed as extensively.

In Chapter II, I create a historically-based overview of graffiti beginning with the Paleolithic era to modern graffiti. David Lewis-Williams' *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* and Guthrie's *The Nature of Paleolithic Art* allow me to theorize graffiti art as a societal consciousness and lay the historical foundations and importance of graffiti art as a cultural marker. After discussing the Paleolithic era, I look at several periods throughout American history to describe the role that historical events from each period had on modern day graffiti art: Adams and Adlers' *DEFinition: The Art and Design of Hip-Hop*, Dir. Tony Silver's *Style Wars*, and Gastman, et al.'s *Freight Train Graffiti* lay a more contemporary framework of the history of graffiti art.

Graffiti art is a relatively new cultural phenomenon in American society and deserves exploration in order to understand the discourse of a marginalized, albeit now commercialized, sector of society. Using graffiti as a rhetorical tool to understand a discourse of a culture or group and know the historical evolution of graffiti within the US is important.

Because of the complexity of the genre of graffiti, I clarify my purpose, by looking at various historical markers and analyzing how they have influenced modern graffiti art as the discourse of the marginalized community of graffiti writers. I incorporate the discourse of gang members, and while I do discuss the role of gang graffiti and its impact on graffiti art, I do not intend to say that gang graffiti is the same as modern day graffiti art. Ralph Cintron's *Angels' Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday* helps me to discuss gang graffiti.

In Chapter III, I discuss the use of space and place as defined by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. By then using Scape Martinez's *Graff: The Art*

and Technique of Graffiti to explain the basic techniques of creating a graffiti art piece and its use of space on a surface, the reader will become more familiar with the genre. I also then discuss the elements of style, the use of style, and graffiti artists' stylistic techniques. This use of space on the artists' painting surface is important for understanding how graffiti artists rhetorically manipulate their environment. Additionally, I incorporate an analysis of wall murals that do not use spray paint or graffiti elements as a point of comparison. Murals are typically viewed with more social acceptance than their counterpart—graffiti art pieces. Yet for either genre of art, Ralph Cintron raises an interesting question in *Angels' Town* when he asks, "how does one create respect under conditions of little or no respect . . .?" (164). I argue that respect is created through space. Gang members often use space in their neighborhoods which might not be owned by them to create boundaries, but which are socially considered their claimed territory—their turf. However, the social construction of space that has affected graffiti art has affected the perception of what is now a hugely commercialized art form. The correlation between the marginalized yet commercialized art form is an irony that should not go unnoticed. That correlation is a reflection of the people who create and promote the art form, yet extends beyond the scope of this thesis.

Theories from Miles' *Art Space and the City: Public Art and Urban Futures* and Gaspar de Alba's *Chicano Art: Inside/Outside the Master's House* show the value placed on public and marginalized art. In *Art Space*, Miles says, "[b]ecause public art acts in the public realm, its critique necessarily extends to a series of overlapping issues, such as the diversity of urban publics and cultures, the functions and gendering of public space, the operations of power, and the roles of professionals of the built environment in relation to

non-professionals” (10). These issues are relevant to analyze as a part of my investigation in the rhetorical situations of graffiti art and are explored in this thesis.

In Chapter IV, I examine the sociopolitical history of Chicanas/os and its relationship to literacy. It is not, of course, that race has everything to do with the problems of non-white students in higher education today, but it is an issue and provides an opportunity for creating change in the statistics of Chicanas/os’ academic performance. Breaking the boundaries of traditional curricula and pedagogies needs to be addressed. Socioeconomic status, for example, affects students’ academic performance, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis. The historical subjugation of Chicanas/os in the public realm continues to impact academic performance. Exploring this area allows educators to better understand the positionality of their Chicana/o students and of themselves. I cite Beverly J. Moss’ *A Community Text Arises: A Literate Text and A Literacy Tradition in African-American Churches* in order to introduce a re-positioning of the term literacy. The term literacy is one often associated with academic standards. However, the literacy practices of Chicana/o students differ from the skills inherent in academic literacies often expected of them. Because of these expectations, the conclusion is often that Chicanas/os lack the ability to be successful in academia.

In Chapter V, I provide a synopsis of the ideas presented in this thesis and I propose using, recognizing, and being sensitive to students’ experiences and the literacies they bring to college composition classes as a means to engage student learning to enhance students’ writing. The rapidly changing demographics of the United States is becoming increasingly Latino and the history of our country regarding racial oppression in our college educational system is becoming a central issue in how we can construct a

liberating composition pedagogy. Consequently, the implications for developing pedagogical approaches based on critical methodologies of study in academic institutions should be seriously considered when creating a curriculum for rhetoric and composition studies in secondary and post-secondary classes.

Chapter II

THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE AND ITS RHETORICAL IMPLICATIONS

As I explore art history from the earliest discovered pieces of human attempts to depict the world in which they lived through modern graffiti art, I am unable to separate rhetoric and philosophy in the analysis of the texts and image. In addition, this chapter determines graffiti's positionality in the social context of the US and seeks to understand the discourse of the graffiti community as a marginalized, albeit commercialized, sector of society. In this chapter, I lay out a timeline to provide information covering the genesis of art, the evolution of graffiti, and a partial analysis of graffiti art's linear movement through time. This discussion of history is pertinent to later chapters and to understanding the definition of graffiti art, graffiti art's current position in society, and graffiti art's rhetorical appeals which artists use to communicate their messages. Historically, one of the earliest attempts at using art to interpret culture began during the Paleolithic era. Before written history, homo sapiens—as a conscious species—were creating art. In *The Nature of Paleolithic Art*, R. Dale Guthrie states, “images present forensic evidence from which we can perhaps reconstruct quite a bit about their lives” (3). The relevance of these early drawings to graffiti is that these Paleolithic drawings represent a form of consciousness open to interpretation. I argue that graffiti art, like the theories presented

by Guthrie and later by David Lewis-Williams for Paleolithic art, are applicable to interpreting graffiti art as a discourse of the marginalized US Chicana/o graffiti art



Figure 1 *Crouching Bison*

communities. Whether the drawings of the Paleolithic period represent the consciousness of man from that era or not, these drawings are nevertheless representations by which scientists and archeologists make sense of life from that period. As Guthrie states, “The Paleolithic art that remains is enough to confirm that humans are prone to such creative endeavors” (396). Figure 1, is an example of early cave drawings, the image is of bison on a cave wall found in Alta Mira, Spain. It represents the early human endeavor of humans making paintings of their surroundings.

According to Guthrie, anthropologists began to speculate about the markings of cave walls and began asking questions like these: was it symbolic, religious, and cultural, a form of literacy, magic, ceremonial? (8). The images currently found in contemporary graffiti art can be analyzed in a similar manner. Therefore, modern day graffiti art can also be used as a way to question and understand the positionality of the Chicana/o community. The study of the Paleolithic period is significant insofar as it describes, according to the theory by Guthrie, “the immense evolutionary importance of art making and its employment in our human lineage. Indeed, those behaviors are so much a part of our experience that they are not readily apparent . . . [as] we are [clearly] an art making animal” (374).

Those interested in making art then are a part of an art movement which is interpreting the evolution of societies; graffiti art is therefore a discourse of society. And as David Lewis-Williams argues in *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art*, “Some common, frequently used words are extraordinarily difficult to define [like art, for example] ‘Consciousness’ is another such word. . . . One of the sources of such difficulty is that consciousness is a historically situated selection. . . . It is not a universal timeless ‘given’” (104). With that understanding of consciousness, I am able to argue that human evolution has occurred since at least Paleolithic times and can be traced through art, and also that consciousness is historically situated. Lewis-Williams says that consciousness is not only historical, but also “constructed within a specific social context . . .” (121). By applying this argument to graffiti and more specifically to graffiti art, I can argue that graffiti art occurs in a historical situation and that graffiti art is created in a specific social context. The social context is a variable that contributes to the persistence of graffiti as a rhetorical act.

Moreover, Lewis-Williams further explores the idea that Paleolithic art may represent a “shifting consciousness” (180). Expanding Lewis-Williams’ idea of social diversity and change and applying these ideas to graffiti art, we can then look at this kind of graffiti as a mechanism for change. As Guthrie states, “Creativity is something more than just doing things differently or unconstrained novelty. It is about [a] beautiful alternative within apt constraints” (397). For these purposes graffiti art is becoming more widely acknowledged, as reflected through its use by mainstream media. Conversely, the social discourse of graffiti art does not receive the same reception. Graffiti is a symbol of

social consciousness, “and [if graffiti art is a] kind of social consciousness [this] means that we need to consider the divisive functions of image-making” (181).

Guthrie argues that in the analysis of these early Paleolithic images, “one cannot ‘notice’ a representational image [as] a mass of lines unless one already has a notion of images And a notion [of images] must be socially held; it cannot be the exclusive property of an individual” (183). With this in mind, the value given to a work of graffiti art is socially constructed, remains a function of society, and has marginalized origins. As Lewis-Williams states, “Higher order consciousness involves the recognition by a thinking subject of his or her acts or affections . . . involves the ability to construct a socially based selfhood, to model the world in terms of the past and the future, and to be directly aware” (188). He also says, “The spectrum of human consciousness thus became an instrument of social discrimination—not the only one but a significant one” (203). Through art, people are able to articulate social distinctions.

As I further explore the idea of graffiti art as a system rhetorically representing social-consciousness, it is imperative that I contextualize the historical influence of graffiti art. The stigma attached to graffiti art is in part due to the historical influence of gang graffiti. In order to examine the influence of gang graffiti on graffiti art, I first apply “interpretive schema” from Ralph Cintron’s chapter “Gang and Their Walls” in *Angels’ Town: Chero Ways, Gang Life, and Rhetorics of the Everyday*. In “Gang and Their Walls,” Cintron interviews individual gang members and deciphers the rhetorical situation of gang members and the graffiti they create in relation to the community they live in. “In the public sphere,” Cintron says, “street gangs and particularly ‘hard-core’ gang members may be viewed as a kind of antisociety, as barbarous and verminlike, so

completely outside the fold of the human community that they deserve to be removed” (167). So in the case of contemporary graffiti art, one of the reasons this genre continues being marginalized is because of its correlation with gang activity, because those in the hegemony who are unaware of the difference between gang graffiti and graffiti art.

Cintron further states that

Indeed . . . street gangs for understandable reasons sometimes played with this very rhetoric creating from it hyperbolized images in which the mainstream could witness its deepest fears. In gobbling up the images, the mainstream felt that it had the evidence that proved the legitimacy of its views. But . . . the mainstream positioned itself atop a moral high ground from which to judge and punish. (167)

Cintron states that this is

how one creates respect under conditions of little or no respect, with an intensity that acted like a searchlight revealing the rest of the community. Street-gang members explicitly wrote out their needs for respect Obviously there was not just one way but many, and many of these ways were not acceptable to different members of the neighborhood. Each way, then, reflected someone’s desire and someone else’s rejection. (164)

While the gang members Cintron mentions in his ethnography take on many other lexicons and semantic systems to identify themselves, I use his research here to lay out the history of graffiti art. The evolution of graffiti as rhetorical discourse is relevant to the art form as it exists today and is relevant in the discussion of Chicano graffiti art and the

rhetorical discourses it creates. Understanding the history of Chicano gang graffiti is a way to understand the continued marginalization of the graffiti art genre.

In the US prior to the 1960s, for instance, almost exclusively it was gangs who used graffiti. In a foreword by Chaz Bojórquez to *Cholo Writing: Latino Gang Graffiti in Los Angeles*, by François Chastanet and Howard Gribbles, he says, “Los Angeles may have the longest history of street writing in the world. Some say that earlier style of LA graffiti goes back to the 1930s when the Latino shoeshine boys marked their names on the walls with dauber to stake out their spot on the sidewalk” (6). The L.A. Cholo

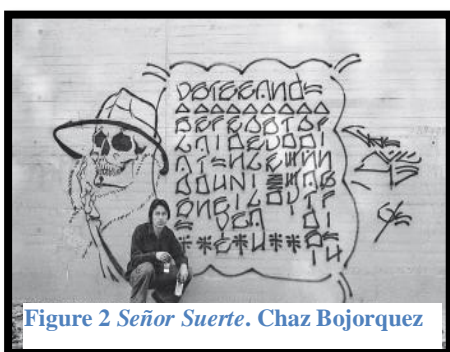


Figure 2 *Señor Suerte*. Chaz Bojórquez

lifestyle and claiming space have influenced Chicano graffiti artists. The image of Chaz Bojórquez kneeling next to a roll call and his image of Señor Suerte (Mr. Luck) are both recognizable in many Chicana/o communities.

Bojórquez’s cholo images have been exhibited in many mainstream art museums. He remains an authoritative source and expert of Chicano graffiti art whose works have been hung in many mainstream exhibitions.

In *Cholo Writing: Latino Gang Graffiti in Los Angeles*, Bojórquez describes the gang history in East L.A. and the use of gang graffiti as territorial markers:

East LA graffiti has its own unique format called placas or <<plaques>>, symbols or territorial street boundaries. Placas are graffiti painted walls with the names of a gang and its members, mostly painted on the limits or edges of their communities. They are pledges of allegiance to their neighborhood. Placas encourage gang strength, create an aura of

exclusivity, and are always painted in black letters. The squarish, prestigious font used was called <<Old English>>, a typeface meant to present a formal document to the public. All the names from a gang were written in lines that were flushed left and right, or names were stacked line over line and centered. Great care was taken to make them straight and clean. This layout or format is based on an ancient formula that demanded a headline, body copy, and a logo The headline states the gang or street name, the body copy is your roll call list of everyone's gang name, and the logo refers to the person who wrote it by adding his tag to the end of the placa. (6)

As Cintron states, "Graffiti, as a part of the warfare between rival gangs, was the use of language in the place of—although, at times, as a kind of—weaponry. It could be used, for instance, to proclaim a particular gang's territory or the courage and audacity of a rival gang member who had dared to enter enemy territory to disrespect the local gang" (173). Many of these competitive elements surrounding gang life in the US also surround graffiti writers in their competition through art.

Moreover, in *Wallbangin': Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.*, Susan Phillips states, of non-gang graffiti, "Respect is the fundamental goal of production for graffiti artists Such name-making goals stem from a desire for recognition from a community of peers. At first, these might seem to be precisely the same goals of gangs. However, gang members foster respect and garner a reputation for reasons that ultimately stem from their need for protection" (313). The end goal of the two groups of Chicanos thus differs. The recognition that each group seeks is one of social capital, but the two groups go about

gaining status in different ways (313). That is not always readily apparent to the mainstream, and thus the public fear of gangs may also become the public fear of graffiti artists.

Because legal wall space is limited for graffiti artists, these artists often lay claim to a wall at a location where they are granted permission to paint by the proprietor. Only select artists are allowed access to the wall. The artists granted permission to the wall by

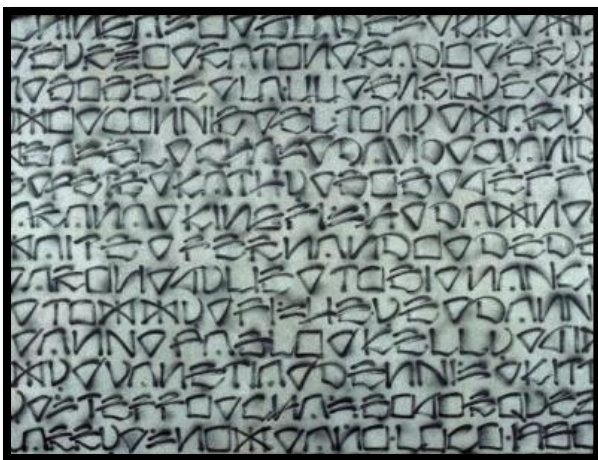


Figure 3 Chaz Borjorquez *Placa/Rollcall*

the proprietor maintain that wall. If a tagger (a person who writes their name using handstyles of the graffiti community) or if a bomber comes and hits their wall, then the artist(s) will buff the wall and paint it again. It is also a sign of disrespect to the artists who created the work to put up tags near a mural on a wall, as artists want to maintain their recognition for the painting.

In gang graffiti there is a push for likeness among gang graffiti writers, but the idea of individual style permeates the non-gang graffiti and graffiti art. In Figure 3 and Figure 4, the difference in the gang graffiti roll call can be identified from a graffiti art roll call done on a permission wall. The hand-style in Figure 4 is not as rigid nor as uniform as the gang graffiti roll call.

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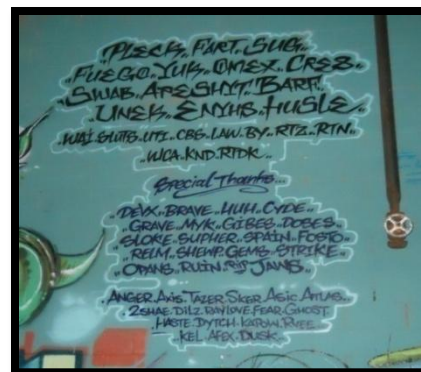


Figure 4 Break Yosef Rollcall

Another correlation between gang graffiti and non-gang graffiti writers is that the “[a]uthors had found a way to scribe themselves over each other in their need to make themselves individually and socially known” (Cintron 173). Thus, many of the people who write graffiti illegally write for individual glorification: “Graffiti implicitly declared metaphorical ownership wherever it desired and in the face of property owners whose own system of rules was being rendered impotent” (174). Simply put, gang members “act out” their subordinate position. Chicano graffiti artists also act out their subordinate position through their art.

The formation of gangs as a concept is something Cintron rhetorically theorizes in his ethnography. He discusses the construction of gangs when he says,

Interestingly, a “shadow system,” [of the mainstream] as the metaphor implies, depends on themes and models provided by and circulating through the system world. Using the metaphor heuristically, which is how metaphors work, one might say the following: the system world is the “substance” that casts the shadow, a shadow that has the shape but is not equivalent to the system itself. (176)

In my current discussion of the historical, cultural, and political understanding of graffiti art, it is important to understand the need to create the notion of respect. Graffiti art crews, for instance, do this to claim wall space so they have a place to show their work. Graffiti art crews are groups of artists formed on the basis of interest and collaboration. Graffiti artists also create crews to continue the art movement and to stimulate creativity. Because of their marginalized status in the US Chicano graffiti art crews are aware of their position and maintain crews as a way of preserving the art form

and preserving a network. Bojórquez explains the formation of gangs, “<<Racism and poverty created the gangs, we had to protect ourselves>>”, said old time Zoot Suiter El Chava from HOYO MARAVILLA gang in the 1940s. In those times, Latino Zoot Suiters were defining their Americanism” (6). The same is true for more recent Chicano graffiti artists, as racism and poverty are still a part of their community, and they use their art as a means of protection. While non-violent, they still have their voices heard.

While significant differences exist between gang graffiti and graffiti art, most people in the mainstream often still fail to comprehend the differences of the two groups, yet an interesting parallel lies in their divergent rhetoric. Because gang graffiti was a precursor to the art that many define as graffiti art, it is interesting to look at the discourse created by the subcultures of gangs and how the subcultures of Chicano graffiti artists continue to use it similarly. As Cintron states, “For the most part, the mainstream could not interpret gang meanings, and thus a secret, esoteric, subterranean world was made” (167). So much ambiguity and secrecy remains in graffiti art today, which in turn may cause people to think that works of graffiti art are somehow gang-related.

In *Wallbangin’: Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.*, Susan A. Phillips analyzes hip-hop graffiti art and gang graffiti. She first differentiates graffiti art and gang graffiti by highlighting territorial markers: “Taggers and writers take the city as their canvas as opposed to working only within the confines of their residential areas and local surrounding” (312). The significance of that difference is less than the following attribute. Graffiti art and the crews who form around the production of the art provide an alternative in those areas where gangs are found. As Phillips states, “The protection crew affiliation offers kids is occupation outside the realm of gang activities. It removes them

from the pool of eligible gang members and allows them to occupy their time in support of another cause—that of getting their crew up, becoming known acquiring fame for themselves, making their art” (314).

Historically, graffiti art as an alternative to gang banging has also created an outlet in other facets of Chicanas’/os’ lives. As Phillips says, “many kids who start out tagging and dedicate themselves to the hip-hop career wind up in art school, the gallery, and other mainstream work” (314). Graffiti art is a healthy alternative to gang life and allows its creators to continue to identify their cultural background yet move away from the negative situations they may face in the neighborhoods they come from. So the difference in graffiti art and gang graffiti is ultimately quite significant, as graffiti art is valid as an art form that arose from a social construction. The influence society has had on this art form thus makes it analyzable from several perspectives. Another significant movement in graffiti art was the New York graffiti scene. Like with gang graffiti, this type of graffiti was done illegally.

In the landmark documentary *Style Wars*—which deserves proper acknowledgement for its contribution to the graffiti movement—the narrator of the documentary states, “Graffiti art in New York is a vocation. Its traditions are handed down from one youthful generation to the next. To some it’s art to most people; however, it’s a plague that never ends: a symbol that we’ve lost control” (*Style Wars*). The narrator of the documentary goes on to say that “In the 1970’s New York graffiti, rapping, and breaking became the prime expressions of a new young people subculture called hip-hop. Graffiti is the written word” (*Style Wars*).

This is the beginning of what I will describe as graffiti art. Figure 5, for instance, is an example of tags popularized in New York City during the 1970s. The pioneering era of graffiti art was a time “when graffiti experienced a surge in styles and popularity. But was strictly tag based” (Martinez 8). Prior to this, there were writers who gained fame from writing their name, or tagging, in the claimed birthplace of graffiti, Philadelphia. Cornbread and Cool Earl are some of the earliest all-city writers who emerged from this era: “They gained a lot of attention from the Philadelphia press and the community by leaving their signatures everywhere” (8).



Figure 5 Harlem Tags

Graffiti began to make its transition from tags into its current art form when many graffiti writers began working on the subway trains of the New York transit routes. These mass transit routes made writers’ tags visible to millions of people, and because of their large audience, the need for innovation became greater, and style really began to evolve. Unique styles were noticed and graffiti writers wanted to be noticed. The spirit of innovation that developed during that era still permeates in the graffiti art community. This was, as Sacha Jenkins describes, a time when crews began to form and compete in the “World Series” of bombing in which they competed for “advertising spots” for their crews (17). Graffiti became a competitive sport, so to speak. In *Graffiti New York*, Eric Felisbert says of this pioneering era,

The number of writers and the volume of tags were growing at an impressive rate, so it became necessary to devise new means to stand out

and get attention. The first way was to make your tag unique. Many script and calligraphic styles were developed. Brooklyn writers enhanced their tags with flourishes, including stars, arrows, clouds, and other designs. Philadelphia's TOPCAT 126 imported to New York a tall, narrow letterform with serifs. Many writers from upper Manhattan adopted this style and it came to be known as "Broadway Elegant." (12)

Figure 6 is an example of how graffiti writing became larger in scale, and eventually, with nozzles or caps from other aerosol products that allowed writers to make thick lines, masterpieces or *pieces* developed.

The competition eventually turned into a show of skill—it became about style. Writers were adding additional graphics and characters. Writers also were drawing "top-to-bottoms" on subway cars as well as creating pieces that spanned the entire length of the car. The scale of the train car is what I believe influenced the scale of modern graffiti art murals. In addition, artists began to give their work dimension, as 3-Ds became very popular. Because of this competition, crews had another reason to form. In 1972, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) "graffiti task force" began its detailed plan to clean up the subway system, which was where so many graffiti artists showcased their



Figure 6 Spin New York

work. It then became harder for writers to *get up*, but by then, graffiti art had spread worldwide (Forman et al. 21).

This development leads me to another movement that occurred at the time graffiti art was emerging. As Gastman et al. state,

During the late 1970's another subculture was making noise in New York City: hip-hop [music]. Many people think—incorrectly—that hip-hop and graffiti in New York City could not have developed without each other. The fact is that, while both cultures played a major part in expanding the other's sphere of influence, there were many in the hip-hop community that had nothing to do with graffiti, and many writers preferred to listen to Black Sabbath rather than Grandmaster Flash. (0055)

The connection between the two movements—Hip Hop and graffiti art—stems from the contributions and influence each has had on the other. Many in the mainstream population have the same ideological understanding of hip-hop music and graffiti art. The correlation between hip-hop music and graffiti art also exists because they are both US urban art forms. I emphasize that graffiti is the artistic written word of a subculture, not necessarily of hip hop itself.

Because of the impact that writers had getting up and having their name seen by mass numbers of people on subway cars and freight trains, by the 1980s, the graffiti art movement was here to stay. Writers of this time period who were gaining commercial success were doing so because, as Adams states in *DEFinition*, “aside from their sheer talent, was their ability to translate the language of the street into the language and history of modern art” (19). This is a view directly tied into my idea that graffiti art is a voice for the people of Chicana/o communities.

It was in this era when the connection between graffiti and hip-hop music was made for mainstream audiences in a video for pop-singer Blondie. According to Gastman et al., in *Freight Train Art*, “Blondie’s song ‘Rapture’ featuring rapper Fab Five Freddy and a set painted ‘live’ by notable subway writer LEE, the video received heavy rotation during MTV’s launch in 1981, and the video offered many suburban kids their first look at the urban art form” (0055). The connection was then made for the larger hegemonic consciousness, by the media, as the union

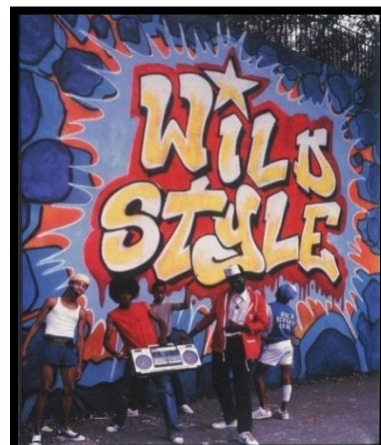


Fig. 7 *Wild Style: Rock Steady Crew by Zephyr and Revolt Manhattan.*

between hip-hop music and graffiti was finally and definitively made. In the 1980s, many graffiti artists were featured in mainstream art galleries, many curators asked graffiti artists to show in galleries worldwide. There were also several media milestones during this time: *Style Wars* (1983), *Wild Style* (1984), *Beat Street* (1984), *Subway Art* (1984), *Spray Can Art* (1987). Figure 7 shows the coming together of the hip-hop elements.

For as Jenkins states in *DEFinition*, “The pure writer is one who pushes the envelope, breaks the rules a little bit, and, in the process, is a thorn in the side of the status quo and conformity—a necessary role in a democratic society where those in power are known to consistently flout the rules themselves. Like any other artist, the writer makes art because he or she has to” (19). The idea that writers have for creating their art is important because, as described in the quotation above, the communities of graffiti artists are making a statement for a group of people. The statement also represents a consciousness of the community as the community members are aware of the inequities of power and realize that they are not major decision makers.

Moreover, in *Freight Train Graffiti*, Gastman et al. describe the graffiti art movement's popularization in L.A. and its to spread through many cities (0065). During the 1990s, the emergence of graffiti art on freight trains was seen (0066). Because of the worldwide recognition and the desire graffiti artists had to get their names up, hitting freight trains became popular. Arguably, the freight trains were significant because of the ties railroads have to the idea of Manifest Destiny and its implications on the colonization of the US. As with the expansion of power that came as the railroad lines grew with hegemony, power also came to the marginalized community through their graffiti on freight trains. Freight train graffiti is also a symbol of the graffiti community and of the inability of the mainstream to quiet the consciousness of a group. The reality of the situation creates a rift in the control that the hegemony has over this particular subgroup. The interesting idea that these artists are connected to the consciousness of society reiterates its relevance as a social movement.

Many graffiti-related magazines began to come out: *Skills Magazine*, *Ghetto Art*, and *On the Go*. The authors of *Freight Train Art* also claim that as the internet gained popularity, “[a]rtists were able to share their pictures, stories and make new acquaintances in other cities” (0069). They also state that “In September 1994, graffiti found a structured home on the Internet with the creation of the first information hub dedicated to it, *Art Crimes*” (0069). From the popularity of the Internet, various magazines sprouted up. During the 1990s, several graffiti jams were also put together, and artists came together to exhibit their work. These events were “Scribble Jam” and “PaintLouis” (0070). The 21st century globalization has also made its impact felt on graffiti art. There are now numerous websites that advance graffiti art, but because of the

digital medium, I will not discuss graffiti art on the Internet. Adding that topic to this research project would be too broad to include here.

Graffiti has consequently turned into a platform from which one can question the mainstream. This questioning beckons the need for a shift in the thinking of cultural hegemony. While I do not think the world of graffiti art wants or needs to be a part of the hegemonic culture, it is nevertheless a vehicle for recognition of the “other.” Graffiti artists and others from the community of Chicanas/os, like so many from marginalized communities, must learn to navigate between the mainstream and their own community.

Graffiti has taken on a new life—a legal life that has made its way to art galleries and commercial areas. It is now a worldwide phenomenon. In *Street Artists: The Complete Guide*, authors Eleanor Mathieson and Xavier Tápies, cite one artist, Banksy, received \$1.9 million for his work at an auction (21). Although much of what is seen falls more closely under the category of street art, it is derived from graffiti writing. It is thought that in 2003 street art gained popularity (7). There is now a redefinition that art can come in the form of graffiti, and that redefinition of art can symbolize the acceptance of a culture (7). Street



Figure 8 Obama Poster, Artist

artists seem to come from a more elitist background and are more accepted by the mainstream. For example, André, who creates Mr. A, is a “[n]ightclub owner, hotel owner, clothing designer and international party boy” (11). Shepard Fairy is another example of an artist who has achieved the acceptance of street

art by the mainstream. Fairy operates on a worldwide scale with his ambitions as an entrepreneur and is known as a global artist. He even received a thank you letter from future president Obama, because he featured Obama in the *Hope* campaign. Figure 8 is the image he created and which “proved one of the abiding images of the election” (*Street Artists* 91).

The influence of street art is not just from graffiti but also integrates qualities of fine art. Bäst, as described in *Street Artists*, “shows Pop Art sensibilities in his choice of subject matter—advertisements, Disney cartoon characters, weapons, celebrities—and in screenprinted, layered and distressed style in which these images are presented . . .” (*Street Artists* 23). Many street artists seem to be invited into the mainstream art world, while graffiti artists maintain only an underground celebrity status. Their popularity is maintained within the graffiti community, and the graffiti writers of the community are very aware of that fact. For example, Texas graffiti crew, Lifeless Crew, use the initials of their crew to reflect different aspects of their positionality/identity; one of the monikers they use is Local Celebrities. This practice reminds us that these artists are aware of their marginalized status and that their art will be viewed within the community in which they create their piece, recognized only by those who will also view their tags, throw-ups, and bombs throughout, hence as Local Celebrities.

Another famous street artist—who also influenced Banksy—Blek (le rat) was born to an architect father and was the grandson of a French diplomat; Blek began using his global influence to create his art. He took the graffiti of NYC subways “with the recollection of some WWII stencilled graffiti he had seen on Mussolini’s head on a trip

he'd taken to Paloma, Italy, as a child. The propagandist element appealed to him and from that day on he decided to focus on stencils" (*Street Artists* 27).

Despite having attained some commercial success, graffiti art's status remains on the fringes of the art world. In addition, the status of most Chicanas/os also remains on the fringes of history and society. While graffiti art itself is gaining headway in mainstream culture, it remains connected to street culture; however, it acts as a media outlet to advertise certain commodities to urban audiences.

The inversion of this notion of popular culture is found in the culture of the Chicana/o. Gaspar de Alba, in *Chicano Art*, for instance, introduces the notion of the solar paradigm, which "argues for a separate and historically specific cultural reality that transcends and subverts the notion of 'subculture'" (37). Gaspar de Alba goes on to say that "often the popular beliefs, objects, and practices of Chicana/o culture are antagonistic or anathema to the dominant culture . . ." (37). Historically, the efforts of Chicano graffiti artists continue the tradition of graffiti as a rhetorical discourse. The unique cultural competencies developed in the modern Chicano graffiti community are discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter III

TACTICS OF SPACE: ALLOCATION, DISTRIBUTION, AND DELEGATION

Gangs have used graffiti to claim territory, and writers interested in going *all city* (having their name in areas where it is visible to a large number of people, for example, on a subway car) continue to use the art form with the same intent. Graffiti artists are innovative in their search of ways to be noticed: countless artists are realizing new artistic styles and new reasons to *get up* (an artist having their work seen by many people). I examine graffiti as an art form that evolved and has moved from the use of illegal space to create a new identity separate but not disconnected from its early beginnings. Much of graffiti has been about one thing: expressing consciousness.

The evolution of graffiti art practices, in their current state, transcends the efforts of their predecessors: although much of graffiti art today still carries and reflects a discourse similar to early graffiti writing, the art form has nonetheless evolved. The progression of current practice and participation reaches further and has taken on a more elaborate and possibly more complex aesthetic. Arguably, the acceptance of graffiti art as high art has not kept up with the evolution of styles and techniques. It has been readily exploited, however, much like the minority community for whom graffiti artists create their art. Alicia Gaspar de Alba's insights in *Chicano Art* analyze the CARA exhibition on display from 1990-1993, of Chicana/o artwork from 1965-1985, and theorize the

exhibit as a cultural marker. The CARA exhibit was one of the first to feature Chicana/o artists using various media in well-known art galleries throughout the country. Featured in Figure 9 is the exhibition logo: “visible gaze that reflects back on the viewer” (113). The exhibit not only requires the audience to gaze on the identity of Chicanas/os, but it asks the audience to reflect on their own identity and makes the audience members know that they are also being watched.

As Gaspar de Alba says of the CARA exhibition,

Historically, CARA marked the large-scale intervention of marginalized art and culture in the master’s house, the elite space of the “public” art museum. Culturally, CARA engaged in the critical

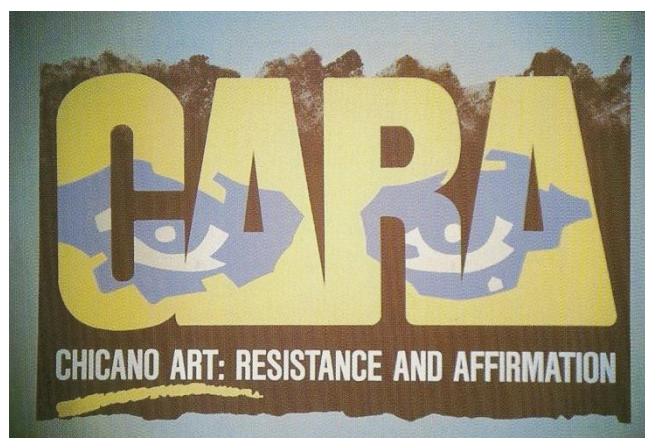


Figure 9 CARA Exhibition Logo

debates and struggles of a postmodern society, particularly those focusing on the tensions between identity/difference, margin/center, subjectivity/representation, high/low culture, insider/outsider. Politically, CARA countered the aesthetic traditions of the mainstream art world, challenging institutional structures of exclusion, ethnocentrism, and homogenization. (7)

That exhibition, as Gaspar de Alba demonstrates, rhetorically represents people of Mexican descent, albeit in a highly sexist and homophobic manner.

I argue that graffiti art engages the same “critical debate, struggles, and . . . tensions” with society as did many of the pieces featured in the CARA exhibition (7). Graffiti artists use a method of combining image and text and the product is often indecipherable to readers outside the community: Chicano graffiti art is ironically an openly secret society. Those outside the community may be onlookers, but they need a cultural translator, just as in the communities of the marginalized Chicano, where it is expected is that those outside of the community are unaware of the culture inside the community. This is a response to the insider/outsider dichotomy. Here I use the definition of *place* and *space* as explained by Michel de Certeau to describe this social dichotomy,

A place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (*place*) A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. A *space* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function In contradistinction to the place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a “proper” [distinct location]. In short, space is a practiced place. (117)

Now that I have introduced theoretical practices of space and place, I want to explore the practical elements of the use of space by graffiti artists, before moving on to more theoretical implications of their use of space and place.

The supplies needed to paint a piece on a legal wall are specialized. Figure 10 is an example of graffiti artists' supplies. The artist will need, according to Scape Martinez in *Graffiti: The Art and Technique of Graffiti*, spray can tips which vary depending on the brand of paint purchased, but there are four basic types of tips needed: fat caps, skinny caps, outline caps, and fill-in caps (12). Latex gloves, and respirators or masks are often used to protect the health of the artist. There is also the consideration on the part of the artists to properly dispose of the hazardous materials after completing a piece (12).

When creating pieces, artists often use the name they “write,” or a nickname. This is a name sometimes given to the graffiti artist, but many times, the artist chooses it. According to Martinez, the graffiti artist should consider “how it [the name] sounds” as the writer should ask “[h]ow do the letters work together? Do they flow? Is



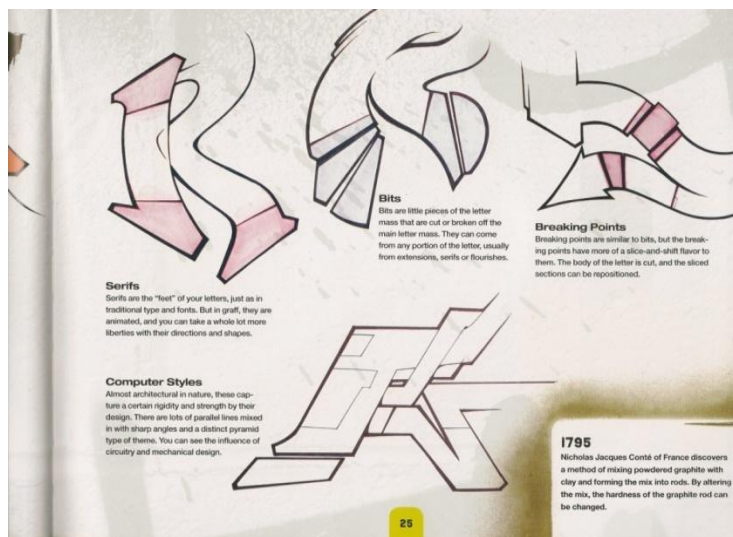
Fig. 10 Spray Cans.jpeg

there a rhythm to the sounds and the look?” (16). There is obviously an artistic consideration that must be taken into account over how all of those elements will appear when creating their artwork. Martinez, in addition, recommends that the name must not be too long and that the writer be able to “envision your letters developed and how they may look together in a piece” (16).

In addition to individual names, crew names are developed by “[a] loose-knit bunch of guys who share styles, insights and a safe creative environment for their art. It isn’t uncommon for a writer to be involved in one, two or even three crews” (18). Martinez adds, “Let’s be clear: A crew is an art thing. It is not a gang thing, and it is not a

clique thing. Keep the spirit of creativity alive” (18). Crews and the purpose behind their formation and their maintenance are beyond the scope of this work, but crew development is an important part of understanding graffiti art and how space is maintained.

There are several basic letter styles: bubble letters, block letters, semi-wildstyle, wildstyle, 3-D wildstyle, and abstracts. Artists use those basic styles to combine their letters to form pieces (20-22). While there are many other more specific styles, they can, in most cases, be



broadly defined as one of those styles listed above. **Figure 11 Graffiti Letter Style Components**

Many components are worked into pieces that add to the overall style or intricacies of the piece. For example, Martinez describes overlaps, extensions, flourishes, connections, serifs, bits, and breaking points as a few of the elements that can be added to the letter styles. Figure 11, above, is a model of some elements that may be added to letters to create style. The element of individual style is important in graffiti writing. Arrows are very common way for the artist to direct the eye of the observer, and 3-D shapes and shading styles add depth, and color is used to add “energy, action, and excitement” (28).

Martinez, an expert of Chicano graffiti art, points out the emphasis of color in graffiti:

One of the important differences between graffiti and traditional art is the palette. Since the primary medium is aerosol paint, the palette is limited. Tints and shades don't get much play because we use paint right out of the can, without color mixing. And because of the variations in the physical locations we use as surfaces and the bold colors, we get a powerful, universal effect. (28)

Color is used in three basic ways; again, these are just basics, as each artist develops his own methods of using color. Color is often done in camouflage, fades, and cut and slice. I am only pointing out the elements used to create the letters of pieces. There are many other elements that can be added to a piece, such as characters, backgrounds, and themes. The piece itself is a combination of the elements previously discussed minus what can be



Figure 12 Fill Colors

added around the piece. What makes a piece good or bad is purely subjective, but as with the critique of other art forms there may be a few characteristics that make a piece largely viewed as good.

Martinez describes a good piece by saying that “Each layer is in its own plane and, whenever possible, should be in its own unique perspective. Working with multiple perspectives makes your pieces visually interesting . . .” (40). He also comments that the letters should be the strongest element in the painting, winning over characters or background for instance. He goes on to say that a good piece should have creativity, consistency, balance, contrast, and rhythm. Standards for creating pieces are kept high in

Chicano graffiti art: “Letters are the most important aspect of graffiti writing, outside the name [W]e have to remember that letters are symbols that over time (centuries), have developed meaning, sound connotations, etc. So proceed with this in mind: Letters are symbols that can be manipulated as you see fit” (20).

That manipulation of letters is a rhetorical manipulation that graffiti writers create: the intentional creation of pieces that can or cannot be read by those outside the graffiti community. The idea of Chicano graffiti artists having a method of combining letters in a manner understood by other Chicano graffiti artists creates a shared literacy. The graffiti styles that have developed over time can be attributed to specific writers, by those who created pieces legally and illegally.

The definition of place and space is important because space acts as a cultural marker. The spaces claimed by a particular community are places where relationships and cultural competencies are created. This is important in the discussion of graffiti art because legal graffiti artists must legitimately acquire places to paint. The places that the graffiti artist paints become a space where the artist is able to represent their community. In other words, the practices of the graffiti art community must be welcomed into a particular place, and their artwork then changes the space.

Because of the scale of graffiti pieces, it is suitable to compare graffiti art pieces to traditional murals and the way each uses place and space. I would like to explore the way that non-graffiti art murals are situated in society as opposed to the way graffiti art murals are commonly viewed by society. Figure 13 is in Lincoln Park or “Chicano Park” in El Paso, Texas. The murals painted under the freeway in that park reflect the coming together of the Chicana/o community in El Paso to beautify the area. The place, the park,

was affected by the artists' use of space. Martinez describes the murals in this way:

“Traditional mural making tends to be a more visible community-building event. A lot of communicating between parties occurs during the creating: build up, prep and execution. There are processes involved with the community that help build bridges and community engagement” (71). The attention surrounding traditional murals tends to be more widely accepted by the



community and tends to be viewed in a positive way.

Figure 13 Chicano Park Mural jpeg.

The murals painted in Chicano Park are cultural, religious, and social images often associated with the Chicana/o community.

Martinez goes on to describe graffiti art murals: “The graff writer’s community is underground” (71). He acknowledges the marginality of the art form and states that “A graff writer tends to record the city’s subconscious Go around town and scope out the city and see it in different ways. Everything is a backdrop. Look at things, not as they are, but as they could be, or should be, with your name written on it” (71). In the passage above Martinez also refers to marginal position of graffiti art and the voice created through art. He points to the possibility of sharing the history, culture, and politics of the Chicana/o community through graffiti art. This situates Chicano graffiti artists to claim space, rather than just a claim to place, for the community that they represent. The members of the marginalized communities of Chicanas/os are as much owners of their surroundings as any person who resides in the same place. De Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, states his objective as

This goal [further research in the area of rules and operations of society] will be achieved if everyday practices, “ways of operating” or doing things, no longer appear as merely the obscure background of social activity, and if a body of theoretical questions, methods, categories, and perspectives, by penetrating this obscurity, make it possible to articulate them. (xi)

The connection between de Certeau’s objective and Martinez description of graffiti artists is their interpretation of community space and place. The relevance lies in the questioning of the dominant cultural schemata and making “explicit the systems of operational combination (*les combinatoires d’opérations*) which also compose a ‘culture,’ and bring to light the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society . . .” (de Certeau xi-xii). Martinez asks, “who is able to express themselves in the public space, and why or why not?” (71). Martinez calls into question how space is delegated and who does or does not have the power to call public space their own.

In *Art, Space and the City: Public art and urban futures*, Malcolm Miles “. . . asks how art and design can contribute to urban futures” (i). I am influenced by that question and ask how graffiti art contributes to urban space. I use Miles’ research of urban public spaces along with his analysis of society and culture to more closely frame how graffiti art is situated in the social construction of space. I have already discussed graffiti artists’ literal use of space, or more accurately, the way they place their medium onto a surface. I look now to the rhetorical use of space. Miles describes public art by stating,

One difference between conventional public art and community arts or new genre public art, is that the community artist, and often the new genre

public artist, acts as a catalyst for other people's creativity, political imagination being perhaps as valued as drawing skill. This is a reaction against the commoditization of art by its markets and institutions, a rejection of the self-contained aesthetic of modernism, and reflects a critical realism derived from Marxism, feminism and ecology which implies that artists act for and with others in reclaiming responsibility for their futures. (12)

Graffiti art is public, so it is then visible, that Chicano graffiti art is a rhetorical discourse of the marginalized community of Chicanas/os which Chicano graffiti artists represent. Currently, though, the status of graffiti art remains on the fringes of the art world and is often viewed as an example of folk art. Similarly, non-mainstream cultures, such as Chicanas/os, remain on the fringes of history and society. There are many ways the work from artists of color is kept out of the mainstream art world: one is through the façade of quality: "Quality functions as a euphemism for racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ethnocentrism" (Gaspar de Alba 169). Art, though, is a civil rights movement in progress, which can cause a rupture in the social order.

Although graffiti art itself is gaining headway in mainstream culture, it is used as a media outlet by advertisers to sell products to urban audiences; however, it remains connected to street culture. The tactics and strategies of the hegemony must be called into question. De Certeau defines "strategy" as "when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment'" (xix). He states that

[a] tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance. It has at its disposal no base where it can capitalize on its advantages, prepare its expansions, and secure independence with respect to its circumstance Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities." The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them. (xix)

The position in which Chicanas/os are currently situated lends itself to using tactics to survive the strategies in place by the hegemony. In addition as Gaspar de Alba states, "This is the myth of the 'universal' Euro-American, whose ethnicity and color, language and beliefs are the norm from which cultural 'Others' deviate and differ. For historically colonized and marginalized groups, however, Eurocentric ideology is so visible that it renders their own realities invisible" (38). The Chicana/o mural a form of graffiti art, is a way to render Chicana/o culture visible.

Graffiti artists that deploy tactics within the community to manipulate their circumstances. If humans are "an art creating animal" and art is consciousness expressed, graffiti art is the maintenance and discourse of the marginalized community or what it creates in response to and receive a response from. More specifically, Chicano graffiti artists create art in response to the Chicana/o community and receive a response from the Chicana/o community. Chapter IV is a discussion of the educational position of the Chicana/o community.

Chapter IV

CHICANAS/OS IN EDUCATION AND LITERACY PRACTICES

The context of the Chicano graffiti community can be understood in several ways. One of the important factors for this study is understanding the history of the Chicana/o in education. That is important because of the history of subjugation of the Chicana/o in the US. While I narrow the history to education, there are many other factors of Chicanismo relevant to being and participating in the Chicana/o community.

Racial discrimination is nothing new in the Chicana/o community. For the National Education Association, Richard Verdugo states in *A Report on the Status of Hispanics in Education: Overcoming a History of Neglect*, that oppression of this community goes back as far as the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo 1848 and from the colonizing effects of what was then called “Manifest Destiny.” The signing of the treaty along with the ideals of the Manifest Destiny resulted in what “could best be characterized as haphazard, segregated, and inferior . . .” treatment of a group of people (15). This report also attests to how industrialization, urbanization, immigration, and civil rights movements have affected the societal perception of this group (14-17). The report also lists court cases that involve the fight against the racist discrimination of Chicanas/os.

In “Emerging Politics of Hispanic Education: From Politics to the Courts and Back Again,” Reynaldo Contreras maintains that historical documentation within US courtrooms has ruled in favor of equality in education, but the reality of the court decisions has been enacted contrary to the court:

While conventional wisdom defined the landmark *Brown* case as the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, the struggle by Hispanic communities for educational equity predates the civil rights movement of the early 1960s by decades. Although Hispanics have made significant progress in regards to educational inclusion in the last four decades, since the late 1970s hard-won gains have deteriorated. (4)

In most circumstances most court cases resulted in rulings that stated something like the following: “segregating public schools by neighborhood was unconstitutional since neighborhood school policies reinforced racial boundaries established through residential segregation” (2). But what was really happening, instead of court-ordered changes, was “white flight” and school districts completely ignoring the rulings from courts as high as the US Supreme Court.

To discuss this subjugation more incisively, I narrow the scope of the term Hispanic and use the terms Chicanas and Chicanos. Continuing the historical discussion of Chicanas/os in education, Duncan-Andrade says,

Traditional American history is the story of Mexicans as a conquered people, virtually devoid of historical, economic, or cultural significance. These notions of powerlessness and cultural deficiency, most powerfully transmitted through the schooling system, have been passed down to

Chicanos[as]. However, this telling of Mexican history, and vis-à-vis Chicano history, is not the only version or even the most accurate one [T]he dominant historical view as the only acceptable knowledge in schools has meant the alienation and disempowerment of school-aged Chicanos[as]. (582)

The effects of “alienation and disempowerment” on the Chicana/o student is evident in the high school dropout rate and in the enrollment and retention rate of Chicana/o college/university students.

Despite the fact that that knowledge exists, many Chicanas/os are still schooled in buildings that are substandard, with substandard resources, and substandard teachers, yet are expected to perform as well academically as their non-Chicana/o peers. It has been speculated that other factors affect Chicana/o students.

In “News-Surfing the Race Question: Of Bell Curves, Words, and Rhetorical Metaphors,” Meta G. Carstarphen argues against biological reasons for the disparity in academic achievement presented in *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. Carstarphen states that the authors of *The Bell Curve* “. . . discussed ethnic differences, cognitive ability, IQ, and other variables associated with native intelligence” (17). Carstarphen says,

The ethnic differences among human beings count for something, to be sure, but exactly what race is and what it means to our current discourse is subject to frenzied debate. And in the madcap pace of modern communication, no one bothers to take time to challenge key premises or

define important terms, least of all in discourse about the widely discussed but easily generalized subject of “race.” (28)

This argument is further supported in “Exposing Race as an Obsolete Biological Concept,” where author Alan H. Goodman states that “while humans have come to live our social lives through racial categories, these categories simply are not useful for classifying human genetic diversity. At this point, differences in wealth, health, or educational attainment between groups we call ‘races’ are the products of history and social life, not biologically determined” (4).

There is no logic in concluding Chicana/o students’ poor school performance is due to biological deficiencies; rather, the deficiencies are socially constructed. The struggles of students need to be identified and dealt with accordingly.

For instance, many Chicana/o students still struggle with language and cultural differences that further separate them from the hegemony and that add anxiety to the students’ educational experience. Chicana/o students often struggle with language attitudes and ideologies. In *Mexican Americans and Language: Del dicho al hecho*, Glenn A. Martínez attests that the English/Spanish issue at school depends on language attitudes and ideologies. He says,

a language ideology is a structured constellation of attitudes about different aspects of language that justifies and rationalizes particular power relations in a society. Language attitudes, then, can be considered the building blocks of a language ideology. Ideologies are constructed from attitudes and are then used to achieve certain sociopolitical goals.

(21)

Students face making language decisions; they view speaking English/Spanish with “language pride/language panic” (38). As Martinez explains,

opposing attitudes revealed tensions between the absence or presence of Spanish as an identity marker, between the absence or presence of Spanish as an identity marker, between standard Spanish and English-inflected Spanish as an identity marker, and between the desire to maintain Spanish and the commitment to enact that maintenance. Such oppositions show how the I and the Other intersect with community and individuality and, thus, unfold in a basic ideological tension between language pride and language panic. (38)

Language is only one cultural issue students grapple with on a day-to-day basis in schools.

There are other cultural differences students contend with, another example, is the manner in which they are perceived by the authorities of the school they attend. Yet another issue is the “othering” of Chicanas/os which involves the ways students are expected to act due to the influence of the mainstream media. The media not only influence the way students view themselves, but also the way they are viewed by others.

As Duncan-Andrade states,

Through the use of powerful imagery . . . the entertainment industry has made a valuable, consumable commodity of the marginalized, violent image of urban youth as gang members [T]he ensuing trap that is laid for urban youth by the definitions of gangs and urban life that are embraced by the political, legal, and social power structures. (587)

Patrick Finn states in *Literacy with an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in Their Own Self-Interest*, that “[m]embers of an oppressed group come to regard certain beliefs, skills, tastes, values, attitudes, and behaviors as *not* appropriate for them because they are associated with the dominant culture” (42). This type of perception causes a cultural rift between student and instructor. As a result, they often adopt an “us vs. them” mentality (39).

The results of the “us vs. them” mentality, language ideologies (i.e., language pride/language panic), and the historical institutionalized subjugation of this group results in findings of the National Education Association in *A Report on the Status of Hispanics in Education: Overcoming a History of Neglect*: “Hispanics have the highest dropout rates among the three major race-ethnic groups—Hispanics, whites, and blacks” (8).

The statistics show a disconnect between Chicanas/os and educational institutions in standardized testing scores and in the success rates of Chicana/o students, rate in which Chicana/o students are often behind their peers. But what seems to make sense are that, “the original aims of standardized tests were subverted to include rationalization of racist theories of genetic inferiority” (Nieto and Bode 122).

Understanding previous statistics is not a result of what some might say is this group’s unwillingness to pull themselves up by their metaphorical bootstraps, but rather are due to the effects of institutional racism. Institutional racism as defined by Nieto and Bode, is much more powerful than individual racism; it is “the systematic use of economic and political power in institutions (such as schools) that leads to detrimental policies and practices . . .” (67). Historical and legal documents substantiate institutional racism faced by Chicanas/os since the United States established itself as a union. As

Nieto and Bode state, “Prejudice and discrimination, then, are not just personality traits or individual psychological dysfunctions; they are also manifestations of economic, political, and social power Racism as an institutional system implies that some people and groups benefit and others lose” (69). Students are placed in an environment everyday of their school careers where they face opposition and discrimination.

While the entirety of this chapter could focus on the historical context of Chicanas/os and their positionality within the educational context, I want only to use the history of that group as a point of reference. It is imperative for educators to understand the historical context from which Chicanas/os will enter college as is invaluable in preparing a curriculum and composition pedagogy based on students’ literacies often overlooked in public schools.

To better serve the population of Chicana/o students, the literacy practice of that group should be understood. The terms by which Chicanas/os know, read, and interpret their world are often different from the ideological structure of academia. The definition of literacy needs to be revamped to a way of understanding that includes cultural influences.

In *A Community Text Arises: A Literate Text and a Literacy Tradition in African-American Churches*, Beverly J. Moss moves to extend the “discussion on literacy because of the status that literacy, particularly academic literacy, is given in the United States as a marker of success in the academy and as a marker of upward mobility” (2). Because Chicana/o students’ literacy practices differ from those of the academy, it is often interpreted that Chicana/o students are unsuccessful and lack the intelligence to move up socially (2). Moss continues to discuss African American literacy and calls into question

the definition of literacy as it affects the perception of African Americans in the academic setting (2).

I use the theoretical frame work presented in Moss' work to simultaneously theorize the perception of Chicanas/os in academia. The purpose, in part, lies in "One of the major assumptions," she states, "is that African American students are not being raised in a 'literacy vacuum'" (2). Working in an academic institution, I have heard the literacy of Chicana/o students in the school discussed by faculty and staff, where I am employed, in a way that suggests that there is a deficiency in the community. I question those statements that suggest a community or cultural deficiency, as an educator and as a person of color coming from a community of so-called "deficient literacies" (2). The relevancy of these observations rationalizes the argument for a curricular and pedagogical shift. Literacy as a flexible ideology that can be manipulated to scaffold learning for academic purposes provides for a way of building common understanding that is multidirectional. I discuss the Chicana/o history of educational subjugation earlier in the chapter, and that history continues to affect students. The effects range from the language pride/panic, to an "us vs. them" mentality, to a total detachment from the academic community in the form of withdrawing from school. Moss cites numerous ethnographies, about which she says,

[e]ach of these studies suggests that there is a great deal of rich and complex literacy and language activity occurring in the home communities of these various racial and ethnic groups [referring to the racial and ethnic groups of the ethnographies]. And each of these studies suggests that what constitutes "community literacy" for each of these communities (and

communities like them) does not necessarily match what is known as school literacy. (3)

The research suggests that the literacy of those communities on the margins are viable and that “we [as scholars] still find ourselves looking at a model of literacy that is based on traditional (i.e., narrow) academic notions of literate texts and literate behavior” (3). Traditional academic notions perpetuate colonial ideologies.

To impede the perpetuation of those disenfranchising ideologies educators should include the literacy practices of the Chicana/o community. Those who continue traditional literacy practices of composition studies as standard must “understand the need for knowing how students use literacy in settings other than school. If community is to be a part of the education process, and it must be, then schools must understand the role of community. This knowledge is important in making connections between school and home” (4). The imperative nature of understanding the literacies of the Chicana/o communities is supported by data presented by the US Census Bureau. Chicanas/os are not graduating high school or moving on to higher education.

Duncan-Andrade hypothesizes two possible conclusions to this continuing problem for Chicanas/os. He says,

There are many ways to perceive these two and a half decades of failed educational reform. One is to presume that the problem is so complex that American educational theorists have been unable to crack it despite ever increasing government attention. Another possible conclusion is that the reform policies necessary to significantly affect these trends of failure for Chicanos[as] is so drastic that their implementation lacks the political

support necessary for them to take effect. Possibly a combination of these two conclusions is the most likely. As educators seek to find solutions to these problems, they are encouraged to uncover leaks in the ship that can be patched, allowing the ship to merely stay afloat. However, what is becoming . . . clear is that the ship is sinking as Chicano[a] students place less and less faith in the promise of schooling as the ultimate social equalizer. (590-91)

To help bring equity to the classroom educators should explore the historical and sociopolitical context of Chicanas/os and bring in the literacies of the Chicana/o students' community. The exploration of historical and sociopolitical contexts of Chicanas/os provides a foundation for educating students of that community. Bringing in Chicana/o history and sociopolitical contexts can range; the possibilities are abundant; my focus is looking at those contexts in relation to graffiti art and using the images to stimulate and facilitate active thinking.

The idea of community is tied to understanding literacy. As Moss says, "literacy is a complex social process" (7). She goes on to say there are "three key components of literacy as a social process that [her] study highlights: the presence of multiple participants in the literacy event; the presence of intertextual relationships; and the influence of cultural norms and ideology that shape the way participants, intertextuality, and discourse interact." The understanding of those key elements—"multiple participants in the literacy event; the presence of intertextual relationships; and the influence of cultural norms and ideology"—in the Chicano graffiti community is important in

understanding the rhetorical discourse of graffiti art as it represents the Chicana/o community.

To understand Chicano graffiti art as a discourse of the Chicana/o community by adding the definition of literacy as explained by Moss: “literacy function may be defined differently from community to community. In short, literacy is defined in context. It follows that if definitions of literacy are dependent on the context and community in which literacy is used, then the concept of a literate text must also be dependent on context and community” (4). Graffiti’s history unfolds itself to reveal an intricate set of literacies. The ability to recognize the graffiti artist’s name in a piece is an obvious marker of community literacy, but is worth mentioning again. And for the purposes of this thesis the graffiti artists historical and sociopolitical understanding of the Chicana/o community creates an intertextual context that artists reveal through their use of place and space as defined by de Certeau.

Graffiti art can be understood as literacy practice. And I as stated in Chapter I, art can be representational of consciousness. While the practice of tagging, bombing, gang and other forms of illegal graffiti are interesting topics of research and interesting topics of discussion in the classroom, I, again am looking at those who participate in the legal creation of pieces in which the artist creates an image using letters. It is through the use of large outdoor wall space that artist display their work.

Here I define graffiti artists as literate in the styles and techniques of the specific genre of graffiti. Just as with any art form, it takes practice and dedication to perfect style and technique; these are practices of space were discussed in Chapter III. As Moss says, “Most obviously, the social nature of literacy requires that there are multiple participants

in this process. That is, there is neither a solitary writer nor an isolated reader; writer and reader collaborate in the act of making the text” (7). The image created by the artist is a text. The image creates an intertextual relationship among the members of the Chicano graffiti art community.

The practice of creating and reading those pieces is also a part of the literacy of the Chicano graffiti community. Those within the community are able to read the pieces created by other graffiti artists. This literacy is one of the most unique within the community, but is one that creates an insider/outsider duality. Artists inside the community are literate in discerning the image, and those outside the community are most often times unable to decipher the writing. An artist being able to read another artists’ letter style comes from an understanding of technique. But what I find most fascinating is that it also comes from the interaction with other artists. Through various interactions, whether it is an art show, graffiti jams, or productions, artists come together to participate in creating art and appreciating the art form. As the artists meet, they discuss and critique each other’s work. Similarly, as Moss says,

There are also cultural norms that govern when and how certain texts are used and for what purposes they are used. These intertextual relations and their accompanying cultural norms have major implications for how . . . communities create, define, and use literate texts. This intertextuality is also characterized by the social relations between participants and texts, relations that focus on process as an important factor in the use of literacy and on how such relationships are established, maintained, and change. (8)

The interaction is also important in the formation of crews. Being part of a crew is also a literacy practice. Crews are formed not only to foster the art form, but for monetary and spatial reasons. As with other organizations, being part of a crew is a way to network within the graffiti community. This networking makes available opportunities to be included on commission work as well as much sought after wall space.

Painting legally means that permission must be acquired for the proprietor of the building. Being able to paint on a large wall to create a mural is not a readily available commodity. Place is limited. Therefore, when an artist acquires a wall (i.e. place) and is allowed to change the content of the mural at their discretion (space), then the graffiti artists who acquired permission control it. That artist maintains the place and gives permission to other artists to paint the wall or can invite others to paint. Being a part of a crew increases that likelihood of being included in financial and spatial gains. As Moss says, “It is this complex belief system that shapes behavior, values, language use, and beliefs about language, and which sets up expectations and rules for the roles of participants and intertextual relations . . .” (8). Establishing crews is important in the preservation, maintenance, and evolution of graffiti art.

There is also the issue of language as literacy. There are many ways in which to be literate within the Chicana/o graffiti community. Members of the community must understand the language of the Chicana/o as well as the technical terms of graffiti. The language of the Chicana/o community can be equated to specific cultural knowledge and behaviors, while the graffiti community may use jargon.

The historical traditions of the academy have been positioned in a way that creates invisible boundaries for Chicana/o students. The environment in which they are

subjected is often hostile. Restructuring definitions of literacies and ways of knowing can create an environment that is more equipped to educate the Chicana/o student. I advance the notion of bringing marginalized art and people inside the academic class setting: bring the outside in, literally and figuratively. Using graffiti art as means to stimulate conversations, critically thinking about those on the margin, and bringing the outside in: by that I mean bringing a marginalized discourse into a hegemonic setting. Using graffiti art in the class setting is an experimental way to bring in cultural practices often seen on the margins of society to ask students to critically view and analyze the prescribed societal and political norms, not only of the academic community, but possibly extending their learning to the global community.

But graffiti art may be judged in a way that renders it inadequate for classroom analysis. I want to point out some issues of quality when using alter-*Native* pedagogies, for Gaspar de Alba says, “the Quality question ends up passing judgment on an entire group of people, a way of life, a historical reality; hence, it too is packed with explosives that are either detonated or mitigated by hegemonic codes” (166-67). Many, for instance, often view graffiti art as lacking quality, and ask when is it art and when is it vandalism? Questions such as those have become cliché. But who defines quality art? That question could be posed in the composition class.

The shift toward a mode of image can bring graffiti out of its marginalized position because graffiti art creates text as a graphic image; graffiti makes words into a picture. If the argument is made that these changes are merely sensory perceptions and that the true nature of what should be learned will not be changed. Though the shift from

the page to the image, then I agree with an argument presented in *Literacy in the New Media Age* by Gunther Kress who states,

Writing on the page is not immune in any way from this move, even though the writing of the elite using the older media will be more resistant to the move than writing elsewhere. It is possible to see writing once again moving back in the direction of visuality whether as letter, or as “graphic block” of writing, as an element of what are and will be fundamentally visual entities, organised and structured through the logics of the visual.

(6-7)

Because media and technological literacies are increasingly ubiquitous in the United States, it is clear that this shift is occurring.

While media and technological advancements are happening, the need for critical analysis skills is more necessary as students are bombarded with information. Critical learning practices are often missing from many post-secondary composition classrooms. This brings me back to my topic: post-secondary institution, students should learn these critical thinking methods for, not only is critical thinking a central part of collegiate success, but it is also an indicator of success in the larger community. After reading several pieces of literature that discuss the topic of literacies of non-white populations and pedagogical practices to reach those students, I introduce issues that I often was exposed to during my secondary and post-secondary education, but never had the vocabulary to manifest my dissatisfaction, which was a result of the oppression many others like myself faced in the classroom. Many Chicanas/os continue to live subjugated in society (education, Internet carrier, Wi-Fi availability). This subjugation is a result of a

colonized past. With the rapidly changing demographics of the United States and the history of our country regarding racial oppression in our educational system, the implications of critical pedagogy should be seriously considered when creating curriculum in the post-secondary classroom.

Using graffiti art, a type of marginalized art work, in an academic setting as a critical methodology can help students understand the culture of not only Chicanos, but also understand how they are positioned in the academic culture and how they fit into the institution. That self-reflexive metacognitive action of analysis will enable students to actively recount narratives of their understanding of their own cultural perspectives. Using identity based pedagogical approaches to foster critical thinkers can open students to become more politically involved in our quickly evolving global community. These types of critical methodologies can open students to be the type of thinkers needed to make it in the 21st century.

Cross-Talk in Comp Theory, “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” Janet Emig says, “Writing represents a unique mode of learning—not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique Writing serves learning uniquely because writing as process—and—product possesses a cluster of attributes that correspond uniquely to certain powerful learning strategies” (7). Using graffiti art as a method to access the unique learning that is only developed through writing can provide the possibility to ask students to learn in a way that they have often never been asked to do so before. It is not that graffiti art has never been researched or taught in a classroom, but the practice is not widespread and is still maybe new to many students.

Graffiti art is a tool that can be used to foster important discussions within the classroom and to possibly have students rethink what is truly valued as art. Questions like those posed by Ralph Cintron in *Angels' Town*: “*How does one create respect under conditions of little or no respect*” (x) or “*Can one argue critically for a big picture of social justice and simultaneously find solutions that make sense from the perspective of the local?*” (196) could be used as points of debate in the classroom.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

My attempts to change my situation, overcome obstacles, and break boundaries are similar to that of many Chicanas/os; therefore, the remediation of the disparities I face can be applied to other Chicanas/os. The ideas in this thesis already exists within the community of Chicanas/os, as the ideas exist in the music, the art, and in the culture of the people. This written document is the only way for me to articulate to others the results of my experiences and how I view my position in society.

Graffiti has remediated itself throughout the years. Artists are not outside the influence of society; in fact, they react and cause reaction in society. But in the case of artists who participate in urban art forms, they are marginalized. Looking back on this way of thinking, I would like to argue that the framework keeping graffiti on the margins, in turn, perpetuates a way of thinking that is detrimental to the Urbanized Chicana/o. The democratized ideal that the majority wins, and the elite tiered society prevails in the United States. This has created the ability of the hegemony to deem the accepted canon of art as supreme and to hold some forms of art as high while others are considered low. What I believe is occurring within the culture of the United States is that the majority rules idea or might is right has unfortunately turned into white is right. The value of graffiti is relative to the perceiver, just as the value of all art is relative to the perceiver.

The study of graffiti art is a way for all students to understand their position in society. The way graffiti artists keep their art form alive has created a unique community that reflects the actions that the Chicana/o community must use in order to sustain itself. The analysis of Chicana/o graffiti art will establish an understanding of that community, not only to provide a scaffold for Chicana/o students in the classroom, but also to begin to build a scaffold for other non-Chicana/o students to understand the Chicana/o community and other marginalized communities. For the non-Chicana/o student, a foundation in Chicana/o Studies can also build tolerance for the Chicana/o community.

The discourse of the Chicana/o community and the rhetorical implications of my research show the way in which graffiti can be adapted to the composition classroom to prompt authorship. The idea of authorship and creating meaning through texts are also a means of shaping and crafting reality, therefore bringing the fringe community of graffiti writers into a juxtaposing hegemonic setting that adds validity and understanding to the social constructs of that particular community by showing the foundation for those outside of the community. The use of space in the graffiti community also insinuates an understanding of the collective society.

As I reflect on graffiti art in this final chapter, I recall watching the effort, passion, and dedication of the artists as they create their work in what is an inspiring process. The efforts of this group to create unity and self-preservation do not go unnoticed. In fact, it is quite the contrary. Their murals when privileged are too large not to be missed. As it has been for Chicanas/os for a long time, their oppression has influenced their creativity and has created a distinguishing characteristic of the culture and community. These survival

skills cannot be undone. The ability to make their creative use available resources for students is something that will be passed on through the culture.

Graffiti is therefore one of those elements that will be passed on in the culture. Graffiti art is observable, it can be documented, it can be studied for its artistic form by analyzing it for change in style and of its composition of the genre. So the definition of what constitutes graffiti art is always in flux because of the context in which graffiti occurs. The history of discrimination against Chicanas/os is long and unfortunately ongoing. While there has been government legislation passed to ease the pattern of discrimination in our society against this particular group, racism persists in ways that are invisible to many, therefore rendering it a problem of not only the past. Yet the history is nevertheless important to help explain how racism continues in our society.

Bringing artwork that is most often seen outside the mainstream into the class will help stimulate discussion by tapping into the literacies students of color bring with them into educational spaces. Addressing the rhetorical appeals surrounding the graffiti aesthetic in Chicana/o murals and showing how they are tied to cultural experiences fosters the development of self-reflexive analytical skills. The Chicana/o community practice of creating graffiti muralist art has been the subject of many ethnographic studies, which further serve to complicate discussions about how to define the quality of art. Using graffiti art and its criticism as a writing tool to increase students' critical literacy brings everyday rhetorical elements they see in their lives into new and creative perspectives. By bringing a marginalized art form into the college composition classroom as an experimental way to bring in cultural practices often seen on the fringes of society, students can then critically analyze prescribed societal and political norms, not only of

the academic community, but also of the global community. By using graffiti art as means to stimulate academic writing, college composition students can think critically about those on the margin, by bringing the outside in; by doing that, I mean to bring in a marginalized discourse into a hegemonic setting—the college composition classroom where academic writing and rhetoric are taught. My thesis has therefore attempted to theorize and contextualize a form of art so that college composition students, particularly those from the margins, can develop their critical thinking skills further by also developing their writing skills through their analytical skills.

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