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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

BETWEEN ART AND CRIME: GRAFFITI AND STREET ART IN NEOLIBERAL LOS ANGELES

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LATIN AMERICAN & LATINO STUDIES

by

Ismael F. Illescas

SEPTEMBER 2022

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2022

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Abstract

Ismael F. Illescas

Between Art and Crime: Graffiti and Street Art in Neoliberal Los Angeles

This study critically examined the racial, spatial, gender, and class dimensions of expressive cultures and social control. More specifically, *Between Art and Crime: Graffiti and Street Art in Neoliberal Los Angeles* examined how people from historically marginalized and underserved communities affirmed their rights to social space through graffiti and art-based community projects. Focusing on working-class communities of color in Los Angeles, this study demonstrated how criminalized and structurally marginalized youths of color create new social identities and social relationships by producing graffiti rooted in mutual respect, dignity, and justice. This study revealed how Black and Latinx graffiti writers and artists achieve visibility, challenge the borders of racial residential segregation, and transform places abandoned by businesses and overpoliced by city governments into spaces of congregation and empowerment.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Like many youths of the Latin American diaspora who migrated to racially segregated and working-class neighborhoods in the United States during the 1990s, I grew up economically poor but artistically rich. Although I had no access to formal artistic training, I was part of the large underground art movement known as graffiti writing, now widely known and marketed as street art. Walls were the main publishers of my artwork, and graffiti writing was my medium to assert a sense of dignity and identity; it was a way to challenge racial stereotypes forced on the Latina/o, Chicana/o, and Black communities that nurtured my upbringing. Thus, this research was a critical examination of the intersections between the biographical and the sociohistorical (Mills, 1959/2000; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981/2015), which provided an empirical and critical–interpretive account of the understudied phenomenon of graffiti writing or graffiti art.

More specifically, this study critically examined how people who produce graffiti navigate, negotiate, and challenge policies celebrating the graffiti aesthetic as they intensified the penalties for its unsanctioned production. I explored the various tactics graffiti and street artists deploy through their appropriation of urban space across the city of Los Angeles in their efforts to assert a sense of dignity and enact a transnational form of border thinking (Anzaldúa, 1987; Mignolo, 2012). These artists operate under increasingly militarized urban conditions (Davis, 1990/2006; Graham, 2009; Zukin, 1988) and in a growing creative economy that seeks to incorporate them into cultural industries (Dávila, 2012; Yúdice, 2003). Existing scholarship on this

topic has two broad categories: (a) literature examining the illegality and criminality of graffiti writing as resistance (Austin, 2002; Docuyanan, 2000; Ferrell, 1996; Iveson, 2010; Macdonald, 2001), and (b) studies focusing on the legal production of graffiti as complaisant to mainstream lifestyles and the exigencies of cultural industries and creative economies (Burnham, 2010; Kramer, 2010a; McAuliffe, 2012; Snyder, 2011). My research bridged these two categories and filled a gap in the literature by suggesting these two approaches, seemingly opposed and incompatible, are not mutually exclusive. Instead, I framed these approaches as indicative of the ways graffiti and street artists maneuver and struggle in the present conjuncture marked by divestment and marginalization of low-income communities of color in an increasingly carceral and market-oriented terrain (Banet-Weiser, 2011; Bloch, 2012; Dávila, 2004; Davis, 1990/2006; Graham, 2009; Greenberg, 2009; Iveson, 2010; Zukin, 1988). This study was guided by the following interlocking questions:

- How do people who produce graffiti navigate and subvert policies that criminalize and celebrate their artwork in the city of Los Angeles?
- What types of identities do they claim in the process of such negotiation and contestation? What can such identities reveal about the agency of graffiti and street artists?
- How do the cultural politics of writers change when graffiti enters urban processes of commodification as street art? And, if graffiti writing was historically forged as resistance to state violence and passive consumerism, what happens when the legal production of graffiti becomes

complaisant with mainstream lifestyles and the exigencies of cultural industries and creative economies?

To answer these questions, I engaged in ethnographic work, semistructured interviews (see Appendix A), participant observation, and textual analysis of graffiti. My study focused on, and was organized around, four main themes exploring the interplay between the agency of graffiti writers, the dynamics of urban political economy, the creation of space and place, and the subjectivities and social relations that develop. More specifically, I examined: (a) the understudied genealogy of Southern California graffiti, (b) the ways in which graffiti writers transgress the borders of racial residential segregation, (c) the type of places graffiti writers create collectively through art-based community projects, and (d) how writers negotiate the celebration and commodification of their artwork.

As I sifted through the National Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian in Summer 2017 as part of my preliminary research, I realized there was little institutional documentation of the long tradition of graffiti writing as it developed in Southern California. Although many interviews, documents, and records of New York graffiti exist in the national archives, and there is a substantial body of scholarship examining New York graffiti (Austin, 2002; Castleman, 1982; Chalfant & Prigoff, 1987; Cresswell, 1992; Dickinson, 2008; Glazer, 1979; Kramer, 2010a; Ley & Cybriwsky, 1974; MacDonald, 2001; Miller, 2002; Snyder, 2011; Stewart, 1989; Stewart & Stewart, 2009), the visual–cultural practices of Los Angeles and Southern

California graffiti remain underexplored (Avila, 1998; Bloch, 2012, 2016a; Docuyanan, 2000; Phillips, 1999).

Therefore, I begin this dissertation with a critical examination of graffiti that accounts for a broader genealogy and expands the archived learning about graffiti. Much of the literature about graffiti explicitly or implicitly assumes graffiti as a phenomenon of U.S. culture, a national framework that privileges the United States but rarely acknowledges the contributions of migrants or diasporic communities. In the next section, I seek to broaden scholars' understanding of graffiti by showing it as an amalgamation of diasporic cultural traditions.

A Genealogy of Southern California Graffiti: A Transnational and Diasporic Approach

Miller (2002) and, to some extent, Latorre (2008) are scholars who have taken a transnational approach to the study of graffiti. Miller's (2002) scholarship demonstrated how graffiti draws from West African, Puerto Rican, and Afro Caribbean traditions. Similarly, my work incorporated a transnational approach to examine and render visible the multiple cultural influences of Southern California graffiti which, I argue in Chapter 1, extends from Chicanx visual art and writing practices. These practices have been nominally identified as *placas* or *barrio calligraphy*. Although the presence of placas and barrio calligraphy as precursors to hip-hop graffiti or New York graffiti has been noted, I show how these styles were blended to provide Latinx youths a way to illustrate the cultural lineages and

overlooked visual contributions of Chicanx art through the medium of Southern California graffiti.

As early as the 1930s, Mexican American and Latinx youths working as shoeshine boys made use of their tools (e.g., horsehair brush applicator, black polish, sole edge color) to mark their territory by drawing their names on the walls where they worked in East Los Angeles (Robisch, 2013). What began as a visual method for fending off the competition interested in their clientele later developed into placas or *plaqueasos* that Pachucas/os (i.e., a Chicana/o graffiti painted on by neighborhood gangs or individuals to demarcate territory) mastered during the 1940s and 1950s (Phillips, 2009; Ramírez, 2009). This writing tradition was passed down to Chicana/o youths and gangs of the 1960s and 1970s (Romotsky & Romotsky, 1976), and later would be fused with what is nominally called New York or hip-hop graffiti in Los Angeles during the 1980s and 1990s (Avila, 1998; Phillips, 1999). Pachuca/o and Chola/o graffiti is known for a style rooted in the black and white aesthetic, the use and manipulation of Old English calligraphy, and block letters followed by a tag that reads “c/f” or “con safos,” which is roughly translated as “with respect” or “don’t mess with this placa,” and distinguishes its style, intent, and artform.

Block letters refer to Indigenous temples of Mesoamerica, visually situating and reflecting the Chicanx and Latinx association with indigeneity, colonization, and making do with colonized language, signs, and forms of communication (Robisch, 2013). In other words, by incorporating blocks into their designs, Chola/o writers merged Roman text with symbols depicting the Indigenous temples of the original

inhabitants of the Americas. As I demonstrate in Chapter 2, the block letter technique homages the integration of particular Chicanx and Latinx visual cultures into graffiti writing. Despite emerging from gang culture, Cholo writing allowed Chicanx Latinx graffiti writers to share their history and cultural roots publicly and visually (Robisch, 2013).

The next section contains a genealogy to demonstrate how this writing tradition persists in the visual graffiti practices of contemporary graffiti in Southern California. The growing presence and popularity of hip-hop culture and New York-style graffiti in Los Angeles during the 1980s and 1990s provided many Latinx youths the opportunity to move away from the early writing restrictions of previous generations. They developed their own identities as "all city" writers, creating and joining graffiti collectives, known as *crews*, to paint across the city instead of being tied to specific barrios or neighborhoods.

Going All City: An Illicit Cartography of Los Angeles

The particular context in which these rich writing traditions (i.e., barrio calligraphy and hip-hop graffiti) merged was marked by an era of urban restructuring, failed attempts to desegregate schools, and political maneuvering. During this time, the broken windows theory and the politics of everyday fear (Zukin, 1988) prompted city politicians, like those in Los Angeles, to bring together architecture and urban design with the police apparatus in comprehensive security efforts (Davis, 1990/2006). Moral panics were spurred on through sensationalized accounts of "killer youth gangs high on drugs," which used penetratingly racist elicitations to justify

urban apartheid (Davis, 1990/2006). In this context, Black and Latinx youths began tagging all over the city of Los Angeles, transgressing the boundaries of racial residential segregation.

The 1980s and 1990s were marked by the mass migration of Latin American families to the United States, and racial propositions were passed in California to deny their social rights (HoSang, 2010). Propositions, such as 187 and 209, targeted Latinx and Latin American migrants by stripping them of social rights, such as health care; establishing English-only education; and enforcing stronger and punitive laws against juveniles and adults who committed minor crimes. Similar to other cities in the United States, municipal policy in Los Angeles led a security offensive in response to white, middle-class demands to increase spatial and social isolation. Divestment from public space and recreational facilities supported a shift of fiscal resources to corporate redevelopment priorities under a city government that professed a "bi-racial coalition" (Davis, 1990/2006, p. 227). Together, these Black and white liberals collaborated in the vast privatization of public space and the subsidization of new racist enclaves, which enforced the divestment and use of brute force in inner-city neighborhoods. In other words, new class and racial warfare occurred at the level of the built environment. In this sense, graffiti became a way for marginalized youths of color to illustrate alternative cultural heritages and develop a form of space making that transgressed the borders of racial residential segregation. The articulation and implementation of going all city (i.e., having your writing seen

across the city despite these borders) was a way to contest the racial apartheid and produce an illicit cartography of the city.

With the phrase *illicit cartography*, I refer to the ways Black and Latinx graffiti writers reimagine and produce a rival geography of the city that counters the official map (see Appendix B) configured by capitalism. In so doing, they lay claims to their "rights to the city" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 174). Writers are very aware of the racial segregation demarcating the social boundaries of the city. They are highly policed. Their movements are surveilled. Their motives are always questioned. Graffiti is a way they challenge the spatial confinement of racial segregation.

The spatial dimension of graffiti is explored in multiple studies. For example, C. L. Anderson (2012) argued the spatial politics of graffiti writing must be understood as a response to the construction of the ghetto, the inner city, and the barrio as spaces of spatial confinement. Phillips (2019) interpreted tagging as a creative expression, deployed by youths to overcome the borders drawn around them in the hyper-segregated city of Los Angeles. Villa (2000) and Avila (1998) similarly suggested Chicanas/os appropriate the segregationist infrastructure of freeways through graffiti to convey an oppositional identity and to personalize the impersonal city visually and publicly. I build on these studies as I interpret these writers' actions as attempts to challenge their social exclusion and create ways to relate and claim the city on their own terms.

In the process of going all city, graffiti writers create meaningful sites often overlooked or discarded by the public and businesses. They are sites where writers

transform dilapidated and abandoned spaces into places of congregation and empowerment. Despite being dismissed, these cultural and social sites created in pockets of the city endure, even if they are as fugitive as the art they display.

Writers speak highly of these social sites because they are places of possibilities, where writers can affirm their identities and develop new relationships in the writing community across racial and class divisions. For working-class writers of color, the creation of these social and cultural places are ways they claim to their neighborhoods. Examining these sites can show how interracial and interethnic identities and relationships among Black and Latinx youths are constructed through art in historically disinvested communities. Although some of their initial spaces, what they call *graffiti yards* (e.g., the Belmont Tunnels, the Motor Yard), no longer exist, Black and Latinx writers continue to create and maintain social and cultural spaces throughout the Los Angeles region. One of these spaces is the popular Vermont Arts District.

The Vermont Arts District

The Vermont Arts District is a graffiti yard located in the predominantly working-class neighborhood of Westmont, a racially and economically segregated area of South Central Los Angeles. Unlike the renovated and officially designated Arts District in Downtown Los Angeles, its designation as an arts district is grassroots. The title has been assigned directly by the working-class Latino and Black graffiti writers from the area. These writers renamed the parking lot and alley that

constitute the yard, and have been meeting there since 2009 to paint alongside each other, learn from one another, and create a space of collective empowerment.

As I demonstrate in Chapter 3, the Vermont Arts District is a site where young and veteran graffiti writers from Los Angeles claim space, create a grassroots arts-based community project, and assert a sense of dignity and respect amid the reality of endemic poverty, racial and class segregation, structural marginalization, and the ongoing criminalization and policing of their communities. Grassroots graffiti sites, like the Vermont Art District, stand in stark contrast to the more institutionalized arts districts in metropolitan downtown areas of cities, which are increasingly linked to gentrification and urban displacement. I argue the creation of places like the Vermont Arts District renders visible how marginalized and criminalized youths of color from economically impoverished neighborhoods claim spaces abandoned by capitalism and overpoliced by the city. In doing so, they transform them into spaces of congregation and empowerment.

An Ambivalent Relationship Between Graffiti and Street Art

Chapter 5 critically examines the political, economic, and social context in contemporary Los Angeles, where arts and culture are increasingly commodified and intensely contested. More specifically, I examined the processes of the redevelopment of Los Angeles's Arts District, where the arts and culture were converted into a resource for the advancement of urban redevelopment and neoliberal markets. As Dávila (2020) and Yúdice (2003) argued, the arts and culture have been converted into a resource to invest and use for economic ends that perpetuate existing

inequalities; it has become central to urban economies as a fiscal source for urban growth. In the context of the Arts District, this means the graffiti aesthetic is transformed and sold as what is popularly known as street art.

Today, the combination of social media and urban redevelopment efforts result in artistic movements being repackaged into an ideal backdrop used to lure retailers trying to attract new clientele. Due to the redevelopment of Downtown Los Angeles, street artists have found new patrons: corporate sponsors and developers. For example, Carmel Partners, a real estate and investment corporation, recently hired graffiti artist 2501 for five circular works of art, inspired by Mexican culture, to be completed with the help of a nonprofit, the Do Art Foundation (Kim, 2017). These works of art were created outside of Camel Partners' new Eighth & Grand Complex, which comprises 700 apartments and a Whole Foods (Kim, 2017). In this context, nonprofits act as a means through which social inequalities among artists persist. By connecting street artists with developers looking to create a hip and attractive image for their projects, these nonprofits continue to marginalize and criminalize graffiti writers who operate on their own terms. In the process, nonprofits such as Do Art Foundation promote a new wave of street art with direct corporate backing.

In rediscovering and increasingly claiming ownership of the Arts District, nonprofits and redevelopment companies are turning decaying zones into spaces exclusively for retail markets, lofts, and condominiums. These ventures are carried out in the name of urban economic growth. Thus, political elites, economic interests, and nonprofit organizations join in partnership to produce a hip image of the city

where ethnic or urban aesthetics are transformed into hot commodities as they produce social exclusion (Greenberg, 2010; Logan & Molotch, 2007; Zukin, 2009).

In Los Angeles, the redevelopment of decaying zones into gentrified spaces involves creating Art Walks and Graffiti Art Tours, which glorify graffiti art and its aesthetics to attract middle- and upper-class hipsters to areas renovated by landed capitalists, investors, developers, nonprofit organizations, and transnational capital. In the last chapter, I critically analyze how this new urban regime amasses wealth through the commodification of graffiti and helps set the grounds for a new subjectivity—the street artist—in 21st century Los Angeles.

By employing internationally known street artists such as Shepard Fairey, projects like L.A. Freewalls have transformed the Arts District (Vankin, 2013). In the process, creative work and processes of commercialization have converged, increasing the property value of this area of the city, consequently driving processes of gentrification, and commodifying cultural practices into commercial brands. Street artists, in this context, are represented not as vandals but as innovative and trendy artists that must be included in a burgeoning market for street art. In other words, the cultural economy of cities authorizes individuals to be entrepreneurs and their productions as brands.

This process has created new boundaries between what has been the autonomous activity of producing graffiti and street art with the financial realm of commerce. It has created a permitted vandal, who aligns themselves with nonprofit and corporate backing, in opposition to the criminal vandal, who remains in the

margins of this new market. Chapter 5 highlights how the counterstory presented in Chapter 4, in which graffiti writers and street artists used their art to struggle for the public's right to public space, has been transformed by capitalism and now thrives in the branded city and in neoliberal logics of commercialization, not outside of it (Banet-Wiser, 2011). As such, graffiti writers locate the contradictions in the spaces this urban political economy has engendered and exploit them. The case of the L.A. Arts District reveals what is at stake when graffiti and street art are mobilized to reproduce the present neoliberal urban economy and inherent structural inequalities by relying on hyper-individualism, entrepreneurialism, and the commercialization of arts and culture.

Methods and Methodology

This dissertation draws from 10 months of ethnographic research, participant observations, textual analysis of graffiti art, and 30 semistructured interviews with largely Black and Latinx graffiti writers in Los Angeles. I have relied on my insider status as a retired graffiti writer who continues to have connections with active and retired graffiti writers in Los Angeles. I relied on this insider status to gain access to a highly guarded community of people and relied on data generated from the qualitative method of participant observation (Adler & Adler, 1987/2011).

The closeness and intimacy I shared with the research participants made me critically reflect on my positionality and the degree to which our personal connections affected the proposed research and defined my methodological approach (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Holstein & Gubrium, 2013; Zavella, 1993). My goal for this research

(i.e., explaining how graffiti writers make sense, navigate, or challenge the current treatment of their cultural practice as either criminal activity or cultural celebration) has far outweighed my identity as a retired graffiti writer. My position as a researcher, who is in a relatively higher position of power and tied to academic institutions, was informed by what anthropologist Trouillot (2003) called a "responsible reflexivity" (p. 115). Although scholars constitute a major source of expert knowledge, they cannot forget that knowledge produced matters much more outside than inside disciplines. In other words, my analysis takes into consideration the power relations between myself as a researcher and my research participants in the study, and how asymmetrical power relations may provide material or symbolic rewards for me but not have immediate or direct rewards for them.

Moreover, Chicana feminist research has pushed me to think critically about what Zavella (1996), drawing from Black feminist scholars, referred to as the "outsider within" (p. 56). It informs my way of approaching the complex relationship generated between ethnographic researchers and their participants to consider how my status as a "cultural insider" (Zavella, 1996, p. 70) may have resulted in several dilemmas. Rather than operating in a rigid construction of identity, a Chicana feminist approach to ethnography compelled me to deconstruct the ways I defined, and was critical of, my affiliation with graffiti writers and street artists, and the way these identities were publicly framed (Fregoso & Chabram, 1990). Being attentive to the constraints my participants may face each day has revealed how the ways they identify oftentimes mean accommodation, resistance, and/or struggle (Zavella, 1996).

My status as a scholar and researcher, who is also a retired graffiti writer, inevitably created two audiences that have required a deep sense of reflection, accountability, and sensitivity. To this end, I must be clear: This dissertation is not a historical account of graffiti in Los Angeles. Graffiti writers author and authorize their own histories, and are the major archivists of their artform. My role was to critically interpret their accounts to the best of my ability.

My ethnographic research and participant observations among this population in Los Angeles have also been guided by what Low (2014) called an “engaged anthropological approach” (p. 34) to the production and social construction of space and place that adds embodiment, taking seriously my research participants’ feelings, thoughts, and intentions, and their cultural beliefs and practices. This approach was especially important for my analysis of the Vermont Arts District, where I often heard the resounding claim of South Central; it became clear that this was one way Black and Latinx graffiti writers developed a place-based identity through shared affinity with this region of Los Angeles.

Throughout my ethnographic research with graffiti writers, I took field notes and over 300 photographs of the graffiti I encountered. I wrote analytic memos and contact summaries, which only I have accessed (Emerson et al., 2011). As a retired graffiti writer, I recruited research participants through my social networks and had those contacts refer me to potential interviewees; thus, I used the snowball sampling method. I reached out to graffiti writers through close contacts and through social media. I explained my research to prospective participants and provided them with

my contact information, including my name, email, and cell phone number. I also prompted them to share my contact information with other graffiti writers who might be interested in participating in this study.

I chose to interview graffiti writers from the city of Los Angeles rather than narrow the scope to any specific cities or neighborhoods because this opened more possibilities for my ethnographic work. This choice proved to be quite challenging, but I managed to conduct interviews with individuals from Santa Monica to South Los Angeles and to the near inland of Los Angeles. My main participants were working-class Latinos between the ages of 17–50. My interviews were semistructured and lasted 1 to 3 hours. I learned graffiti writers, especially the veterans, have a lot to share. I interviewed some graffiti writers who were active in producing graffiti and others who were retired or not as active.

Aware that my participants are part of a criminalized population persecuted by law enforcement, I conducted interviews in places where they felt safe and comfortable. Nearly all my interviews were recorded for transcription and uploaded to a secure server. In accordance with my university's Institutional Review Board, I kept my interviewees anonymous except for those who had verbally expressed their willingness for me to use their names. For interviewees who preferred to remain anonymous, I assigned them an alias and removed fact sheets containing identifiers (e.g., names, addresses) from instruments containing data after each interview. In the process of securely storing data documents, I locked the personal information of my participants in safeguarded digital locations and assigned security codes to

computerized records. Before any interviews, I asked interviewees to refrain from disclosing any information they felt would place them at risk, legal or otherwise. De-identified data (e.g., transcribed interviews, photographs of graffiti and street art, participant observation notes) were stored in encrypted Microsoft Word documents and saved on a password-protected computer.

My semistructured interviews with graffiti artists used open-ended questions to address a range of themes, including: (a) participants' knowledge of the history of graffiti in Los Angeles, their introduction to graffiti, and the longevity of their careers as graffiti writers; (b) the number of crew affiliations throughout their graffiti career; and (c) their thoughts concerning the criminalization and celebration of their cultural production. During interviews, I often asked conversational and informal questions to get the interviewees to thoroughly elaborate on key terms or phrases they mentioned.

As part of my ethnography, I have written and drawn from analytic memos, jotting nondiscursive movements and elicitations such as bodily expressions, gestures, and spontaneous or reactive movements participant made as I discussed interview content. That is, my interviews have been attuned to gesticulations, coded language, or "code-switching" (E. Anderson, 1999, p. 33), a method used by aggrieved youth of color to alter articulated perspectives, speech patterns, and mannerisms as they traverse "decent [and] street" (Bloch, 2018, p. 16) environments and audiences that can also be viewed as spatially contextualized gestures typically used to explain subcultural performances. Attention to code switching has been

significant because writers have their own lexicon with meanings tied directly to their artistic practices.

I initially used “place-based elicitation” (Bloch, 2018, p. 172) during my interviews. In interviews with graffiti writers in Los Angeles, Bloch suggested conducting interviews near places where graffiti writers have painted as a more effective way to engage than a sit-down, out-of-context interview. Bloch found the method elicited a more nuanced response from the interviewees; sitting down in a backyard or a cafe altered research participants’ answers to align more with mainstream discourses concerning graffiti. However, when the same questions were asked in or near the places they had previously painted, the answers changed and seemed more genuine.

In my own research, conducting interviews near a wall or surface my participants had painted previously did allow for many of them to replace “well-rehearsed narratives” (Bloch, 2018, p. 172) concerning why they paint, with enthusiastic elaborations. However, this method came with unexpected risks. For example, during one of my interviews with Scum, a 17-year-old Latino youth who was painting a legal graffiti wall near the Estrada Courts in East Los Angeles, we were confronted by hostile graffiti writers who were looking for their rivals. None of us were hurt in the altercation, but I had to abandon this approach after the incident. Although I agree with Bloch (2018) that place matters in terms of the effects on a respondent’s narratives, certain places proved quite dangerous to engage in interviews for myself and participants.

Throughout my interviews, I also used photo elicitation (Harper, 2002). Photo elicitation inserts photographs into a research interview to evoke deeper elements of human consciousness that interviews using words alone cannot obtain. Although elicitation studies mostly use photographs, Harper (2002) suggested studies could use public displays such as graffiti or virtually any visual image. Moreover, photo elicitation encourages collaboration between two people to discuss the meaning of the image or photographs they examine together. This idea proved true with many of my research participants, who demonstrated a level of trust when I revealed a photograph of my own work or when I would sit down and sketch a piece on a blackbook (i.e., a graffiti writer's sketchbook similar to an art portfolio) before or during an interview.

Beyond participant observations and interviews, I was interested in critically analyzing graffiti itself. Because I am interested in visually documenting, interpreting, and tracing the genealogy of graffiti writing in Southern California, part of my ethnographic research consisted of taking photographs of graffiti and street art around Los Angeles to analyze visual graffiti practices. I collected over 300 original photographs of graffiti and street art across the city. I conceptualized the photographs as visual diaries, considering and defining them as the main medium used by embodied actors who take pictures to view them from perspectives (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). In other words, I used photographs much like memo notes, which are marked by my position as a researcher in the project. In this sense, I considered photographs as visual field notes that served as data.

I also considered photographs of graffiti writing and street art as cultural texts. For the purposes of this research, I examined the ways these photographs were produced and disseminated in specific contexts, recognizing they were always embedded in systems of power. I used discourse analysis to analyze the photographs, a method used to examine discursive practices embedded in the text to unravel how a text assumes its present form, examining its process of production and distribution (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Discourse analysis was a fitting approach because it disclosed the hidden ideas embedded in written language. It focused on both language and discursive practices—the process of communication. Discourses are composed of "ideas, ideologies, and referents that systematically construct both the subjects and the objects of which they speak" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010, p. 238). In examining graffiti as text, I worked to reveal the traces of a prevailing worldview embedded in graffiti visual practices and the silences, or what is marginalized or left out of the text; that which Foucault (1980) termed "subjugated knowledges" (p. 84) and Gordon (2008) defined as that which "haunts" (p. 7) the text itself. Studying cultural texts in this way reveals how dominance is enacted by locating them in sociohistorical contexts and opens space to analyze these texts as having oppositional possibilities to existing power structures and dominant paradigms, a site where hegemony is contested, resisted, and challenged (Hall, 2019).

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1 draws from several in-person and online interviews with active and retired graffiti writers, along with a textual analysis of graffiti visual practices, to

critically examine the genealogy of graffiti in Los Angeles, specifying the lexicon used by the graffiti writers. Building from and expanding Miller's (2002) argument, which suggested graffiti writing is rooted in West African and Caribbean traditions and cultural forms, this chapter considers how Los Angeles graffiti is linked to alternative genealogical roots in Mesoamerican/Indigenous cultural forms and aesthetics that were embedded in Chicanx visual artistic practices, namely placas, barrio calligraphy, and contemporary graffiti writing. By providing a genealogy and contributions of Chicanx visual forms in Southern California, I suggest graffiti writing continues a tradition that revisits and reopens the uncertain territory between image and text, offering alternative aesthetics and ways of knowing to the western canon, and drawing connections to Mesoamerican and Indigenous glyphs. Analyzing these underexplored, rich writing traditions and the contexts in which they emerge recuperates and renders visible the ways Latinx visual culture informs present-day graffiti in Los Angeles.

Chapter 2 analyzes the ways graffiti writers culturally map the city in their attempts to go all city. This chapter underscores how, for Black and Latinx youths, graffiti is a way to transgress and challenge the borders of racial residential segregation, and the ways they make themselves visible and mobile. Although scholarship on graffiti has underscored the ways youths deploy graffiti to undermine racial segregation, this chapter highlights how they reimagine and remake the city as their own. I deploy the term illicit cartographies to underscore this cultural mapping and demonstrate how Los Angeles can be read through the prism of graffiti.

Chapter 3 is an analysis of the type of places Black and Latinx graffiti writers produce work in South Central Los Angeles. I explored the significance of legal graffiti yards like the Vermont Arts District, and I argue that, for Black and Latinx youths and veteran graffiti writers, such yards render visible how marginalized and criminalized youths transform places of devastation into places of congregation and empowerment. Indeed, the neighborhood of South Central Los Angeles has suffered greatly from institutional divestment and overpolicing. Black and Latinx youths are not immune to this treatment and conditions. Their attempts to create a legal graffiti yard is a way they take care of their own. Moreover, it demonstrates how their identities and the type of social relations they develop as graffiti writers inform their place-based identities, specifically in relation to the neighborhood they grew up in South Central. I interpret their claims to the abandoned parking lot and alleyway that constitute the Vermont Arts District as a way they exercise their freedom of expression and freedom of assembly despite having these rights thoroughly tarnished by zero-tolerance policies.

Chapter 4 critically examines another site in Los Angeles where graffiti and street art are celebrated and commodified under redevelopment and process of gentrification: the Arts District in Downtown Los Angeles. This chapter builds from my observations as a tourist in the Downtown L.A. Graffiti and Mural Art Tours and interviews with veteran graffiti writers who worked at galleries or as tour guides in the Arts District. I demonstrate how the recent transformation of the Arts District, a neighborhood covered with different forms of street art, was partially accomplished

through the struggles of graffiti writers and street artists who worked to lift the mural ban in 2013. Yet, what resulted from these efforts was not a decriminalization of graffiti but the commodification of its aesthetic under the name of street art. In so doing, certain graffiti writers and street artists have been caught in the entrepreneurialism of the arts and culture. Underscoring this point, I provide an analysis of the revamping of the *Undiscovered America* mural, which was the first mural commissioned for the Arts District in 1992. The revamping of this mural demonstrates graffiti writers' intervention in discourses that celebrate street art at the Arts District. In so doing, they critique the convergence between artistic work and its commercialization.

Chapter 2: From Barrio Calligraphy to Hip-hop Graffiti: A Latinx Genealogy of Southern California Graffiti

> *Old school is an earlier style that started before hip-hop because here in the West coast, here in Los Angeles, we had a tradition of graffiti. We had a tradition of graffiti from the Cholos, from the Pachucos, from the Latin community. So since probably the 30s and the 40s, they used to do their graffiti. It was even before the use of spray cans. It was done with the brush, and it was a delineation of your territory, and of your crew, and of your community, so it was an old school in that it was a pride of your community. You wrote for your community group, and it was a gang, but it was not gangs like we have them today. It was a gang more like a club. More like an identity. Those symbols of those times, which are half English and half Spanish, certain symbols that are in almost always German Gothic typeface. So, there is a tradition in that old school. It was always done in black and white. That was before hip-hop. Hip-hop is different. I am from that old school gang L.A. style. Graffiti from my generation, which is from the 1950s and 1960s.*
>
> —Chaz Bojórquez (Bryan, 1995, 6:42)

> *Our inspirations. A lot of it had to do with gang writing. So, a lot of gang names and certain people in different gangs came up with their style of writing. It was a gang form [of writing] that was a major influence, just all the Old English letters, calligraphy, and tattoos.*
>
> —Angst (Bryan, 1995, 6:24)

Chaz Bojórquez (2019), a veteran graffiti writer known in the community as the "godfather of Los Angeles graffiti," and Angst, a pioneer in the development of hip-hop graffiti in Los Angeles beginning in the 1980s, both noted that Southern California has a unique writing tradition, predating contemporary graffiti in Los Angeles, which has been influential and provided distinctiveness to the evolution of the movement. Exploratory studies of Chicana/o street culture and gang writing of the 1970s and 1990s (Romotsky & Romotsky, 1976) documented these writing traditions and descriptively categorized them as placas, plaqueasos, or barrio calligraphy. In this

chapter, I trace and demonstrate the genealogy and distinctiveness of this writing tradition as it appears in contemporary graffiti in Los Angeles.

The exact date and origin site of contemporary graffiti writing in the United States is unknown. The earliest inscriptions of U.S. hip-hop graffiti have been attributed to an African American teenager, Darryl McCray, who wrote his graffiti moniker, "Cornbread," in Philadelphia during the 1960s. Around the same time, Taki 183, a young Greek American graffiti writer, and Julio 204, a Puerto Rican teen, began writing their monikers in their respective neighborhoods in New York City; the numbers following their monikers indicated the neighborhoods they represented. Julio preceded Taki by a few years and limited his writing to his local neighborhood until he was arrested, which ultimately led him to stop writing graffiti. Taki, however, is said to have been the first graffiti writer to move beyond his local neighborhood and go *all city*, a term used by graffiti writers to denote the prolificacy of a particular individual in their clandestine community. Cornbread, Taki 183, and Julio 204 are popularly acknowledged as the originators of contemporary graffiti writing, which has become recognized and included as an element of hip-hop culture. They are frequently referenced in books and exhibitions as pioneers and the originators of hip-hop graffiti. However, the long tradition of graffiti writing in Southern California has been underexplored.

The graffiti writing traditions of Southern California have been documented and descriptively surveyed as placas, plaqueaasos, and barrio calligraphy, mainly through exploratory studies during the 1970s and 1990s (Romotsky & Romotsky,

1976). Placas, plaqueasos, and what is nominally termed barrio calligraphy is native to the Southern California style of graffiti writing, a writing tradition that roughly dates to the 1940s. The earliest empirical evidence of this early Southern Californian style of graffiti is recorded in the interviews Romotsky and Romotsky (1976) conducted with youth and street writing veterans in their largely exploratory study of Mexican American and Chicano gang graffiti. Their study noted the street writing practice of barrio calligraphy was blooming in the early 20th century in the predominately Mexican American communities throughout the Southwest area of the United States. Phillips (1999) also suggested Los Angeles graffiti stems from the subcultures of the Pachucas/os, young Mexican American youths who dressed in zoot suits in the postwar era. Robisch (2013) similarly documented that, as early as the 1930s, Mexican American youth working as shoeshine boys marked their territory by drawing their names on the walls at the corners where they worked in East Los Angeles. These early inscriptions later developed into a more stylized writing practice that came to be known as barrio calligraphy, placas, or plaqueasos, which predated and then rivaled the popularized New York hip-hop graffiti during the 1970s.

The genealogy of the visual aesthetics of L.A. graffiti writing is inseparable from the history of Mexican Americans and particularly Pachuca/o and Chicana/o street culture. Therefore, a brief history of the Pachucas/os and Chicana/o's artistic and cultural identity is imperative to illustrate the connections. To be clear, this section is not an attempt to provide a historical account of the Pachucas/os or Chicana/o history, but to demonstrate the originality and persistence of the street

writing traditions that originated with the Pachucas/os and Chicana/o street and gang culture in Southern California. In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the origins of this writing tradition—what Chaz called "old school" in the epigraph—and then analyze contemporary graffiti pieces that demonstrate the influence, incorporation, and persistence of this writing tradition.

I use the terms barrio calligraphy, plaqueasos, and placas interchangeably in reference to the visual elements and native writing traditions of early Pachucas/os and Chicana/o street and gang culture. I most often use the word "placas" to refer to this writing tradition. Placas comprises three predominant lettering styles: point lettering, block lettering, and loop lettering, and I use the term intentionally to stress the presence of these traditional forms of writing and to differentiate these forms from hip-hop graffiti writing. Differentiation is important because it allows me to trace the lineage of Los Angeles graffiti's unique style.

Methodologically, I conducted a close reading of fonts, alphabets, lettering styles, and images, and treated them as meaningful and symbolic texts that can be read. I deployed a critical visual methodological approach (Rose, 2014) to the graphic characteristics of contemporary graffiti to interpret and make claims about the persistence and meaning of Southern California graffiti. In the images and visual elements I analyzed and interpreted for this chapter, I drew from several in-person and online interviews with active and retired graffiti writers. In these interviews, I focused on participants' references to the origins and early development of Los Angeles graffiti, placas, and Mexican American and Chicana/o street and gang

culture symbolism. The online interviews were conducted in the process of making a low-budget, 45-minute-long documentary entitled "Graffiti Verite" (Bryan, 1995). This documentary explored the world of L.A. hip-hop graffiti using images and interviews with 24 of the most prolific graffiti writers in Los Angeles, who are now considered veterans and pioneers of the subculture.

Expanding Miller's (2002) argument, which suggested New York graffiti writing is rooted in West African and Caribbean traditions and cultural forms, this chapter considers how Los Angeles graffiti writing is linked to alternative genealogical roots in an amalgamation of diverse cultural forms and aesthetics. These diverse cultural forms and aesthetics include the use and mixture of Old English font, German Gothic Script, Roman and Italic blackletter, and reference to Mesoamerican glyphs. I suggest these writing traditions are embedded in the placas and present in contemporary graffiti writing in Southern California. I argue that examining the genealogy of Southern California graffiti writing traditions makes intelligible the intercultural elements of this practice. Thus, young, working-class Latino youths who write in this tradition revisit and open the uncertain terrain between image and text, and offer alternative aesthetics, distinct and transnational identities, and alternative ways of knowing by weaving western or European lettering forms with what they perceive as a form of Mesoamerican Indigenous glyphs. Contrary to the dominant narrative portraying these youths as vandals, my analysis underscores how young, working-class Latino youths are creative, cutting-edge producers of culture and engaged in politically and aesthetically significant meaning-making activities.

Antecedents to Contemporary Southern California Graffiti

The earliest empirical evidence and archival sources of the Southern Californian style of graffiti are captured in the interviews Romotsky and Romotsky (1976) conducted with youths and street writing veterans. Their study noted the street writing practice of barrio calligraphy was blooming in the early 20th century in predominantly working-class Mexican American communities throughout the Southwest area of the United States. Phillips (1999) suggested L.A. graffiti was originally introduced by Pachucas/os, young Mexican American youths who participated in the subculture of zoot suiters. Robisch (2013) similarly documented how, as early as the 1930s, Mexican American youth working as shoeshine boys typically made use of their tools such as the horsehair brush applicator, black polish, and some heel and sole edge colors to mark their territory by drawing their names on the walls at the corners where they worked in East Los Angeles. These early etchings developed into a stylized and sophisticated writing practice that came to be named barrio calligraphy, placas, or plaqueasos, which were contemporary to and rivaled the popularized New York hip-hop graffiti of the 1970s. Barrio calligraphy is a term that scholars (e.g., Romotsky & Romotsky, 1976; Sanchez-Tranquilino, 2019) have used to describe the old school L.A. writing style used among Mexican American and Chicana/o youths that originated from the Pachucas/os.

More broadly, the origins of placas, plaqueasos, and barrio calligraphy must be situated in the context of the great migration after the Mexican revolution began in 1910, the Great Depression in the 1930s, and the settlement of hundreds of thousands

of Mexicans from Mexico in the United States who had to create a new cultural identity in new lands (Mazón, 1984). In Los Angeles, Mexican migrants in the early 20th century were met with outright racism and institutionalized disapprobation (Molina, 2006). Hundreds of thousands of Mexicans were deported to Mexico during this period, 60% of whom were English-speaking dominant (Ngai, 2004). The creation of a new cultural identity among Mexican American youths was tied to their resistance to the nation-building projects of the United States and Mexico (Sánchez, 1995). By 1928, Los Angeles had the largest Mexican population of any city in the United States (Sánchez, 1995). The city attracted many migrant sojourners because of the increasing employment opportunities and its lively Mexican community. In their daily struggles, they came to survive in an oftentimes hostile environment where Mexican newcomers had to create a world that was shaped by their memories of the past and through the reality of their present situation. Mexican American ethnicity was not formed in isolation. It was formed through interactions with fellow Mexicans and Mexican Americans who lived in what became the Southwest of the United States for generations. Their ethnicity or racial formation formed through dialogue and disputes with larger cultural worlds of migrants from different parts of the United States and the world. Their great migration occurred at the same time as the great migration of African Americans fleeing the rural South of the United States, who also came in the thousands to the city of Los Angeles, and the arrival of a large population of Chinese migrants (Hunt & Ramón, 2010).

For Mexican sojourners who chose to stay, cultural adjustments had long-lasting implications. Becoming Mexican American meant they had to draw from new traditions and on their memories of Mexico, which was being irreversibly transformed through the modernization project of the Porfiriato (Sánchez, 1995). In the process, they had to make sense of a new world north of a border that was also undergoing rapid change. Sánchez (1995) stated:

> Nowhere was this more evident than in Los Angeles, where demographic upheaval meant that most residents were newcomers little versed in the culture of the region they now inhabited. In the United States, new traditions had to be invented and older customs were disregarded or radically transformed while Mexicans in Mexico were creating "traditions" to cement national identity. (p. 10)

The origins of placas, plaqueasos, and barrio calligraphy were an important part of the process of forging this new cultural identity among Mexican American youths who would participate in the zoot suit subculture as Pachucas/os.

The U.S. Southwest has been the locus of profound and complex interactions between various cultures in the United States across history and has been continuously overlooked (Sánchez, 1995). The struggle to forge a new cultural identity relational to the diverse migrant groups and internal migrant groups of African Americans was ongoing in the 1930s and 1940s. It is no coincidence that youths were the chief producers of a rich writing tradition in this era. They created and refashioned letters, words, and languages out of Spanish and English, often blending the two to create a new form of expression. Stylish inscriptions imitative of Old English letters, improvised Gothic font, and new letter formations fashioned an exclusive lexicon that formed the foundations of barrio street writing tradition in the

1940s. These new forms of expressions demonstrated the adjustment and appropriation of traditions and languages Mexican American youths learned in the United States, which had to be appropriated and reinvented in conjunction with the radical transformation of older customs and the Spanish language, which was already infused with certain Indigenous (e.g., Nahuatl) words and meanings.

These writing traditions largely developed from and are attributed to Mexican American youths who identified as Pachucas/os. R. J. Gonzalez (1988) stated: "The term [Pachuco] seems to have been applied colloquially to Mexican American youths and their families coming from El Paso on the crest of one of the great migration waves to California in the early [1920s]" (p. 75). During World War II, Mexicans wearing zoot suiters experienced violent repression, resulting in their marginalization from U.S. society and their criminalization as racialized and deviant others (Mazón, 1984; Ramírez, 2009). Pachucas/os, a particular group with a distinct "creole language" (R. J. Gonzalez, 1988, p. 75), originated in the underworld of drug trafficking in the inland port of El Paso, Texas. Their language and culture evolved from an overlapping point of contact between American, Mexican, and Indigenous (Nahuat) cultures. The Pachuca/o subculture's existence and manifestation as a diasporic identity throughout the U.S. Southwest were largely due to transgressing U.S. Anglo-Saxon and Mexican nationalist projects. Pachucas/os found themselves exiled from their mother country and forced to engage with different, often antithetical, standards of "language, psychology, and values" (R. J. Gonzalez, 1988, p. 77).

The period following World War I and the Mexican Revolution (i.e., 1910–1920) was marked by great social unrest and extreme poverty and worsened by the fall of international markets (R. J. Gonzalez, 1988). This period correlated with an unprecedented migration of Mexican migrants to the United States, and the immigrants fell into two groups. The first and largest group consisted of newly liberated and uprooted peons and lower-class laborers (e.g., hacienda workers, mule drivers, small farm owners, bricklayers, craftsmen) who brought with them a body of tradition and ways of living from Mexico. The second group was composed of generals, politicians, business and professional men, aristocrats, and intellectuals who were uprooted and lost holdings of land and wealth in the political turmoil (Sánchez, 1995). One group was highly literate in Spanish and the other did not have the economic means or public institutions to become fully literate in either Spanish or English.

The second and wealthier group preserved its Spanish language intact, but the other was left without formal education and were unable to identify with what was imagined as a U.S. culture, namely English-speaking and Anglophone culture, or with upper-class Mexicans. They modified their faulty Spanish, fractured by regional dialects, into a broader slang to talk with one another, drawing heavily from underworld vernacular. It is this slang that became what R. J. Gonzalez (1988) referred to as a “creole language” (p. 78), creatively developed by Mexican American youths who identified as Pachucas/os. Their dialect was referred to as Caló. Caló was a language used by Spanish gypsies and bullfighters and is often recognized as

Hispanicized English or Anglicized Spanish. It is a dialect composed of words of pure invention interspersed with words from Nahuatl, archaic Spanish, and English (R. J. Gonzalez, 1988).

The spread of Caló became common with the migration of large groups from El Paso, Texas to Los Angeles, California by 1943. The Pachucos of the 1940s in Los Angeles formed gangs, which resembled teen clubs rather than the violent groups often associated with the term today. R. J. Gonzalez (1988) stated:

> The pachucos were a force that moved rapidly from El Paso west and quickly spread their jargon throughout that part of the United States. . . . That the Pachuco subculture and language spouted at the exact point of contact between the two cultures is not surprising. It was, in fact, a hybrid not only of two distinct cultures but rather three. To a large extent, its existence and spread are due to the mutual repellence of two subcultures that found themselves exiled from their mother culture [Mexico] and forced to mingle with another one different and often antithetical to theirs in language, psychology, and values [in the United States]. (pp. 76–77)

The Pachucas/os developed a transnational identity that merged different cultures to develop a new one.

During the same time as the Pachucas/os developed their identities, Mexican American youths who worked as shoeshine boys in East Los Angeles used their horsehair brush applicators, black polish, and some heel and sole edge colors to mark their territory and protect their corners by painting their names on the walls where they worked (Robisch, 2013). What began as a visual way to fend off or inform competitors, who would otherwise take their clientele, developed into the highly stylized placas or plaqueasos that Pachucas/os in Los Angeles mastered through their use of Old English script (Phillips, 2009; Ramírez, 2009). The earliest form of graffiti

in Southern California is inextricably linked to the highly stylized plaqueasos and placas working-class Mexican American youths later painted east of the Los Angeles River in the early 20th century.

Eastside street gangs of the 1940s, which included White Fence and Barrio Maravilla, marked their turf with graffiti (Michonsky, 2008). Barrio street writers named these inscriptions plaqueasos or placas, a slang word derived from the Spanish word placa, meaning a plaque or sign. These placas demarcated affiliation with a particular family. Related graffiti was written publicly in barrios throughout the Southwest region of the United States, including in cities such as El Paso and San Antonio; however, Los Angeles was the center and arguably the birthplace of the highly stylized plaqueaso (Romotsky & Romotsky, 1976). The words plaqueasos and placas were used interchangeably in barrio street language to speak of the stylish and distinctive signatures painted or etched on walls by Mexican American youth. By the 1970s, Chicano youth distinguished three calligraphic alphabet styles that stood out in these traditions of writing: (a) point lettering, (b) block lettering, and (c) loop lettering (Romotsky & Romotsky, 1976). More individualized inscriptions that resembled yet diverged from traditional placas began to appear in the 1970s; these were defined as "eccentric lettering" (Romotsky & Romotsky, 1976, p. 21). The first two forms of lettering provide the basis for my analysis in the following sections.

Point Lettering

The best example of a lettering style that distinguishes L.A. graffiti from other styles is point lettering, which draws its form from the Old English font, specifically

the blackletter and Gothic script (see Figure 1). Old English lettering varies, and graffiti writers most often use Gothic typeface or blackletter print. Throughout this section, I use the terms point lettering and point alphabet interchangeably, and references to the Old English alphabet and Old English script, font, and print are also used interchangeably to describe these prototypes of the point lettering style.

Figure 1

An Old English Capital L for the Lomas Groups

Note. From "Los Angeles Barrio Calligraphy," by J. Romotsky and S. Romotsky, 1976, p. 22. Copyright 1976 by Dawsons Book Shop.

Old English font graffiti is the oldest of the barrio calligraphic alphabets appropriated and stylized by Pachucas/os (Romotsky & Romotsky, 1976). In the Old English blackletter fonts painted by Pachucas/os, the letters are always in black and white and generally meet at specific points. They are usually written in uniform size and omit the rules of capitalization. Each letter is constant, steady, even, identical to one another, and matching in style. The font was usually executed with a thick stroke that funneled into a thin line painted horizontally (see Figure 2). There is an angularity to the Old English alphabet that makes the letters complex and nearly unintelligible to outsiders of this writing tradition. Thick strokes are often painted vertically and diagonally and thin strokes are often painted and emphasized horizontally or as they move horizontally. Fine points meet at the end of each letter, or they sometimes take a circular form. These conventions are found within contemporary graffiti writing in Los Angeles.

Figure 2

Diagram Comparing the Point Letters of Jesse's Plaqueasos to Old English Letters

The authors' diagram comparing the Point letters of Jesse's plaqueaso to traditional Old English letters

Note. From "Los Angeles Barrio Calligraphy," by J. Romotsky and S. Romotsky, 1976, p. 23. Copyright 1976 by Dawsons Book Shop.

Sensa's (pronounced Sensei) individualized and eccentric lettering of the Old English font in his graffiti piece is an example of the influence of Old English lettering and point lettering on contemporary Los Angeles graffiti. Sensa has been writing for several years and almost always incorporates the traditional Old English font in his work as a way to pay respect to the early forms of graffiti writing in Southern California. Sensa painted a legal graffiti piece at an open painting event in the alleys of Pico-Union in July 2018 (see Figure 3). The event was organized by a group called the Ktownwallz Project.

Figure 3

"Sensa" by Sensa at the Koreatown Walls Paint Event, 2018

Note. Original photo taken by author.

Sensa's piece demonstrates the way Old English lettering merges with what is usually categorized as New York or hip-hop graffiti. In this piece, Sensa altered the Old English font to adhere to certain hip-hop graffiti conventions. For example, Sensa selected primary colors instead of the traditional black and white typical of Old English lettering to fill in the letters. The variations of blue hues add color, vibrancy, and a sense of depth to each letter. The navy blue at the edges of the letters, the true blue that fills each letter, and the light blue at the center of each letter provide a gradation effect unusual to Old English fonts and most closely resemble the fill ins from hip-hop graffiti. The contrasting colors (e.g., blue and white or blue and light yellow) add texture and contour to the Old English-based piece.

Moreover, the outer dimensions that circumscribe and border the blue fill-in letters constitute what many graffiti writers call *drop shadows* or a 3D (i.e., three-dimensional) effect. When painting a piece, graffiti writers consciously decide where the imagined light source comes from to decide where to insert a 3D effect. In Sensa's piece, the incoming light he envisioned came from the top-right corner, placing the shadows at the bottom left. This feature gives the piece depth and makes the image stand out in the foreground.

Another exemplar piece of the use and variation of Old English font, specifically blackletter, is entitled *Teen Angel* and was executed by Chaka and Doner in 2015 (see Figure 4). This piece resembles a placa and it is most likely a tribute to the Chicano lowrider magazine *Teen Angels*, which popularized Chicano gangs, prison art, and street culture. It was painted illegally at the Sereno Yard, a graffiti train yard located in the predominantly working-class Latinx neighborhood of El Sereno, east of Downtown Los Angeles.

Figure 4

"Teen Angel" by Chaka and Doner in El Sereno Yard, 2018

Note. Original photo taken by author.

Chaka and Doner are graffiti writers who began their careers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Chaka is one of the most popular graffiti writers in Los Angeles and has been arrested, charged, and convicted for graffiti vandalism. He became a street celebrity among his peers in the 1990s and then famous among the general public when his name made the newspapers and news television broadcasting after allegedly tagging an elevator at the courthouse immediately after being released from jail. Doner grew up in the predominantly working-class and Latinx neighborhood of East Los Angeles, and is a graffiti veteran who has contributed significantly to the development of graffiti in Los Angeles.

Teen Angel is representative of a traditional placa showcasing the Old English script. The lettering techniques and visual references to Chicana/o gang and street

culture are evident in their piece. Unlike Sensa, the letters spelling out Teen Angel are filled with black aerosol paint and their form clearly resembles the blackletter Old English font. The first letter in both Teen and Angel are capitalized and are more stylized than the following lowercase letters. The Old English letters used in this piece change the Roman curved letter into an angular one, emphasizing angles instead of curves. No 3D or shadows appear on this piece. Instead, the graduation of black paint closely resembling a dark grey provides uniformity and proportionality, which allows the letters to stand out and demand attention.

Moreover, the piece is decorated with Chicana/o street and gang symbols originally used by Pachucas/os. For example, the spider webs located right below and on the upper-left side of Teen and the black widow painted in all black on the upper-right side of the wall next to Angel are popular references to Chicana/o street writing. Romotsky and Romotsky (1976) discussed the significance of this symbol:

> The most regularly appearing of these symbols is the spider, specifically the black widow. The spider has the same symbolism as the number thirteen, which often is written directly on the spider or on an adjacent web. Like thirteen, the arachnoid is associated with drugs, danger, and death. (p. 52)

Another symbol that references and pays respect to both Pachuca/o and Chicana/o street and gang influence is the monumental cross located on the far left of the piece. Highly decorative with black hints of shades, the ascending design progresses upward from the three-tiered pedestal that reads R.I.P (i.e., rest in peace). The cross has a 3D design distinctive to hip-hop graffiti 3D. The imagined light emits from the upper-right corner and the shadows are painted accordingly to the bottom left, but only at each corner where the letters run perpendicular. The triangular shapes

at the four corners of the cross represent sacred power over the wall and demand respect for the listed dead. A closer look at the monumental cross also reveals cracks that stand as a testament to perseverance, endurance, and determination. Figure 5 provides a visual example of this symbolic connection between early Chicana/o street symbols with Chaka and Doner's *Teen Angel*.

Figure 5

A Monumental Cross Representing the Lomas Group in South San Gabriel

A monumental cross representing the Lomas group in South San Gabriel

Note. From "Los Angeles Barrio Calligraphy," by J. Romotsky and S. Romotsky, 1976, p. 58. Copyright 1976 by Dawsons Book Shop.

The rest of the decorative symbolism in the *Teen Angel* piece illustrates the writer's knowledge of and respect for Pachuca/o and Chicana/o street and gang culture. The three triangular dots adjacent to the monumental cross, for example, stands for "mi vida loca," which translates to "my crazy life," a form of expression often linked to Chicana/o gang life. The tags on the far-left side of the piece represent a roll call similar to Chicana/o gang rosters. The tags on the far left are examples of a variety of point lettering, mainly square lettering that is usually drawn using straight letters with the upper and lower parts of the letters at about 90 degree angles. The lines in the letter run straight from the top down and left to right with almost no bending or curving. The point lettering places emphasis on the rectangular shape and design of the letters.

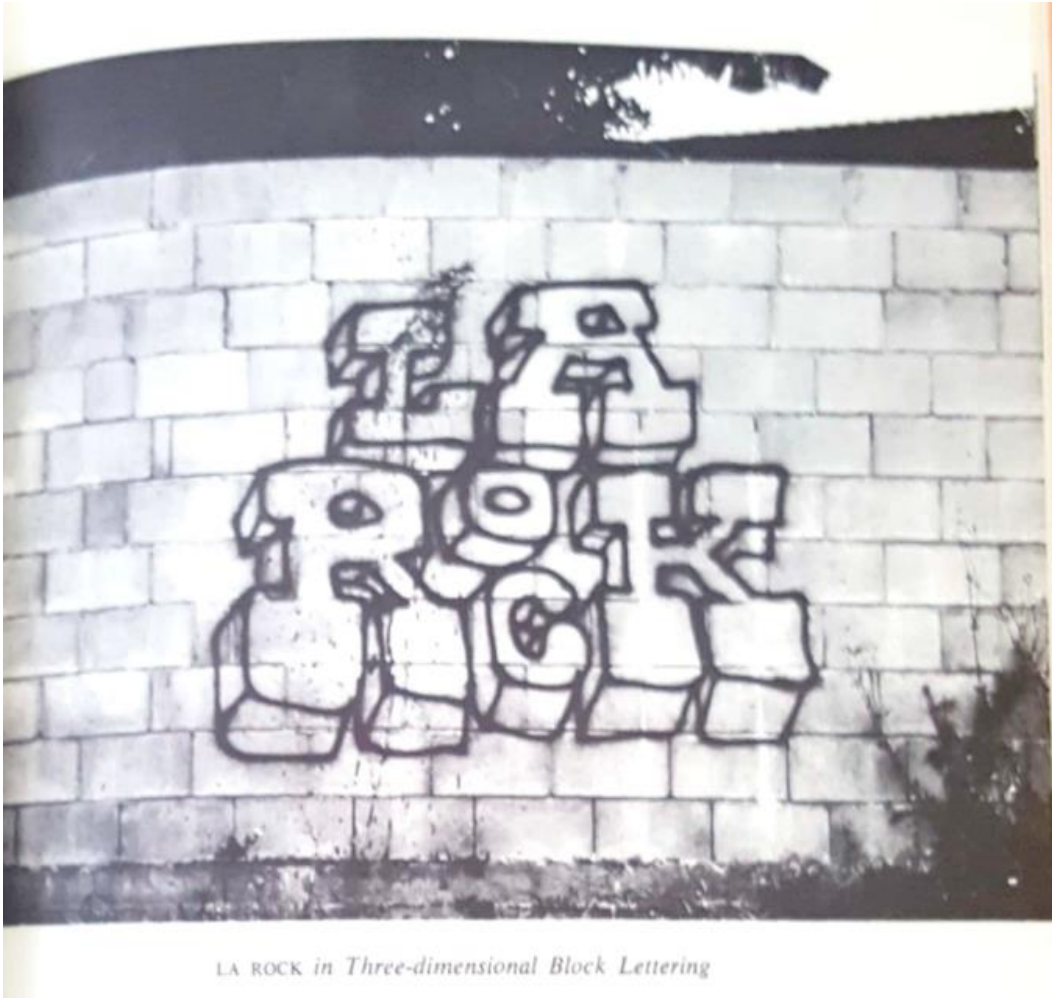
Block Lettering

Block lettering style is the second most distinctive lettering form of earlier Pachuca/o and Chicana/o gang and street culture. This lettering style emphasizes the thickness and blockiness of letters rather than the thick and single thin line emphasized in point lettering and in Old English font. The outline of black letters may or may not be filled in with color. They are usually painted in black and white, or some variation of silver and black. Some block letterings combine rectangular thickness with single thin lines to create a clear discrepancy in the form of the letters. Doing so maintains the viewer's attention on the thickness of each letter.

Block letters differ from Old English and point lettering because they are composed of sturdy and rectangular shapes that rarely include some curvature and angular elements (see Figure 6). As Figure 6 demonstrates, this style is less decorative and does not contain the same sense of exclusivity as Old English letters; rather, they are bold, thick, and quickly read, and this immediacy is their principal effect. The letters are often flat and straight from all angles, massive, and simpler to master. Advanced graffiti writers will add additional features to their lettering to distinguish their particular styles and to demonstrate their mastery over the letter form. A few examples help locate the influences of this type of Chicana/o graffiti font on contemporary Los Angeles graffiti (see Figure 7).

Figure 6

LA ROCK in Three-Dimensional Block Lettering



Note: From “Los Angeles Barrio Calligraphy,” by J. Romotsky and S. Romotsky, 1976, p. 29. Copyright 1976 by Dawsons Book Shop.

Rakl (pronounced Rakel), for example, is one of the many graffiti writers who incorporate the block letter tradition into her writing. Her piece displays mastery over the block lettering style. The lettering styles she prefers are straight, bold lines and an

easy-to-read script, which makes block lettering a preferable style of lettering for piecing and tagging her name.

Figure 7

Rakl in an Unknown Location, 2021

Note. Rakl [@_rudegirl__]. (2021, January 19). [Photograph with no caption]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CKPGaaDMGWA/

Rakl's letters are straight from each angle. Each letter is thick and flat from the top and from the bottom. The fillings in the letters are silver and black with blue, brick-like paintings as the background. Each letter is outlined using firm straight lines, and she has added an all-black 3D or drop shadow to her piece, representative of both hip-hop graffiti and the block letter style. The decorative touch on her piece consists of several black lines that cut through the letters A, K, and L, giving the viewer the impression that the letters are made of stone, and may be old but are still

standing. The letters stand upright and seem to be grounded, almost planted, on the ground.

A few decorative touches in the first and last letter of Rakl's piece demonstrate her symbolic reference to Chicana/o street and gang culture. The spider web at the bottom left corner of the letter R is similar to the spider webs painted on Chaka's and Doner's *Teen Angel*, which historically represent drugs, danger, and death. These representations are not literal. The spider webs are symbolic and serve as visual poetics that transmit a message of the rough life many working-class and racially marginalized peoples experiences. A critical reading of the symbols prompts the reader to connect these representations to larger processes that create economic inequity, political disenfranchisement, and social marginalization. Poverty, unequal political representation, and racial discrimination create unfavorable and dangerous conditions in working-class and impoverished communities.

By incorporating blocks into their designs, Chicana/o and Latina/o writers, like Rakl, visually reference the Indigenous temples of the original inhabitants of the Americas (Robisch, 2013). Thus, the block letter technique signals an integration of a particular Chicana/o or Latina/o aesthetic by referencing Indigenous civilization in the Americas. Despite being born out of Chicana/o gang culture, block lettering allows Chicanas/os Latinas/os to share their history and cultural roots publicly and visually with surrounding communities (Robisch, 2013).

Moreover, the three pyramid-like dots at the bottom right corner of the letter L are also a reference to the Pachuca/o and Chicana/o street and gang symbols. Like

Chaka's and Doner's piece, the three dots represent the vernacular expression of "mi vida loca." Mi Vida Loca should not be interpreted as a personal affirmation of Rakl's life. Instead, it signals the macro structural systems of inequality, like racism, capitalism, and patriarchy, that produce endemic poverty and subsequently incite interpersonal violence among working-class communities of color.

Another example of block lettering in contemporary L.A. graffiti is the piece entitled *Los Angeles*, painted in 2010 by the graffiti crew OFA (see Figure 8). OFA is one of the oldest graffiti crews in Los Angeles, created in the late 1980s by Mexican American and Central American youths in the predominantly working-class and Latinx neighborhood of Pico-Union. The acronym has multiple meanings, although graffiti writers usually know the crew by its original name: Out Fucking Around. The aerosol mural, or production in graffiti writing vernacular, was a collaboration by several of their crew members and has letters inspired by traditional placas done in block lettering form.

Figure 8

Lettering in the "Los Angeles" Aerosol Mural at the Arts District, 2010

Note. Photo was taken by the author in 2018.

OFA's *Los Angeles* piece has several visual elements that combine traditional L.A. street writing of block letters and hip-hop graffiti techniques. Like Rakl's piece in Figure 8, each letter is flat on the top and bottom. The letters are blocky, thick, and rectangular with a few relatively thin lines to accentuate the broad and robust character of the letters. The dark blue lines outlining each letter are firm and thick. This effect provides the letters with an aura of durability, resiliency, and sturdiness. In block lettering fashion, the lines that outline Los Angeles are somewhat angular to provide an impression of curvature. The white paint that glosses where some of the angular lines meet in each letter is a traditional hip-hop graffiti technique. This technique provides a shine and contrasts the roughness of the cracked letters with the

impression of a smooth surface. It is a superficially attractive appearance that demands attention and brings focus to the angular aspect of the piece. Most writers add the gloss technique toward the end to polish the letters and perfect the piece.

Like Rakl's block lettering, the letters in the *Los Angeles* piece are solidly filled with silver paint with added details resembling open cracks. The cracks on each letter are more elaborate than in Rakl's piece, yet they similarly mean endurance, durability, and perseverance, and provide the impression that the letters are built of stone. It looks like the silver paint in the letters is falling off the wall. In the cracks are decorations, including all-white stencils of Los Angeles and marijuana leaves on a brownish and brick-like surface.

The graffiti writers chose for OFA to have an alternative meaning for the piece: "Our Fallen Angel." As illustrated in Figure 9, the name is painted at the very far left of the mural in a highly stylized cursive form. The tag "Our Fallen Angel" is stylistically spray painted next to an image of a nude and tattooed angelic woman who wears a rose in her hair. The cursive tag is wedged between a wooden fence (referencing homes and community), a lowrider car (serving as a visual signal to Chicana/o lowriding and street culture), and an image of a freeway and palm trees (signaling the city of Los Angeles).

Figure 9

Skyline in the "Los Angeles" Aerosol Mural at the Arts District, 2010

Note. Photo was taken by the author in 2018.

In a study of Chicana/o expressive culture and literature, Villa (2000) examined how barrios were targets for urban restructuring and how expressive culture became a site of material and symbolic production to challenge the erasure and displacement wrought by ceaseless Anglo-capitalist restructuring of urban space in Los Angeles. Villa situated Chicana/o literature within the field of urban studies to examine the dialectic of socio-spatial repression, which he terms *barrioization*, and the tactics of socio-spatial resistance by Chicanos/as, which he terms *barriology*. Barrioziation is defined as "a complex of dominating social processes originating outside of the barrios" (Villa, 2000, p. 5). Villa argued the Chicana/o cultural productions have challenged policies that have encroached on, impoverished, and

historically displaced aggrieved Chicana/o communities, and how tactics, including graffiti, became a way for youths in these communities to challenge the machinations of "capitalist urbanism" (Villa, 2000, p. 11).

As a cultural expression of barriology, Villa suggested graffiti was a part of a larger cultural form of resistance to the building of massive freeways that cut through poor and working-class Chicanx neighborhoods in East Los Angeles. Serving as more than just a form of resistance, graffiti became a way to secure lines of communication and continue building community in the aftermath of freeway constructions and city redevelopment. Thus, the freeways played an important role in the creation of this aerosol mural and how it is tied to the imaginings of Chicanx and Latinx graffiti writers keeping communities together.

A silhouette of the city skyline in the background of the letters is representative of Los Angeles. These symbols include the skyscrapers of downtown Los Angeles immediately behind the letters, the palm trees at the upper and lower corners of the piece, the all-white Hollywood sign spray painted at the upper right corner behind the silhouette of mountains, and the police helicopter at the upper right corner with its light flashing as it patrols the city.

Lastly, the roll call of artists painted in all white at the furthest right of the *Los Angeles* piece is indicative of the influence and incorporation of the traditional placa design (see Figure 10). At the far right of the piece is a list that resembles a gang roster, popularly known as a roll call, which is a stylized list of the members of the OFA crew. The roll call is a single-crew palimpsest. The tagging style draws

similarities with the loop lettering of placas. Each letter is consistent with the style, which provides the list with consistency and uniformity. Similar to Chicana/o gang rosters, a single person—usually the most skilled—takes the responsibility of tagging the names on the wall and the roll call is written vertically and resembles a historical tablet. “Somos,” written at the very top of the roll call, roughly translates to “we are” in English. It is a formal introduction to the list of the crew. The names in OFA’s roll call are all written in capital letters except for a few, such as the A in Kalm and in Blax, which are written in lowercase but given the same proportionality as a capital letter. Each name is separated by three dots that represent Mi Vida Loca.

Figure 10

Roll Call in the "Los Angeles" Aerosol Mural at the Arts District, 2010

Note. Photo was taken by the author in 2018.

The names on the roll call are of Keve, Chris, Kalm, Luis, Cyber, Sakoe, Ch1no (whose I is replaced with a 1 for stylistic variation), Rech, Skan, Fess (with the F facing the opposite direction), Tilt, Scare, Edge, Foam (also with the F facing the opposite direction), Worm, Three, Oldschool, Blax, Guero, Boon1es (also with 1 replacing the I), and Cr1se (also with the 1 replacing the I). The year next to the roll call indicates when the piece and crew roll call were painted. Additionally, the grey

skull with one eye located at the bottom of the right side of the piece is also a symbol related to traditional placas; skulls in Mexican and Mexican American traditions refer to life after death.

Conclusion

As I demonstrated in this chapter, Chicana/o street writing traditions are embedded in the placas and present in contemporary graffiti writing in Southern California. I argued that examining the genealogy of Southern California graffiti writing traditions makes intelligible the intercultural elements embedded in Los Angeles graffiti writing. In this way, young and working-class Latino youths engage in a tradition of writing that revisits and opens the uncertain terrain between image and text, offering alternative aesthetics, distinct and transnational identities, and producing alternative ways of knowing that weave in western or European lettering forms with Mesoamerican Indigenous glyphs. Although these writing traditions emerged as a particular local phenomenon, situated in Chicana/o and Latina/o barrios, the merging of New York or hip-hop graffiti with this writing tradition began in the 1980s. Understanding why this phenomenon began appearing outside of these specific spaces is discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Going All City: Black and Latinx Graffiti Writers Cultural Mapping of Los Angeles

> *I think there is only one definition of "All City." It is pretty simple. All the major freeways, bus lines and streets in the range in the greater L.A. area. This is Pomona or the 57 fwy to the east. As far north as the 118 fwy. South all the way to long beach and west as far as the 1 hwy. If you do not have this whole major L.A. area on lock then you are NOT all city. You might be all Downtown or all Hollywood or even all metro. You might even [be] up as fuck, freeway bomber, but you are not all city till you go ALL CITY! The people that have done this or come close are MINER, WISK, SER, CHAKA, OILER, TOLSE (almost), and GKAE. There have been a few honorable mentions since then. AYER could have reached it, if he hadn't pass[ed] away. But all these cats claiming "All City" may be up in some areas, but they forgot about the "ALL" in "All City." It ain't easy. That is why so few have reached that level.*
>
> —Fishe (*Skate All Cities* Interview, 2019)

Going *all city* is the term young, working-class Latino and Black graffiti writers use to express their desire and willingness to be the most prolific member of the clandestine graffiti writing community. It is at once a means and an end because it encompasses a set of methods youths use and a goal they seek to achieve. To go all city, writers travel across the geographical terrain of Los Angeles to place their moniker across the city and claim it as their own. They walk, climb, hop fences, drive, take the bus, ride their bikes, and are generally on the move to tag, bomb, piece—in short, to express who they are and demonstrate what they can achieve. In this way, youths of color who produce graffiti step audaciously over and around the structural boundaries of racial and class segregation that attempt to keep them, and others like them, in "their place," both figurative and literally (C. L. Anderson, 2012; Caldeira, 2000; Davis, 1990/2006; Phillips, 2019). Constant tagging, slap-tagging, and bombing are the most common ways that youths of color who produce graffiti

achieve this goal. If achieved, these youths become recognized by members of their writing community as kings of their aerosol kingdom (Miller, 2002). As Fishe explained in the epigraph, going all city in Los Angeles is far from easy. One reason why so few have reached this goal is the structural violence and systemic repression city officials and police agencies have subjected working-class youths of color, in general, and graffiti writers, over time (Austin, 2002; Dickinson, 2008; Ferrell, 1996; Iveson, 2010).

The stakes for going all city in Los Angeles are inflected by the social and material conditions of immobility and invisibility that working-class Latino and Black people face in an era of racial and class inequality, broken windows policing, and mass incarceration since the 1980s. For instance, the Los Angeles Almanac (2021) reported Los Angeles operates the largest jail system in the United States. Young people who produce graffiti risk getting caught and required to pay a hefty fine, being charged and convicted for a violent and felony crime, and some risk deportation. Immobility for people living in racially segregated and working-class neighborhoods, like South Central Los Angeles, means having low job prospects, having every movement be heavily policed, and suffering from disinvestment in social services for decades. Youths from these neighborhoods often face racial discrimination, and their movements are closely monitored by the police and local gangs. The ideological hegemony of broken windows policing and zero-tolerance policies have turned minor crimes like vagrancy, loitering, and vandalism into the reasons for the decline in

urbanity as opposed to governmental neglect and the endemic crisis inherent in capitalism.

To police authorities and outsiders, graffiti is often viewed as a signal and symbol of crime and urban decay; however, to writers, graffiti is a system of knowledge and a form of space making that expresses writers' identities and subjectivities. Going all city is a way youths move throughout the city with purpose; it is a way to become mobile and visible in a context that often produces just the opposite for many of them. Through the constant bombardment of tags, bombs, pieces, and slap-tags that writers throw up throughout the city, they resist the spatial injustice (Soja, 2010) imposed on them by structural arrangements they do not control. These structural arrangements include: (a) the racial and class segregation that has been enforced through an interstate freeway system and as a result of years of redlining and discriminatory housing policies (Avila, 2004; Lipsitz, 2011; Villa, 2000), (b) the underfunding of educational services and the ongoing impoverishment and divestments of working-class neighborhoods abandoned by capitalism and the state (Gilmore, 2007; Greenberg, 2009), (c) years of racial discrimination and disproportionate incarceration of Black and Latino youths (Davis, 1990/2006; Gibbons, 2018; Hernández, 2017; Wacquant, 2016), and (d) the undisputed corporate use of public space that persistently imposes and maintains a consumer culture via largely illegal advertisement through billboards. But more than just resisting these spatial arrangements, writers create.

Through graffiti, young people create alternative and transgressive identities, long-lasting and meaningful social relationships, and cultural spaces where they paint and congregate with one another. Going all city is one way that these identities, social relations, and cultural spaces are constructed and fortified. "Going all city" may be a popular term that writers use among each other, but it is also a conceptual tool through which we can see and critically read the making of illicit cartographies, the process through which metropolitan cities are reimagined and produced by people's unauthorized cultural practices. In other words, going all city is a way to comprehend how writers produce and affirm their transgressive cultural identities to each other and transform their relationship with the city. This process takes shape through multiple spatial scales ranging from the personalization of a tag to the representation of that identity on the built infrastructure to the moving objects that take a person's identity throughout the city. This process is seldom seen or recognized by outsiders, yet they are very clearly mapped by those who produce and critically read the graffiti throughout the city.

Scholars have examined how the concept of going all city is a way that youths transgress and challenge racial residential segregation (C. L. Anderson, 2012; Bloch, 2019a; Dickinson, 2008). My analysis contributes to these studies by broadening this concept to include the forms in which writers remake the city through their physical movement, the movement of their tags and pieces, and how they constitute a reimaging of the city. In other words, I define going all city as a spatial imaginary

enacted by young, working-class Black and Latinx people involved in the subculture of graffiti that offers an alternate way of seeing, being, and knowing the city.

To be all city, writers must be "up" all over, and their tags, bombs, and pieces must travel from one end to the other. As this chapter demonstrates, this process takes shape at different spatial scales. One of these scales involves people's physical movement from one place to another, which requires a reliable means of transportation. A second spatial scale consists of the movement of a writer's identities via their tags through objects, like etching a moniker on a bus, metro rail train, or a freight train that will travel from one part of the city to the next. A third scale involves objects where writers practice, preserve, and share their lettering styles and skills. One such item is the blackbook. Like tags on buses or pieces in trains, a writer's work on blackbooks travels from one writer's possession to another. In some cases, these blackbooks travel beyond the city into various states and across national borders. Examining these spatial scales helps us appreciate the conceptual value of going all city and explore the alternate mapping of the city by youths who engage in unconventional and criminalized activities.

The first section of this chapter examines the political, economic, and social context young graffiti writers in Los Angeles must traverse and how they have structured the terrain of struggle in Los Angeles. In this section, I suggest the significance of going all city becomes intelligible once we comprehend how these factors have structured the terrain that young and working-class Latino and Black men in Los Angeles had to navigate. The second section centers on the busing of

students to different schools across the city, and how young people began their subcultural careers as graffiti writers through the socialization by the people that they met at school and at graffiti yards. It demonstrates how writers reappropriate moving objects and personalize the impersonal and sprawling city of Los Angeles through graffiti writing. The third section focuses on bombing missions, which I suggest are important ways writers demonstrate an alternate mapping of the city. In the fourth section, I discuss and analyze the data presented throughout the chapter.

The Terrain of Struggle

The political, economic, and social transformations of Los Angeles between the late 1970s to the 1990s was the context in which the notion of going all city was first articulated by young, working-class Black and Latinos in the graffiti subculture (Grody, 2006). By understanding this context, including the restructuring of the global economy, the failure of Black leadership amid social disorder, the demographic transformation of Los Angeles by Latino migrants, and the struggles to desegregate public schools through mandatory school busing, scholars can comprehend the political, social, and cultural significance of going all city.

Politically, the large gains won by Black social movements and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s were weakened by processes of deindustrialization, austerity, and mass disinvestment of working-class communities, among other factors (Robinson, 2010). For example, although the 1968 Fair Housing Act opened new areas of the Los Angeles region for Black, Latino, and Asian American people to reside and inhabit, neighborhoods across Los Angeles County

remained segregated by race and class (Cheng, 2013; Hunt & Ramón, 2010). The outlawing of restrictive covenants, like *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948) by the U.S. Supreme Court, encouraged an out-migration among Black Angelenos from their historic region in Central Avenue to the Crenshaw and Leimert Park District while middle- and upper-middle-class Black residents moved to Baldwin Hills and the Westside of Los Angeles (Robinson, 2010). The judicial gains and political representation, along with a general openness to Black homebuyers in the larger Los Angeles metropolitan area, opened up at a time when two distinct and related problems began to unfold in working-class Black and Latinx communities: growing concern over social disorder that correlated with mass austerity and governmental neglect, and a "crisis in Black leadership" (Robinson, 2010, pp. 45–46).

The crisis in Black leadership in Los Angeles refers to the first elected Black mayor of the city in the 1970s, Thomas Bradley, who failed to provide necessary financial investment in neglected neighborhoods and areas where working-class Black and Latino communities lived, although he advocated for and accomplished projects for white voters and local business elites in Downtown and the Westside (Davis, 2006). When it came to issues concerning Black and Latino communities, Bradley was characterized as politically timid, and acted as a mediator and arbitrator about racial problems, avoiding controversial issues related to race and class. In other words, he often evaded serious conversations concerning equity, racial justice, and transformative change. Any decision to benefit the predominantly working-class and impoverished Black and Latino sectors of Los Angeles was seen as controversial.

And even though he came from humble origins, his ties to Los Angeles business interests transformed him into a symbol of the growing bourgeois elements in Los Angeles's Black community. Yet, the symbolic value he gave to Black voters and other racialized communities, as one of their own, allowed Bradley and his administration to remain in power for 2 decades, even as he failed to act on important issues affecting working-class Black and Latino constituents. Two issues are particularly important and relevant for this chapter: (a) The discourse of social disorder typically associated with Black and Latino youths and (b) issues over the desegregation of public schools and school busing.

During the Bradley administration, local Black newspapers and news media were concerned about what they referred to as an issue of social disorder (Robinson, 2010). The social disorder was typically associated with sensationalized and racialized accounts of Black and Latino youth and inner-city violence. Drug trafficking and drug addiction, gang rivalries and gang violence, homelessness, and petty theft, along with other social ills, were problems specifically attributed to people living in inner cities. Graffiti writing—or what most news reports called tagging—and the taggers became directly connected to the social disorder discourse.

Sensationalist accounts, with racialized innuendoes, of young people painting their stylized names on their streets made them scapegoats for larger systemic problems. Several FOX news reports (e.g., Marcus, 2007; Todaypk.video, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c) on Los Angeles graffiti throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s portrayed these youths as thugs, vandals, and criminals. Yet, news media accounts of the

conflicts in and between Black and Latino teens concealed the underlying problems causing the interpersonal violence in these communities.

The global economy shifts in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in the restructuring of the U.S. economy and labor markets, which drastically altered the economic opportunities for many members of the Black and the growing Latinx communities in Los Angeles (Ochoa & Ochoa, 2005). The processes of deindustrialization, for example, brought about a rapid decline of the Los Angeles manufacturing base, which meant the loss of well-paying jobs for many Black and Mexican American communities. Youths bore the brunt of the negative and lasting impacts of deindustrialization. Low-wage service sector jobs replaced high-paying, skilled manufacturing jobs previously held by unionized workers. By the 1980s, migrants from Southern Mexico and Central America—a growing population of people from El Salvador and Guatemala fleeing civil wars and political and economic crises—began to compete with, and eventually replace, Black workers in the service sector economy (Hunt & Ramón, 2010; Martinez, 2016; Ochoa & Ochoa, 2005). Continued mass disinvestment of social services, widespread unemployment, increasing poverty, and the over-policing of historically Black neighborhoods, among other factors, have had a profound impact on Black and Latinx communities across the metropolitan region of Los Angeles since the 1980s.

Racially segregated working-class neighborhoods and communities, like South Central Los Angeles, were especially impacted by the restructuring of the global economy and the unprecedented migration (Ochoa & Ochoa, 2005; Robinson,

2010). These neighborhoods suffered from structural abandonment by the state in providing life-affirming services. They suffered from underperforming, overcrowded, and underfunded schools; ineffective and abusive policing; and the extraordinary flight of local, blue-collar firms (Robinson, 2010). This *structural abandonment*, as Gilmore (2008) called it, correlated with a rising cocaine trade, the hypercriminalization of young and working-class Black and Latino men, draconian vagrancy and loitering laws, the enforcement of zero-tolerance policing, and the proliferation of local street gangs that deteriorated already grim conditions (Rios, 2007; Robinson, 2010). The social disorder affecting Black and working-class Latino communities was a byproduct of local government negligence; demographic changes resulting from U.S. imperial policies across Latin America, particularly in Central America; and a regional economic shift from heavy manufacturing to a predominantly low-wage service economy.

In Los Angeles, the struggle over desegregation became a critical site that contextualized the terrain many early graffiti writers traversed (Phillips, 2019). It is in understanding the struggles over desegregation and its failures that contextualize the social realm where the notion of going all city emerges. Mayor Bradley's failure to advocate and support laws to desegregate public schools are important to examine because the 1970s and 1980s was when the struggles to end racial residential and school desegregation ultimately failed.

As Schneider (2008) outlined, the struggle to desegregate Los Angeles public schools began in 1961, and after years of class action law suits and negotiations

among the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the Los Angeles Superior Court, the Los Angeles School Board was required to submit a voluntary plan for desegregating schools in 1970 (Schneider, 2008). Over the next decade, multiple plans were submitted and declared ineffective by a court trial. Eventually, the accepted plan presented to the Los Angeles Superior Court called for mandatory student reassignment and busing, which was set to be implemented in 1978. Implementation of the plan was obstructed by white parents who lived in the suburbs and the Westside, who felt they had nothing to do with the reality of residential and school segregation and therefore were not responsible for remedying the problem (see Figure 11). The plan to integrate students from different racial and class backgrounds in public schools across Los Angeles was met with fierce and organized opposition by white grassroots organizations, such as Bustop, Inc. (*Bustop, Inc. v. Board of Education of City of Los Angeles*, 1978). These groups ultimately sought to uphold the privileges of whiteness by fiercely opposing racial integration via mandatory busing of students.

Figure 11

A Mother Holds Her Son at BUSTOP Campaign Rally, 1980

Note. From "School Desegregation and Busing in Los Angeles," by Daily News Morgue Files, Bustop Campaign Collection (https://library.csun.edu/SCA/Peek-in-the-Stacks/DesegregationBusing)

Many white residents in Los Angeles, including Bradley's white coalition partners, did not welcome busing (Robinson, 2010). In fact, Bradley avoided confronting the issue for most of his time in office, until he finally came out in opposition to cross-town busing because it would burden the city's budget, despite his

efforts to attract transnational capital to redevelop Downtown Los Angeles (Ettinger, 2003). According to HoSang (2010), ongoing protests and statewide organizing against school integration resulted in the Robbin's Amendment, or Proposition 1, which was passed in the California state legislature in 1979. The amendment ended the mandatory reassignment of students to schools and busing. It declared that school boards had no responsibilities or obligations to surpass the guarantees of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution under the Equal Protection Clause concerning school reassignment or student transportation. In its stead, other institutional methods for school integration were developed.

Mandatory busing and student reassignment were replaced with programs to alleviate and ameliorate racially isolated minority schools through the implementation of citywide integration programs and magnet school programs (HoSang, 2010). The Los Angeles Center for Enriched Studies, for example, was the first magnet school built as a direct result of the court-ordered voluntary integration programs. Magnet schools developed as a remedy for decades of racial apartheid. These programs were, in other words, designed to address—not fix—what the courts found to be the harms brought about by *racial isolation*: overcrowded environments, interracial hostility, lack of access to college opportunities, and low academic achievement.

Proposition 1 and alternative measures to halt racial integration in schools were grounded in assertions of "racial innocence, the claim that because white parents and students did not create the second-class schools to which most nonwhite students were consigned, nor explicitly support segregated schools, they could not be

compelled to participate in their improvement" (HoSang, 2010, p. 91). In other words, institutional attempts for racial integration of schools were halted by a discourse that did not explicitly prohibit school desegregation entirely, but instead carefully stipulated the conditions and speed through which integration could occur. Ultimately, Robbin's Amendment attacked the progress of the Civil Rights Movement by challenging the racial apartheid in neighborhoods and schools in California and Los Angeles. Since the amendment passed in 1979, magnet programs and integration programs continue to operate as a way to remedy the harms caused by racial residential and school segregation.

Despite the fierce grassroots organization by many white parents, lawmakers, and protestors, Proposition 1 and the attempts to maintain race-based residential segregation among youths were subverted by youths themselves (Phillips, 2019). Housing market discrimination and school segregation did significantly limit and shape racialized peoples' movements, but they did not completely determine the type of spaces, identities, and communities that youths could collectively create. Through graffiti, Black, Latino, Asian American, and white youths from different class backgrounds collectively produced what Lipsitz (2007) called a "moral geography of differentiated space" (p. 13). In this moral geography, their motivations and actions differed drastically from those who attempted to keep them segregated by race and class, and one that signaled an emergent multiracial and interclass identity through their participation in the graffiti subculture.

In the process of producing graffiti, youths engaged in the creation of alternative and oppositional identities that contested racial identifications and class positions that attempted to keep them in their place. The anonymity of graffiti monikers provided an open and meaningful method through which youths could visually subvert racial and class distinctions that attempted to stop them from interacting in meaningful ways. Individual identities and social relations through graffiti monikers relied much more on young men's involvement in graffiti—the practicing and mastering of lettering styles and claiming space through their tags—than their association and allotment based on their race or class. Their involvement in the graffiti subculture encouraged them to reimagine their role in a city that continually drew imaginary yet violent lines that they were prohibited to cross. In this context, the notion of going all city can be interpreted as a creative means through which young, working-class Black and Latino men were able to construct an urban identity and reimagine themselves as active participants in shaping and intervening in the construction of the city through their creativity and vision. One of the most meaningful ways that they were able to do so was by taking over the buses and moving freely through the city on their terms. As the next section demonstrates, public transit, specifically buses, was the clearest way they could move through the city with a purpose.

Busing and Reimagining the City

Two forms of busing are important to the development of going all city in Los Angeles: school busing and public transit. School busing and public transit are central

to the notion of going all city because each involves the complex ways through which young people and their tags travel and transform the city. School buses and public transit buses are spaces where youths are socialized into the graffiti subculture and the ways that the notion of going all city has historically been imagined.

Most of the graffiti writers in this study were bused to schools outside of their vicinity, irrespective of generations. The busing of students to schools outside of their vicinities was not a way to desegregate schools as much as it was a response by the Los Angeles Unified School District to halt the struggles to desegregate public schools, and manage the overwhelming influx of displaced migrant youths arriving to Los Angeles since the 1980s. In these schools, youth met young people from their neighborhood in the bus and other students in public school who began to identify as writers and produce graffiti. Their trips to schools by bus made it possible for them to meet each other and practice their art with one another. As this section suggests, it was during their time in school and on their way to school that they began to see, understand, and produce graffiti across the city with their peers.

Nuke

Nuke was a graffiti writer who identified as a Chicano and who grew up in the working-class neighborhoods of East Los Angeles and Southeast Los Angeles. Like many of his peers, Nuke was bused to school in the San Fernando Valley (i.e., an area northwest of Los Angeles) where he was socialized into graffiti by a group of teens who had formed a graffiti crew known as Under The Influence. I met Nuke at the unveiling of the Undiscovered America mural at the Arts District in 2018 where he,

along with other members of the Under The Influence crew, and the EARTH crew, were commemorated for revamping the first city-sponsored aerosol mural at the Arts District that has been "up" since 1992. I came to this event through a social media post that was circulating among graffiti writers, and because Shandu, a veteran graffiti writer who worked as a graffiti art tour guide at the Arts District, shared it with me. I met Nuke, Angst, and other graffiti writers at the event. We agreed to meet and conduct an interview at Nuke's parents' home in Boyle Heights the following week because he was busy coordinating the event and socializing with a number of people.

As soon as we sat down and began to talk, I could hear the eagerness in Nuke's voice to impart a history of Los Angeles graffiti from his vantage point. For him, Los Angeles graffiti is much more than vandalism or scribbles on walls. Los Angeles graffiti tells a social and public history of individual and collective empowerment as much as it is about vandalism. As we sat on his parent's porch in Boyle Heights, Nuke recalled the moment he decided to identify as a graffiti writer, referencing his crewmates who also rode the bus with him to James Monroe High School miles away from his neighborhood. The main person that introduced Nuke into the graffiti subculture was his friend named Skill during their rides on the bus to school. Skill became Nuke's first mentor. He offered him a list of names to identify with and to write as a graffiti writer. Nuke chose his name over the others that Skill offered to him during a bus ride home because, according to him, it captured the "explosive nature of [his] artwork." The more Nuke shared his stories of graffiti, his

involvement in it, and how he practiced perfecting his lettering skills and fashioned his identity through style with his peers in the school bus, the more I kept thinking about the ways that he, along with Skill and the other youths, created a space for the emergence of an alternative academy on their way to James Monroe High School based on the tenets of graffiti subculture. Nuke shared:

> Skill, along with Snap, started UTI, Under The Influence crew, back in ‘85. I didn’t meet these guys until ‘87. I knew [of] them, but then I started going to school with Skill. I was bused from South Gate all the way to the Valley early in the morning. I went to [James] Monroe High School, out in San Fernando [Valley], and that’s where I met all the UTIs for the first time. Some of them were in my class. Guys by the name of Ghost (RIP), Celtic, and there was Rios, and Skill. . . . I would have to say that Skill is the one that gave me the name Nuke. He gave me a bunch of names, but I picked that one. I picked that out of a whole list of names that he’d come up with on a bus ride to Monroe. That’s when I said, “Alright, this is what I’m going to do. This is who I’m going to be.”

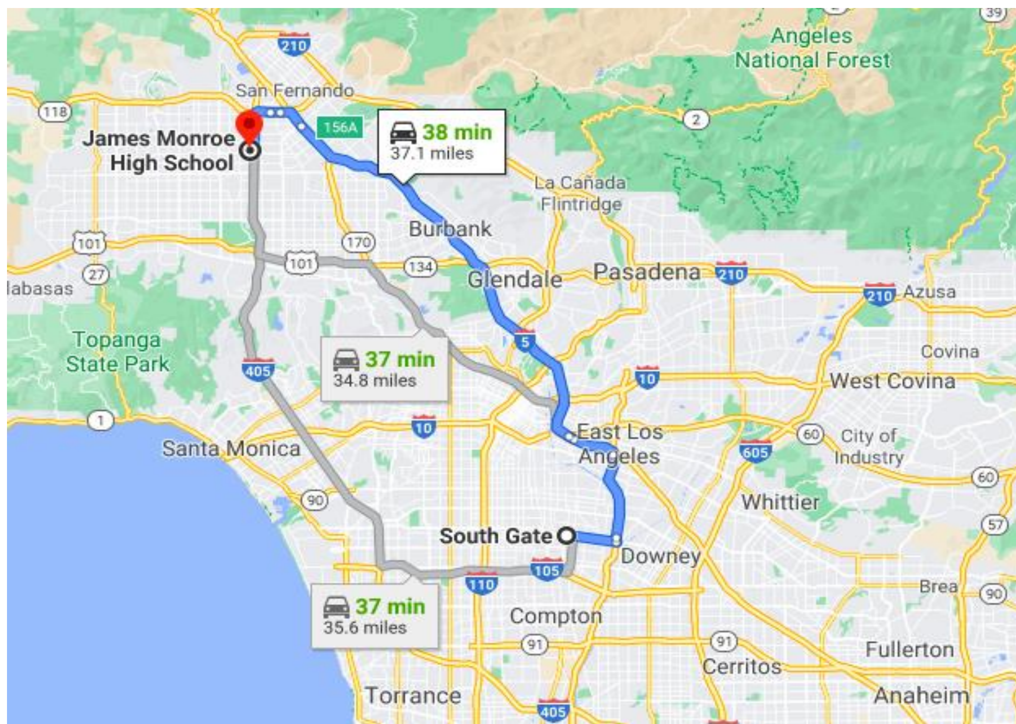
Nuke went on to describe where he and Skill would travel to paint with one another, but his conversations about the bus and the ways he came to identify as a writer, in company of his classmates, are most important to reflect on.

The alternative school Nuke detailed in his interactions with other young graffiti writers in the confines of the bus resonates with what Lipsitz (2004) referenced in discussing the work of Marisela Norte, the “bus poet of Los Angeles” (p. 512), who identified the constraints and possibilities of riding the bus in her travels. Similar to Norte’s poetry, Nuke spoke of his experience and his interaction with Skill and others in the bus as one of both “containment and connection, of incarceration and affiliation, of solitude and sociality” (Lipsitz, 2004, p. 512). Nuke was contained in the school bus for at least 40 minutes on his way to school on the

freeway (see Figure 12), but he did not experience that containment alone. Being enclosed to a moving bus for at least 40 minutes a day, 5 times a week, gave Nuke and youths like him time and space to transform the bus into a space where they could associate and connect with others by practicing their art together. Moreover, the school bus Nuke rode shared a similar ridership to L.A. public transit, which is composed mostly of poor and working-class Latino and African Americans, and encompasses the social contradictions and vulnerabilities of Angelenos.

Figure 12

Map of Route and Travel Time From South Gate to James Monroe High School



Note. Map generated by author via Google Maps.

Long distance busing and the infrastructure of freeway travel have been historically organized by race and class. Interstate highways in Southern California, for example, have a long history of violent incursions on Mexican American neighborhoods that have sliced impoverished and racialized U.S. urban neighborhoods. Avila (2004) argued, “Race—racial identity and racial ideology—shaped the geography of highway construction in urban America, fueling new patterns of racial inequality that exacerbated an unfolding ‘urban crisis’ in postwar America” (p. 2). The freeways Nuke and other racialized youths embarked on their way to school have a long and wretched history of racial and class segregation (Avila, 2004; Villa, 2000). Their construction was historically coded as clearing urban blight, facilitating the process of white flight, and assisted in the development of a new white identity associated with the suburbs (Avila, 2004). Yet, the story of Nuke in the bus suggests that, just as the freeway and the school bus were a way that a moral geography of racialized and classed space was built to segregate, the infrastructure of the freeway and the school bus that took young people like Nuke to school was also a site to generate alternative communities among youths.

The estimated 40-minute drive for Nuke and his classmates to get to the San Fernando Valley from South Gate via the I-5 freeway (without traffic) provided the time and space for him and his peers to construct different ways to associate with one another beyond that of being classmates. In other words, those long rides to school gave Nuke, Skill, and other youths space and time to fashion an identity with one another, to practice and judge their art with one another, to teach and learn from each

other, and to create a collective and anonymous form of identity through the manipulation of fonts and the creation of individual style. More than these factors, their trip to school helped them familiarize themselves with the writing that was already painted on the built infrastructure of the freeways on their way to school.

Trama

Other writers from different generations and neighborhoods share striking similarities with Nuke and Skill's socialization into the subculture and how school busing and attending schools outside of their vicinity was important to their reimagining the city as a canvas. Trama's case helps illustrate this connection.

Trama was born in Oaxaca and raised in Los Angeles. He grew up in the Westside of Los Angeles and rarely visited Oaxaca as a teenager, mainly because his parents were undocumented. We first met in 2011 through his cousin, Prox, and kept in touch through the years. We met again in 2018 to speak about his experience as a graffiti writer at a bar near the Promenade in Santa Monica. Trama was introduced to graffiti through his cousin, Prox, in middle school and was socialized into it through his close friend, Quik, in high school. Quik became one of his mentors who taught him how and what to tag, how to use markers, and shared with him the unwritten rules of graffiti. Trama shared:

> When I met Quik, he was in my [physical education] class and he would never dress [for physical education class] but he would always be painting. I started seeing the book and started seeing what he was doing. I never really knew what it was, but he started writing. I always remember eggshell—prism eggshell 20% and cool grey 10% [markers]. Those were his favorites, and that was when I learned how to use prisms. . . . [That is when I learned] this is what you draw, what a blackbook is, how to tag, what to bomb, what a throw up is, burners, just the basics.

Quik taught Trama "how to use prisms," and how to develop a style and a lettering technique (see Figure 13). Despite being introduced to graffiti by Prox in middle school, it was Quik who began teaching him "what you draw," "what a blackbook is," "how to tag," "what to bomb," and "what a throw up is, burners, [and] just the basic [rules of graffiti]." His role in Trama's introduction to graffiti is another example of the critical process of socialization and a form of mentoring that enable newcomers to become part of a clandestine community.

Figure 13

Quik Painting a Production

Note. Photo Credit to Luke and Quik. Reprinted with permission.

Unlike Nuke, both Trama and Prox were fortunate to attend adequately funded schools. Trama and Prox attended schools in Santa Monica, where several students from other neighborhoods were bused. Their mothers worked as domestic workers in Santa Monica and they asked their employers if they could use their address to send their sons to good schools. Prox's parents migrated from Mexico and Central America and came to reside in South Central Los Angeles at a time when a gendered labor market for domestic work predominantly employed migrant women from Latin America and Asia. Trama's family migrated in the 1980s and lived in the Westside of Los Angeles until they were able to move to Santa Monica. His mother used the address of their employer to send Trama to school in Santa Monica until she was able to move into that area. Trama and Prox's parents dropped them off before heading to work early in the morning until they were old enough to use public transit, so they mostly met other writers during and after school. Although Trama and Prox were not bused to school like Nuke and Skill, other students who attended their schools were. And like Nuke, the schools they attended were segregated primarily by race and class.

The students in Lincoln Middle School and Santa Monica High School were predominantly white and middle or upper class. This demographic difference was a result of years of racial covenants that restricted homeownership to Black and other people of color (Rothstein, 2017). As a result of white grassroots organizing and the passage of the Robbins Amendment, the mandatory desegregation of schools in California and in Los Angeles was revoked. As Trama put it, Santa Monica was a

“little bit more diverse” compared to Lincoln, but it was at Santa Monica High School where “everybody was just thrown in together.” He described his experience, saying:

> I went to Lincoln. Lincoln [Middle School] was a little bit more Caucasian–more upper class. You have all the people from North of Montana and Palisades that went to Lincoln. Even though you’re still friends with everybody at that time, it’s different. I think I talked to you last time when I was saying, when you’re growing up poor in a rich neighborhood, you feel it a lot more than when growing up poor in a poor neighborhood. We would go to my friend’s house, and I’m like, that’s a big-ass house, but in high school, it was different because everybody was just thrown in together. You had people from a little bit more of the rougher parts of town like McArthur Park and Pico-Union. Then, you had people getting bused from Inglewood. You had some people that claimed Crips, some people that claimed Bloods [predominantly Black gangs in Los Angeles]. They had older homies or older brothers, and cousins [who] were the ones in those gangs. They’re from that area so that’s what they’re bringing.

Some of the young people who, as Trama put it, were “thrown in together” at school, were sons and daughters of parents who were part of the large Latin American diaspora in the 1980s and 1990s. Their parents fled civil wars and political violence in Central America (J. Gonzalez, 2011; Harvey, 2007), and some of them were displaced by the economic devastation triggered by the Structural Adjustment Programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund across Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s (Harvey, 2007). Students who were bused to Lincoln and Santa Monica High School, who came from these rougher parts of town like MacArthur Park, were typically migrants or children of migrants from Southern Mexico and Central America. The young people who claimed Crips and Bloods were youths whose neighborhoods had been long terrorized by unchecked police brutality, and whose communities suffered from economic disinvestment and political abandonment. The vast number of students who were thrown in together at school

arrived at Lincoln and Santa Monica from different parts of the county, but they were also sons and daughters of diasporic peoples. For many of them, movement and displacement were anything but new.

For people growing up in impoverished and working-class neighborhoods, and who come from diasporic communities—like Trama, Nuke, and Prox, among others—producing graffiti is a way to move on their own terms. Whether it is through their actual physical movement, or the movement of the tags they place on moving objects like trucks or public transportation, producing graffiti is a way that they move about on their terms. Like Nuke, Skill, Snap, Trama, Prox, and others, school busing and attending schools outside of their vicinity allowed them to meet people from other neighborhoods in the city. Constructing a new identity and appropriating the built and moving infrastructure in the city became their way to assert their rights to the city. It also became their science of drawing a cultural map of the city.

Public Transit and The Rapid Transit Destroyers

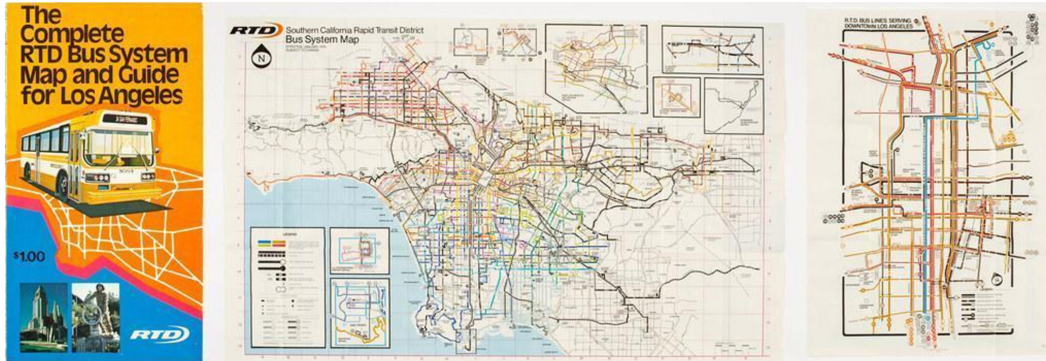
The use of public transit by graffiti writers is equally important to the conception of going all city. Early L.A. graffiti writers adopted the notion of going all city from their peers in New York and adapted it to their context in Los Angeles. For them, the Southern California rapid transit district (RTD) buses became the main means through which they and their stylized inscriptions could travel throughout Southern California. The completion of a comprehensive intercounty bus and rail train system by the 1980s and 1990s made this possible. Although the bus mobbing days were short lived, due to the intensification of police surveillance and increasing

penalties for those caught and convicted of producing graffiti, it remains one of the first and formative ways through which writers transformed their relationship with the city and the way in which they created community across racial and class differences.

The term *all city* originates from the vernacular language of writers who developed the term in New York. In New York, the trains were the primary vehicle that took a writer's signature tag—their stylized name and their identity—across the different boroughs in the city. Painting the trains was the main way through which all city was imagined and enacted for many New York graffiti writers. L.A. youths adopted this term and imagined it in a similar fashion. Instead of the subway trains, however, they used the Southern California RTD buses (see Figure 14) as their main moving object to make themselves visible in a society that marginalized them. Hopping on and tagging their moniker on multiple buses became one of the creative ways that writers began to transgress the spatial confines that they were relegated to by processes of racial residential segregation. The RTD provided the first interregional public transit network in the sprawling city of Los Angeles that writers came to envision as their boxcar trains similar to those that writers painted in New York City to achieve all city status.

Figure 14

Complete Southern California RTD Bus System Map, January 1979



Note. From “Bus System Map,” by Southern California Rapid Transit District, 1979 (http://libraryarchives.metro.net/dpgtl/maps/1979-sctrd-system-map-january.pdf). Retrieved from Metro Library and Archive.

The RTD and the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) made it possible for writers and their tags to move throughout the city and the counties neighboring the City of Los Angeles. Beginning in the mid-1980s, writers made full use of the widened services the RTD provided to Los Angeles County, Orange County, San Bernardino County, and Riverside County. The agency created heavy and extensive public transportation systems to expand its operations with inter-county bus lines and rail trains in Southern California that was transformed into a public vehicle that young people appropriated through the use of markers and spray paint. The fierce competition among writers to be the most up in the city transformed the buses into sites where young people battled for title of kings and queens. Wisk, a graffiti pioneer and one of the few writers who achieved all city status in the early days of bus

mobbing, recalled how the RTD provided the means through which he and his crew members could go beyond the city limits:

> We knew that we needed to [go] everywhere the RTD bus went. Me, [Wisk], and [Ser] had to go there because we really got on this hang up of going all city, you know what I mean? Like, Miner was the king of the city back then, but we noticed that he didn't go to Pomona. We noticed that he didn't go to El Monte. We noticed he didn't go to Long Beach. You know what I mean? And me and Ser [looked at each other] and go, that's where we have to go!

Wisk and Ser are writers from the Westside of Los Angeles. They, along with others, used the RTD buses to showcase their name, their style, and their identity via their tags that traveled throughout the city (see Figure 15). For writers like Wisk and Ser, the buses took a writer's tag from one end of the city to the other, and the buses were transformed into a moving canvas.

Figure 15

Bus Mobbers on RTD Line 1990s, Los Angeles

Note. From "From Buses to River Walls: Graffiti in 1980s to Early-90s Los Angeles," by Montana Colors, n.d. (https://www.sprayplanet.com/blogs/news/from-buses-to-river-walls-graffiti-in-1980s-to-early-90s-los-angeles). Copyright by Spray Planet.

In their appropriation of the RTD buses through graffiti, writers like Wisk, Ser, and others transgressed years of racial residential segregation. Writers from the different neighborhoods in Los Angeles are divided along racial and class lines as a result of years of redlining, racial covenants, and white flight. The Westside of Los Angeles, for example, is made up of 23 neighborhoods. It is composed of wealthy, often gated, upper-class communities like Bel-Air, Beverly Hills, Brentwood, and Century City (Davis, 2006). For youths like Wisk and Ser, riding and tagging the RTD buses became a way for them to meet and imagine a different world with working-class youths from underserved and impoverished communities. Wisk shared:

> We knew we had to get outside of Westwood and the Westside because me [Wisk] and [Ser] were Westside writers and it was like back then we had Westside writers and then you had the mid-city writers like Miner, Rival, all the West Coast Artists and then you had the more closer to Downtown, the K2Ss, the STNs, you had KGB on your way over there. You know, you had a lot of writers. You had UCA, we just knew from the gate that we had to do bigger things and we had to go farther, and that is how we started like taking these little trips everywhere.

These little trips often resulted in meeting individuals who were from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. The K2S, for example, was started mainly by working-class Chicano, Latino, and Asian kids from Downtown Los Angeles that bordered McArthur Park and Pico-Union. Some of the members of K2S were children whose families had recently migrated from Asia and Latin America. Tagging RTD buses

became a way that youths from diverse class positions and ethnic and racial backgrounds came to meet and reimagine their relationship with one another (see Figure 16).

Figure 16

Gin Wisk Dye RTDK Tag on Side Advertisement of an RTD Bus, 1990

Note. Gin One [@ginoneism]. (2019, November 7). [Photograph with no caption]. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/B4kW3p1pQmg/?hl=en

Bus mobbing made it possible for young people to redefine the purpose of public transportation and the type of social relationships that develop using their services. Bus benches, for example, were transformed from seats where people waited to be picked up by a bus into sites to visually illustrate one's originality through a tag and a site to assemble with friends. Windows and door exits were transformed into

plastic and metal canvases where people could etch their name and be recognized by their original style and skills by others in the subculture. Further, the RTD buses and their bus stops were transformed into sites of gathering for diverse and creative youths who came from vastly different parts of the city and from different ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds. Wisk recalled how he would take the bus from Century City to go to what writer's called *the writers bench* at the corner of Olympic and Fairfax. Wisk explained how buses were packed with young people heading to the same destination:

> I would pick up Ser at Emerson [Middle School] and we'd get the 4-bus line to Century City to go to the [writers] bench [on] Olympic. Everyone was on that line. Like, P67, Tony Boy, Me, Ser, that chick that went by Ransky B or something like that, all these writers. We met up with Prism, Main, Deco, Orion. Like, all these kids yo, [kids] that later became [members] of [the crew] RTD Killers. We'd meet them and go to the bench. . . . Pj Miner, Rival, Pyro, they would all meet at Carl's Jr. on the corner of Fairfax and Olympic. And somehow, we got wind of it, and we'd be like, "Let's go meet the homies," and like, other homies got wind of it. It was the cool spot to catch buses. . . . So, all of a sudden, all these kids from all over the city would be at this writers corner. It was a trip. It was like, we'd have to ditch sixth period to get there on time.

Tagging the buses and gathering at places like the writers' bench on Fairfax and Olympic facilitated a creative interaction among youths who lived in a racially segregated city and who had been discarded and abandoned by processes of deindustrialization. Taking the buses through tags made it possible for youths from West Los Angeles like Wisk and Ser, for example, to meet writers from K2S and STN in Downtown and on the East side of Los Angeles (see Figure 17).

Figure 17

Examples of Bus Mobbing

Note. From “From Buses to River Walls: Graffiti in 1980s to Early-90s Los Angeles,” by Montana Colors, n.d. (https://www.sprayplanet.com/blogs/news/from-buses-to-river-walls-graffiti-in-1980s-to-early-90s-los-angeles). Copyright by Spray Planet.

Many graffiti writers attribute the end of the bus mobbing days to the intensification of surveillance by police forces and graffiti vigilantes who waged war against what they called *taggers*. Sensationalized reportage on graffiti vandals and taggers who were reported to be loose in the streets, destroying city property and public transit systems became viral through Los Angeles news reportage. The city waged multiple graffiti abatement programs and intensified the penalties for producing graffiti over the years that have failed in stifling writers attempts to go all

city. Graffiti vigilantes have been acquitted with the murders of young people producing graffiti in the name of protecting private and public property. But the main point that I want to underscore is that the taking of the buses was and remains essential to the idea of going all city. Although writers have found other creative ways to achieve all city status, the taking of the buses remains in the imaginaries of L.A. graffiti writers to this day. My interview with a graffiti writer from South Central helps illustrate this point.

Dazer was introduced to graffiti during middle school and high school by Roder, a school peer and graffiti mentor who was older than him. Dazer's family moved to different parts of Los Angeles as he was growing up, mainly between East Los Angeles and South Central. Dazer attended Crenshaw High School and later traveled around the city by bus to attend a continuation school near Downtown Los Angeles. He was among many writers like Jez, Dice, and Risky who attended continuation school and night school to obtain their Graduate Equivalency Degree. As a member of the subculture from a different generation, Dazer expressed how exciting it was to "hop on buses and to see all of the tags of legends in the back of buses" on his way to a continuation school. He described windows as "full of scribes and tags" of writers he did not personally know, but who he continually saw "up." On the bus to continuation school, Dazer met young people who, like him, were practicing their lettering styles. He shared:

> Some of them came from the east side of town, you know, like East L.A. Boyle Heights, while others came from South Central. And others from different parts of L.A like the Valley. . . . We all caught the different [bus] lines but we would all end up there [at the continuation school]. I was not part

> of the generation who got to see the [RTD buses] and got to sit at the writer's bench. You know when taggers used to wait at bus stops and just straight mob [tag] a bus. But I do remember riding the very last of the RTDs and how all those windows and the metal above the windows were scribed with the names of all these writers and all of these crews. You sat in the back because you know that is where all the tags and scribes will be. The bus driver can't see you back there, some of them intentionally tilt the rearview mirror so that they do not have to see you tagging, and the people taking the bus just mind their own business, for the most part. The bus mobbing days are over, but when I was on my way to school and took the [inaudible] line, I would see writers' tags up everywhere.

Similar to Wisk, Dazer met writers from across Los Angeles on his way to school or after school. Although he never met many of the older generations of writers who go to experience the bus mobbing of the RTDs, he did remember them and saw the inscriptions that remained in the bus lines he took to school. His interactions with writers on his way to continuation school were similar to the ways that Wisk and Ser described meeting writers from across different neighborhoods in the city. Similar to Wisk and Ser, Dazer imagined public transportation as a site where different young people who are part of the "culture," as he described it, meet. Taken together, Wisk, Ser, Dazer, and the other writers who partook (and those that now partake) in bus mobbing prompt scholars to connect the rich history of how marginalized groups in the United States transform public transportation into a site of struggle.

Urban public transportation has been a site of racial and class conflict in the United States since its inception in urbanized cities. Historian Higginbotham (1992), for example, demonstrated how African Americans in Washington, D.C. transformed the street trolley into a symbolic platform of the struggle for space and accessibility in

the 19th century. Higginbotham recalled that, during the Reconstruction Era, middle-class Black women protested transit discrimination by white citizens who limited their access through physical attack and forceful removal. Kelley (1996) also stressed the ways through which Black youth, particularly young Black males, have challenged the racist structures of the Jim Crow South by engaging passengers and drivers with jokes, verbal altercations, and sometimes outright violence. It should be no surprise that, similar to the days of Jim Crow segregation, urban public transportation continues to be a site of racial and class tension and confrontation.

The conflicts in public transportation that arise between young and adult passengers in major cities like Los Angeles are embedded in discourses of security and racialized threat (Fleetwood, 2004). Public transit in Los Angeles is a site where Black and Latinx youths engage with racialized discourses that inform adults' fears of kids as threats to social order and safety. The bus is a space where young people—and specifically, young Black and Latinx youths—strategically reify and outright contest the construction of youthful and racialized identities as deviant and threatening (Fleetwood, 2004). In my observations riding the Metro Transit buses with graffiti writers, I have witnessed the ways adult passengers purposely ignore young people who are tagging buses by looking away and minding their own business. Adults avoid eye contact with Black and Latino teenagers. They are often reluctant or outright refuse to sit next to them, even when the bus is crowded. When a young person is tagging, they often pretend not to smell the pungent aroma of the

paint marker, and they intentionally ignore a young person who etches their name with a blade on a metal frame located above the bus windows.

By writing their monikers on the plastic window protector on buses with a marker, using acrylic paint on bus seats, or scribing their alias on the metal frame of the bus window, writers reify discourses of youths as deviants who engage in criminal activity while at the same time contesting them. They engage in a type of social performance where they come to reify these discourses by engaging in activities that are criminalized and seem out of place. They perform deviance and assume the role of thugs or vandals through their intimidating posture, the type of clothes they choose to wear, and their use of urban vernacular. Writers like Dazer relied on discourses of youths and members of youth cultures as threats because performing a type of aggressive masculinity helps keep most adults from confronting them as they tag. More importantly, they often challenge these discourses by publicly demonstrating their artistic skills on the surface of the moving object. More than just vandals who are out to destroy, writers create art. Dazer explained, "The bus still works. I am not taking out the engine or anything like that. I am blessing it with some art."

The skills demonstrated in the execution of a tag on a window, however, can be the most detestable form of graffiti for people who are not familiar with the subculture. For writers, it is a way they redefine the social function of the bus lines themselves. A tag on a bus becomes a way to personalize the impersonal character of public transit. The tag operates as an invitation for others to illustrate their originality on a structure that is, after all, public. Tagging on buses is an act that appropriates the

institutional purposes of the bus for personal gain. A tag on the bus takes a writer's identity in a loop throughout the city. Although people often dismiss tags on buses as crime, vandalism, or a visual nuisance, writers are very attentive to them. Dazer keeps tabs on the tags, pieces, and bombs that he sees on the surfaces across the city. To writers like Dazer, "seeing a tag of someone [he] does not know, but who [he] regularly sees 'up' is like seeing a friend who [he] will probably never meet, but know they exist." This statement is indicative of one of the ways that writers reimagine the city, their relation to it, and each other.

On Writing and Bombing Missions

Going all city involves going on writing missions and bombing missions. More than graffiti terms or phrases associated with going all city, the word *missions* is a conceptual tool to examine the spatial scale that involves the physical movement of writers. Writing missions may be planned or they may occur spontaneously. They may take place as writers go to the store to purchase snacks, or they may be planned out in a person's living room. Bombing missions, on the other hand, are mostly planned ahead of time because writers usually locate, target, and strategize how, when, and where they will paint and decide who will be a lookout, and at what specific time is best to paint. Although there are multiple terms and phrases that writers associate with going all city, missions is the most appropriate term to understand their physical movement, the social processes, and the cultural practices involved in going all city. By going on missions, writers assume an important role in becoming an all city writer: they take on important painting assignments that must be

carried out successfully. It is the accumulation of successful missions that leads to being recognized as an all city writer. Although many writers use the term to describe the painting and efforts to get their name up across the city, they are not the only group using the term.

Many youths—whether they are involved in graffiti, or not, or are part of different subcultures—use the term mission to describe the ways they understand their travails in the city. Writers and young people often use this term rather loosely. For example, some of the writers and people that I spent time with in the field would use the term to describe or express how going to the corner store from their home turned out to be a mission, implying the difficulties of going to the store to purchase groceries in a given day. The difficulties usually entailed being stopped and hassled by police, getting harassed by a gang member, or just taking a long time conversing with neighbors along the way, which prolonged their way to or back from the store. This popular term among youths from Los Angeles is useful because it is indicative of how youths find that moving through and traveling to different parts of the city—even in their own vicinity—can prove to be a difficult task, an arduous journey, a laborious trip, and even a burdensome and oftentimes dangerous undertaking.

It is perhaps because writing and bombing missions can be so laborious, so challenging, so dangerous, and so rewarding at the same time that writers are enticed to pursue them. When I asked Trama what motivated him to go out at night to paint his name, he responded by recalling the feelings he would get during those moments when he and his crewmates would go on bombing missions:

> When you're going out in the middle of the night to go tag and you're going into a different hood, that right there is a rush . . . that junkie adrenaline rush, yes, it's like: you're going to go out in the middle of the night and go paint. There is adrenaline in that [process]. There's a little bit of that adrenaline rush, and that's something everybody loves, because there's no better feeling than when you went out all night, you completed a piece and you come back home and you didn't get caught. You wake up the next morning, you drive there, or take the bus there again, and you take a picture.

Like Trama, other writers described the process of going on writing missions and bombing missions in a similar way. Partaking in these missions stirs ups excitement that is often described as an adrenaline rush that writers' feel as they stylistically etch their monikers without permission on a wall or on any surface throughout the city. The fact that Los Angeles is a sprawling and impersonal city, a city that is deeply segregated by race and class, a city that is highly policed, and that has a reputation for being dubbed "gang capital of the world," is important to consider. All of these factors and more add to what makes these missions more challenging and threatening. The rush of risking and hoping to not get "caught slipping"—a phrase they use to describe the possibility of being caught off guard by the police, sheriffs, highway patrol, gang members, graffiti vigilantes, or rival and territorial graffiti crews—is shared among writers undertaking these missions.

Moreover, although Trama was not able to recall, or perhaps was unwilling to tell, exactly where he and his crewmates painted that night, he was very clear that it took place in a "different hood." As we continued to converse, Trama shared some more of his experiences going painting at night. He shared how him and his crewmates decided to paint the letters of their crews one night, how their mission was not over until they were able to take a photograph to upload it on a digital platform

the next day, and how having other writers recognize the piece and giving *props*, or showing them respect for creating pieces, felt good. Similar to other writers, Trama shared how he woke up and returned to the spot they painted to document the piece they created, add it to his personal archive, and share it online:

> I remember we had some great times. One of the best times that I remember was when I, Quik, and [unintelligible]. I think I am missing someone—I think Sensa? [unintelligible] was also there. We all went to go do a roll call production of all our crews like NBC, [unintelligible] TRUK, and [the roll call] took one big side of the freeway, and I remember we were there all night, using buff paint, we were fucking filling [each letter] in, and we laughed, and the next morning I came back. I took a picture, and I went back home. I uploaded it to 50 millimeter. By the end of the day, it was like one of the most liked photos or whatever on the front page [of the website] or something like that. We were like, "Damn, we're on the front page." It was that joy, that rush, that we did something dope.
>
> [It felt like an accomplishment]. We went and we did something that's really illegal, that you're going to get in trouble for it, and we got away with it, and it was there for the whole summer. The plants were even growing back over it, especially the ones we tore down [to paint the letters]. But it's just the stuff [bombs and pieces] that stay up for a while, and then everybody knows, especially if people really know about your crew, then they'll talk about that [the bomb or that piece] next time. When people ran into me, they'd be like, "Oh, I saw that piece on so and so. That shit was nice." It's like I said, it's good to hear comments that you did something.

To be clear, the "tag," the "piece," the "bomb," and the "throw up" does not simply state a name; rather, it constitutes an identity that operates at multiple spatial scales in its pursuit of going all city. The style, the form, its meaning, the shape, the number of letters in a name, the colors, and the tiniest to the largest detail is intentional and fundamental to the construction of a writer's identity and the ways they want to (re)present themselves to and throughout the city. Through the tag, through writing, young people are actively producing systems of (self-)representation with the very

few resources that are available to them (Sanchez-Tranquilino, 1991). By doing so, youths create cultural identities, and alternative conceptions of who they are and who they can become (Hall et al., 1992). This identity is performed through a disembodied form: the tag. This disembodied identity is emplaced on built surfaces to personalize the impersonal. For young people who come from marginalized and racialized communities, the personalization of the built infrastructure is a visual expression of what Johnson (2013) called *spatial entitlement*.

As I kept speaking with Trama, it became very clear he understood his neighborhood and the area where he lived in Santa Monica as completely different from the surrounding areas of what I considered the Westside. For him, and for writers that I spoke with who also resided in the west of Los Angeles, West L.A. or the Westside, is split into at least four quadrants: Venice, Santa Monica, Sawtelle, and Mid-City. This understanding of the different areas that make up the Westside of Los Angeles became apparent to me because I kept noticing the number of times that Trama and other writers corrected me whenever I would speak of the west and of their neighborhoods. To them, each quadrant in the Westside was particular and unique.

There are some tensions between writers who are place based in the different areas in the Westside. Yet, for those who attempt to achieve the designation of king or queen (i.e., writers who attempt to go all city), they not only value the place they come from, but they also see themselves as representing all of Los Angeles. When I

asked Jets, a writer who also resided in the Westside, what he wrote, where he was from, and how long he had been writing, he replied:

> I write jets, I stay in West L.A. I represent all of pretty much L.A. I've been writing for a long time now. Since I was probably in elementary school—legit for a while. I have been writing [in] all those [school] textbooks, and all those shits [e.g., desks, chairs, trash bins, walls, yards] when it was the shit [to do so] back in the day. Now, I stick to just day to day because when you're grown-as-fuck, you can't really be writing as much. But I still do my shit. Almost a tag a day, still, to keep me up to date. I stick with all my landmarks pretty much.

Jets was one of those writers who, rather than being recognized as a writer from the Westside or any area of Los Angeles, preferred to be recognized as a writer who represented the city as a whole. Like others that I met during fieldwork, Jets recognized where he was "at," in West Los Angeles, but, most importantly, he also recognized what he, as a writer, represented, which is "all of L.A." As we kept talking in his home, I asked him to share with me why and how he chose his name. He replied he had been writing since he was a little kid. Jets associated graffiti with his early memories of writing on the walls of his house as an infant. I asked why he chose the name Jets, for example, and he shrugged his shoulders and muttered:

> I don't know, it must have something to do when I was a little kid, and I had this shirt with Jets written on it, or it must be because I wrote on the walls as a little kid, or it must be because I love to climb and get to hard-to-reach places and leave landmarks [e.g., tags, pieces, or bombs, that last for more 10 years without getting painted over and erased].

Later, I asked if he had ever gone or ever tried to go all city. Jets replied:

> Hell yeah. If you tag, and you leave a tag anywhere that's all that matters. Your shit [tag, throw-up, bomb, or piece] is going to get buffed. Not everybody in the world's going to see that you have [left your moniker there], unless [you take a photo and upload it online]. I guess that's what Instagram's for. I guess. But what's the fun in that? You can actually be told by

> somebody: “Oh. Well, this fool has this, and this fool has this, and he killed this. And these guys had this running for years and instead you see some bullshit,” just plainly every day.

Jets shared his politics as it related to going all city. To him, going all city meant going out of one’s way to produce graffiti and to see the tags, the throw-ups, the bombs, and the pieces up on the walls, or on whichever surfaces they are etched in the city, live and in person. In other words, for Jets, and for other writers like him, going all city involves a writer’s actual movement through the city to personally see, experience, and witness tags, throw-ups, bombs, and pieces in person and in real time. Social media dilutes and corrupts the notion of going all city precisely because it is a medium through which writers can use to pretend they are all city. To Jets, uploading and obtaining fame by posting photos on a personal page as proof that a writer is “up” or “active” is a misleading and deceitful way of proving or seeing that a writer is going or has gone all city.

The risks of going all city involve getting chased by police, gang members, or graffiti vigilantes. There are times when writing and bombing missions do not end well. Writing may be exciting, but as Trama shared previously, the excitement involves the reality that there are risks involved, and writers who attempt to go all city rarely shy away from these risks and challenges. In fact, they actively seek the thrill in the process of “getting up.” Nori, for example, shared:

> One time, me and this fool [pointing at Jets], we were riding on a BMX bike down Venice Blvd, and we were just putting up slap tags, because that was the thing to do. It was quick. So, I’d tell him to hop off right here, and he’d hop off and hit one [paste the slap tag on a surface]. And one time we got ran up by some cops, and I ran, and this fool got away. Shit like that happens, you know. But that’s L.A. shit, you know what I’m saying?

Unfortunately, Nori did not finish his story. Jets interrupted, asking him to let us finish the interview I was conducting with him at the moment. It was only later I discovered Nori was not taken to jail, charged for vandalism, or even written a ticket. It seems he got lucky that day. The police let him go, perhaps because, compared to a tag, a bomb, or a piece, a slap tag is relatively easy to remove from most surfaces.

Running from the police when caught writing is the type of shit that happens and the danger writers always anticipate but are never really prepared to encounter. When Nori says, “But that’s L.A. shit, you know what I am saying?” he is referring to the robust policing apparatus and judicial system that continues to wage a war against graffiti (Iveson, 2010). The police, however, is only one group the writers remain vigilant of when they go on writing and bombing missions. Gang members also pose a real threat to graffiti writers who attempt to go all city. More often than not, gang members dislike graffiti writers mainly because they attract police and unwanted attention to their respective neighborhoods.

Conclusion

The notion of going all city helped develop a much more expansive spatial imaginary for many graffiti writers in Los Angeles. Going all city is an aspirational goal that guaranteed many young graffiti writers a way to gain respect, recognition, popularity, and prestige among their peers. As this chapter attempted to demonstrate, the notion of going all city had a profound impact on the ways that youths reimagined their identities, social relationships, and their use of the urban infrastructure of Los Angeles.

For Black and Latinx youths from working-class and racially segregated neighborhoods, going all city became a way for them to transgress and challenge the borders of residential segregation and create a new mapping of the city. Rather than staying within the confines of their neighborhoods that decades of redlining and housing covenants produced, Black and Latinx graffiti writers began inscribing their monikers across the city in their attempts gain recognition among their peers. They developed their own vocabulary, their own vision of the city, and what Austin (2002) called a "political economy of prestige" (p. 38). To gain respect, honor, and prestige, graffiti writers sought and continue to seek to be the most "up" or prolific member of their community. This required and produced a reimagining of their place in the city. This required developing a new map of the city. This required and produced what I call illicit cartography.

Illicit cartographies underscore the innovative and subversive mapping of cities within conditions of structural violence. It is produced through their travels by bus, by their tagging and bombing missions, and by their use of public transit and freeways even while their actions and movements are constantly surveilled. Indeed, working-class Black and Latinx youths bear the brunt of racial profiling, aggressive policing, disproportionate incarceration, mass disinvestment of social services in the neighborhoods where they live, and structural marginalization in the economic, political, and social spheres. Those who are caught producing graffiti face hefty fines, jail time, and even long prison sentences. A case discussed in the next chapter about Sight—the Black graffiti writer who was sentenced to 6 years in prison—might be the

best example of how graffiti writers of color are negatively impacted by the criminal justice system. One wonders why producing graffiti warrants such drastic forms of punishment and discipline. It is perhaps because of the ways city governments privilege the protection of private property under capitalism over the lives of young people that warrants such punitive measures.

As systems of domination, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and xenophobia contextualize the terrain of struggle that many writers traverse. As Gibbons (2018), Villa (2000), and Gilmore (2008) demonstrated, racial capitalism (Robinson, 2010) shapes cities in ways that produce racialized inequalities that deeply and negatively affect the lives of Black, Latinx, and other racialized groups. Indeed, racial segregation obstructs many Black and Latinx youths in working-class neighborhoods, like East Los Angeles and South Central, from gaining access to life-affirming resources and institutions like healthcare, well-funded educational institutions, jobs paying living wages, community and youth centers, and safe public spaces. By going all city, Black and Latinx writers produce the city in ways that are meaningful to them. The spaces they form amid and despite the structural violence they encounter are examples of how they refuse to live an unlivable destiny.

By going all city, graffiti writers transform and reinscribe new meanings to the built infrastructure of the city. Bus benches, freeway signs, overpasses, paved rivers, electricity poles, billboards, and building rooftops are all reinscribed with meanings and functions that matter for writers. For example, painting structures like the back of freeways signs reinscribe them with new meaning; that freeway sign is

transformed into what they call heavens. A tag that lasts more than 10 years on any surface becomes a landmark. Graffiti on buses and freight trains become vehicles that transport more than people and merchandise, they transport their tags, their identities. Through these mechanisms, graffiti becomes a way for writers to personalize the impersonal city—to become visible on walls that try to marginalize them, segregate them, and keep them from view. I use the term illicit purposefully to draw attention to the illegality and subversiveness of graffiti and the fugitive aspects of writing. The nodes or spaces that create illicit cartographies are as fugitive as the art itself. There is never a guarantee that any place tagged, pieced, or bombed will last.

The illicit cartography that writers produce is unfamiliar to many outsiders. It is composed of places and spaces writers have created, usually in sites that have been abandoned by businesses and forgotten by city governments. The nodes within this spatial imaginary are known as graffiti yards, which are scattered throughout the city and their locations known only to insiders. They are secret and fugitive sites of congregation. As I demonstrate in the following chapter, Black and Latinx graffiti writers create spaces of congregation and empowerment amid the reality of poverty, violence, and structural marginalization.

Chapter 4: The Vermont Arts District: Transforming Places of Devastation Into Places of Congregation and Empowerment

Sitting in the kitchen of his one-bedroom apartment, Sight, a Black graffiti writer from South Central Los Angeles—who, at the height of his career as a graffiti writer, was considered a King among his peers—began reliving the morning the police raided his home in 2006. That morning, Sight was abruptly awakened by 10–15 sheriff's deputies storming into his grandmother's house with guns and body armor, yelling at him to get on the ground, arresting him for felony vandalism charges, and seizing his spray paint and a couple of his books. He was taken to a police station where detectives began interrogating him, asking him to admit to committing over a quarter of a million dollars in damage to Metropolitan Transit Authority property. The detectives were indifferent to the fact that Sight was more than simply a graffiti writer; he worked two jobs and attended classes at Los Angeles City College. The only thing they cared about was getting a confession from him about his activities as a graffiti vandal. During the interrogation, the detectives asked him to point to a photo of the most recent piece of graffiti they had of him on file, claiming they would immediately release him on probation if he cooperated. Sight cooperated but was not discharged. Instead, he was convicted of more than 70 counts of felony vandalism and handed the strictest sentence any graffiti writer has been given for producing graffiti in the State of California: 8 years and 4 months in state prison.

Sight believed he was targeted and severely punished for producing graffiti because the sheriffs, the Metro Transit Authority, and the California courts were making an example of him and sending a message to all the other graffiti writers and artists in Los Angeles. Eight years in the state penitentiary for producing graffiti sent a message meant to inflict fear on young people and serve as a deterrent to producing any form of graffiti. Sight's friends and fellow graffiti writers were, in his words, "shook," meaning they were frightened and alarmed. They lamented the decision. They were fearful for Sight's well-being in prison. They were upset at the judge and outraged at what they perceived to be such an unjust sentence. Indeed, Sight's punishment was a reminder of the racial and class inequality that existed in the criminal justice system, which racially profiles and severely punishes Black and Latinx peoples for minor crimes (Davis, 1990/2006; Rios, 2007; Waquant, 2001).

To be sure, Sight's sentence did inflict fear among his peers, but the message was also interpreted as a call for many of them to organize among themselves and find ways to, as a fellow graffiti writer put it, "take care of our own." One of the ways they decided to take care of their own was by creating a legal graffiti yard called the Vermont Arts District, a grassroots-organized space located in an unincorporated area of South Central Los Angeles, where graffiti writers and people from diverse social backgrounds safely gather, sell their art, and practice their art with one another. The creation of spaces like the Vermont Arts District can be interpreted as a direct response to the severe punishment Sight received and to the systematic negligence of the local government in providing life-affirming funding for recreational spaces and

centers, employment opportunities that pay living wages, adequate and affordable healthcare services, well-funded schools, and safe public spaces.

Indeed, Sight's case is exemplary of the structural processes that have negatively impacted many young, working-class Black and Latinx peoples in impoverished areas like South Central Los Angeles. These communities have been doubly affected by the withdrawal of the state in providing adequate resources and funding to produce social goods and ensure the backing of social rights; simultaneously, they bear the brunt of the bolstering of the state's carceral power (Alexander, 2010; Wacquant, 2001). On the one hand, the implementation of austerity measures and the withdrawal of the state to provide funding for social services in racialized and working-class neighborhoods, where young people like Sight lived, explains why these neighborhoods suffer from overcrowded and underfunded schools, and why they lack sufficient investment to build and maintain recreational spaces for after-school programs and employment opportunities (Gibbons, 2018; Gilmore, 2007). On the other hand, the strengthening of the power of the carceral state has manifested in an expansion of prisons, jails, and policing, which correlates with the disproportionate criminalization and incarceration of young Black and Latino men for committing petty crimes (Alexander, 2010; Camp & Heatheron, 2016; Gilmore, 2008; Rios, 2007; Wacquant, 2001). In other words, the mass funding of policing and carceral institutions is illustrative of the change in state capacities away from the production of social goods and services and toward concerns over security and securitization that disproportionately affected impoverished and

racialized communities. Sight's sentence is exemplary of "get tough on crime" discourses, of broken windows policing, and the zero-tolerance policies emblematic of the present historical conjecture of neoliberalism (Bloch, 2019a; Rios, 2007). Under these circumstances, Black and Latinx writers are left to create their own social institutions under unfavorable conditions.

This chapter focuses on the Vermont Arts District as a case study to critically explore how working-class Latinx and Black men make these unlivable conditions and spaces livable and habitable. Given their shared histories and experiences with colonization, dispossession, and criminalization, this chapter explores how poor and working-class Latinx and Black men transform the unfavorable places and harsh conditions they inhabit. These findings highlight what types of communities they forged and what social relationships they developed through graffiti in economically impoverished and overpoliced communities like South Central Los Angeles. Drawing from 30 in-depth interviews and participant observations, I argue that the creation and maintenance of the Vermont Arts District render visible the ways in which marginalized and criminalized youths of color from economically impoverished neighborhoods stake claims to spaces abandoned by capitalism and overpoliced by the city. In doing so, they transform them into spaces of congregation and empowerment.

By considering the lives of Black and Latinx graffiti writers in South Central Los Angeles, this study contributes to the growing scholarship that examines how racialized groups are studied comparatively and relationally, and how racially

aggrieved communities produce place-based identities alongside one another instead of in isolation to one another (Molina et al., 2019). Creating community across racial and ethnic difference is especially important as cities grow more ethnically and racially diverse and the existing wealth disparities in cities across the globe (Davis, 2006) leave many economically impoverished and aggrieved communities working with, and at times, struggling against one another, for resources and job security.

The first section of this chapter describes my entry into the Vermont Arts District. I describe how I gained access to the space and was able to converse with the main organizer of the yard and participate in the weekly events: the Graffiti Swapmeet and the Graffiti Café The second section describes how the Vermont Arts District was transformed from an alley that was popularly known as the death alley into a street gallery by local graffiti writers roughly around 2009. In this section, I illustrate how graffiti writers began engaging local gang members, neighbors, and businesses to gain permission to create a place for writers to congregate. The third and fourth sections discuss the weekly Graffiti Swapmeet and Graffiti Café events. These sections demonstrate the intergenerational and interracial relations that are built in these two weekly programs. I end the chapter with a discussion and analysis section where I examine the social significance of the Vermont Arts District to scholarship on the relational racialization of historically aggrieved communities and place the Vermont Arts District in conversations around interethnic and interracial place-based identities in postindustrial and neoliberal cities. Further, I discuss the possibilities for spaces like the Vermont Arts District to render visible the ways Black

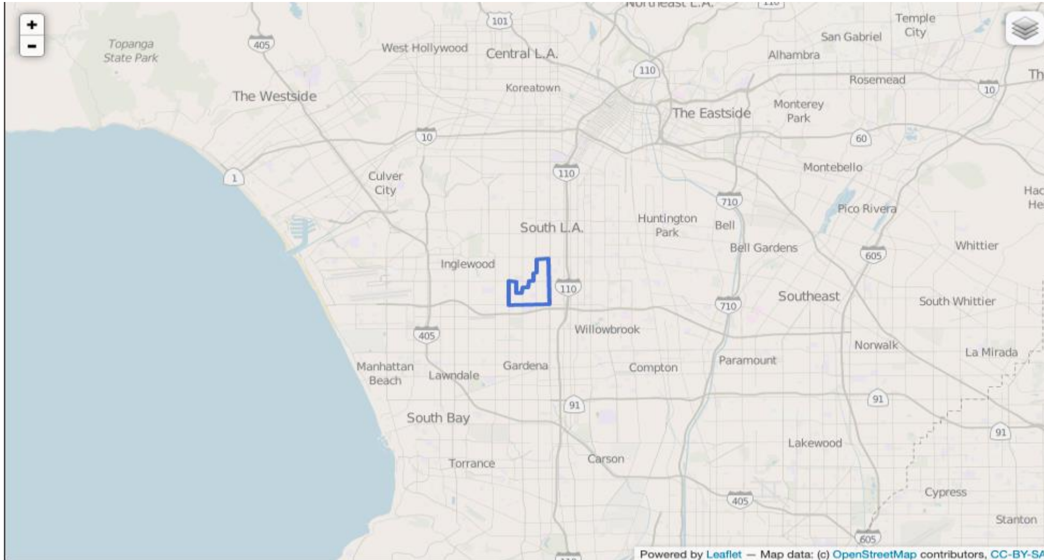
and Latinx peoples value devalued spaces and places and how they affirm their freedom of assembly and right to public space at this moment of racialized austerity and dispossession.

Entry to the Vermont Art District

The Vermont Art District is located in Tiny Westmont, an economically impoverished and racially segregated area of South Central Los Angeles that borders Gramercy Park to the west and Vermont Vista to the east (see Figure 18). I learned of the yard through Dazer and Sight, both South Central residents, who suggested I seek, speak, and paint with them at this location to understand why this site was so important to writers and the people in the area.

Figure 18

Map Depicting Tiny Westmont in Los Angeles



Note. From “Mapping L.A. Project: Westmont,” by Data Desk, n.d. (https://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/neighborhood/westmont/). *The Los Angeles Times*.

I drove to the yard to meet with Poet, the main organizer and founder of the yard in 2018. I was not sure if I could station my car at the parking lot where about a dozen writers were painting, so I decided to park next to the sidewalk near the parking lot. I stepped out and walked toward the group of predominantly Black and Latino men gathering in small clusters conversing with each other as they watched their peers painting the walls on the site.

As I entered the parking lot, I was greeted by a graffiti writer known as 6er, who was wearing a shirt designed by Sight. Sight never described the Vermont Arts

District to me during our conversations but encouraged me to visit. To him, this was a rare place in South Central after the abrupt closure of Landmark Inc., a small graffiti venue and yard that was located north of the area, in 2009 when the main organizer, a 20-year-old Latino and South Central writer named Novel, passing away from cancer. Across the small lot, young and older Latino and Black men were gathering, smoking, leaving their signature monikers on blackbooks, and painting alongside one another (see Figure 19).

Figure 19

The Vermont Art District in South Central Los Angeles

Note. Photo taken by Poet in 2019. Reprinted with permission.

I found the parking lot where the Vermont Arts District is located rather small, yet its walls were saturated and layered with elaborate graffiti pieces, a palimpsest of stylized identities, and an untold public history. Pieces by Poet and Sight decorated the parking lot's interior wall left intact and undisturbed by the writers painting in the yard. Sight was popularly known as an all city writer and a legend in South Central because he was one of the few graffiti writers who was consistent with bombing, or painting his moniker all over the metropolitan area of the city, prior to his arrest and imprisonment in 2006. On the fenced concrete wall near the alley, three Latino men were painting a wild-style piece of their crew that read "PIE." They told me they traveled here from the Westside of Los Angeles to paint, and they have a close friendship with Poet and Shiver, the two main organizers of the yard. Although they are not locals, they share a sense of comradery and relationship with South Central writers like 6er, which allows them to inhabit and paint alongside other writers in the Vermont Arts District.

After speaking with some PIE crew members who were painting, I noticed a car parking in the lot. Poet came out and 6er immediately walked toward the vehicle to greet him. Shiver waved at him, and Poet and 6er walk toward Shiver's car. Poet was wearing a long, white T-shirt with "Graffiti Swapmeet" printed on it, baggy blue jeans, and Nike shoes. 6er, a Black man around his mid-30s, was also wearing baggy clothes, including a long, black shirt with white printed letters in graffiti style spelling out "Sight." Shiver was an older white man who was in his 40s. Tall and hefty, he reclined on the trunk of his car wearing blue jean shorts with a black and white

checkered shirt. They huddled, leaning on the trunk of Shiver's car, from which he sold spray paint to the graffiti writers who came to paint in the yard. Shiver insisted he did not profit from selling spray paint. He always broke even and sold it to support the writers at the yard. For readers not familiar with South Central Los Angeles, it is important to note there are no professional art stores in this area, nor shops selling specialized graffiti spray paint or graffiti tips. Shiver's position at the yard is particularly important given the lack of establishments supporting artistic individuals and creative initiatives in this economically impoverished and racially segregated neighborhood.

I walked toward Poet and 6er to introduce myself, and reminded Poet I reached out to him in a message earlier in the day. I mentioned Sight recommended I speak with him and Shiver to get to know more about them and the Vermont Arts District. Poet began his writing career during the 1980s and organized several cultural and social spaces emphasizing graffiti writing and art in metropolitan Los Angeles since 2006. The Vermont Arts District was his third attempt at creating a legal graffiti yard. He identified as a Chicano, a Latino, a graffiti writer, a B-boy (i.e., breakdancer), and a youth and community organizer. The more we spoke, the more I listened and engaged in conversation with everyone in the yard. Interested in knowing more about the Vermont Arts District—its history, its purpose, and how it serves graffiti writers and the larger Black and Latinx community in the area—I interviewed and conversed with its main organizer, Poet, and others who participated in the weekly events. I visited the yard multiple times between 2018 and 2020.

The demographic makeup of writers who frequent the Vermont Arts District resembles the ethnic, racial, and class demographics of the people living in this unincorporated and racially segregated area of Los Angeles. According to the Mapping L.A. Project (Data Desk, n.d.),which reports using census data from 2000, the percentage of African Americans who live in Westmont is one of the highest in the county of Los Angeles. More than 50% of the population living in the 1.84 square-mile radius are African American, and nearly 40% of the population are Latinx; about 24% of the latter population are of Mexican descent and about 17% are of El Salvadorean descent. Westmont has one of the highest numbers of young people between the ages of 10 and 18, and one of the highest percentages of single-headed households in Los Angeles County. An estimated 31% of children and 22% of the population who called Westmont home lived below the poverty line (Data Desk, n.d.). Approximately 60% of residents rented apartments or homes. The median household income was $31,572, making it one of the most economically impoverished neighborhoods in Los Angeles County. Like much of South Central, less than 6% of people 25 years or older had a 4-year degree, and most of Westmont's residents had either a high school diploma, a General Education Certificate, or had dropped out of high school entirely (Data Desk, n.d.).

Interpersonal and gang violence is too familiar to many graffiti writers and residents who frequent the Vermont Art District. The alley was fully decorated with colorful (master)pieces. Where Poet, Shiver, 6er, and others usually congregated on a weekly basis was previously known as “murder alley” due to high levels of gang

violence and murders that occurred down this backstreet. It did not take long to recognize how mass unemployment, over policing, defunding of public infrastructure and social services, deterioration of schools, inadequate health services, unsafe public spaces, and other factors destroyed the living conditions in areas like Westmont in South Central. These factors helped to produce an urban social environment that encouraged radical division between impoverished peoples. In this context, the creation of the Vermont Art District may be interpreted as a way Black and Latino graffiti writers creatively transform what Davis (1998) referred to an "ecology of fear" (p. 363) into a site of interracial solidarity. To fully comprehend the significance of the Vermont Art District, scholars must first examine how Black and Latino graffiti writers and artists transformed what has popularly been considered a death alley into a public art gallery.

From Death Alley to a Public Art Gallery

The alley stretching from north to south in the Vermont Arts District has been popularly referred to as a "death alley" by residents and news reporters to account for the gang-related violence and murders in this area of South Central. As I illustrate in this section, the transformation of death alley into an unofficial public art gallery demonstrates the creative ways Black and Latino graffiti writers and artists create social spaces amid unfavorable conditions. More broadly, it illustrates how racially aggrieved communities of color engage in art-based community projects that demonstrate their refusal to live unlivable destinies.

A homicide report by Santa Cruz and Schwencke (2014) presented data on 61 people, mainly Black and Latino men, who were murdered between 2007 to 2014 on a 2-mile stretch on or near South Vermont Avenue between Manchester Avenue and Imperial Highway. Nearly every street in this area of Westmont was claimed by gangs like The Hoovers, Underground Crips, Raymond Crips, and Rolling 100s. According to the report, Westmont was one of the deadliest places to live in the County of Los Angeles. Its homicide rates were among the highest throughout the county and disproportionately affected Black and Latino young men. The report stated that "men account for nearly 85% of homicide victims. One of every three males killed is between 17 and 25. About half of the county's population, Latinos account for nearly half of all killings since 2007" (Santa Cruz & Schwencke, 2014, para. 18). Further, it stated, "Blacks, just 8% of the county's residents, remain disproportionately affected, accounting for 32% of homicides" (Santa Cruz & Schwencke, 2014, para. 19).

Homicide reports support local claims of entrenched neighborhood violence, but often sensationalize murders involving Black and Latino residents and evade discussing underlying structural causes for the homicide rates. The death alley is, in fact, a byproduct of racialized austerity that denies direly needed financial investment in economically impoverished neighborhoods like South Central Los Angeles. Lacking structural support from city governments, South Central residents are left to struggle with such conditions on their own.

Graffiti artists like Poet are aware of this alley's history. Like many Latino and Black residents of South Central, Poet knew the interpersonal violence in this neighborhood. In one of our interviews at the Vermont Arts District, and without mentioning the homicide report discussed previously, Poet explained the significance of creating a graffiti yard that functions as a public art gallery and its relationship to death alley:

> This alley right here used to be called murder alley because of all the killings taking place here. People would be scared to walk down this alley. There would be body bags here. I began to speak with local businesses and gangs to ask if it was okay for me and others to meet and paint in this parking lot [right next to the alley]. Everybody knows me because I am an old head, and little by little, we began to expand.

Like 6er, Dazer, Sight, and many others who frequented the yard, Poet had lived in South Central for most of his life. His familiarity with the people from the neighborhood, and specifically in Westmont, facilitated his understanding of the context and history of violence associated with the alley. His long presence in this community legitimized him and helped him develop rapport with local businesses, residents, and gangs.

The process of establishing the yard required ongoing dialogue to convince other stakeholders, such as the local businesses and residents in the area and not the local gangs. Poet approached the workers and owner of the autobody shop down the street on 93rd Street and Vermont with his plan. Anticipating they would ask him for evidence to demonstrate he was a skilled artist, Poet brought his blackbook, a graffiti writer's art portfolio, to present his art. He began conversations by asking the owners of the autobody shop and stores to envision art on the walls and fences along the

alleys, beautifying and serving as advertisements for their shops. He would draw comparisons between the tags and graffiti already on the walls and fences and those from his portfolio. He proposed painting the walls and fences with elaborate graffiti art to evade taggers randomly spray painting on their walls and prevent businesses from paying the city when they forgot or could not afford to paint over graffiti on their property. Poet stated:

> I started talking to these local businesses right here [pointing to the store on the corner and the street across from us], telling them, "Wouldn't you rather see some dope art on the walls of your business rather than these tags and then get taxed by the city to remove the graffiti tags every week?"

Poet was not devaluing the tags he was proposing to paint over; instead, he was articulating the unwritten values among graffiti writers, who considered tags, especially those executed with little skill, in a hierarchy of graffiti writing. To fully understand Poet's comparison between tags and "dope art," we must understand the value system of this clandestine community of writers. Tags are essential but can be *topped*, or painted over, with larger and more aesthetically complex forms of graffiti. Poet referred to aerosol murals, or what many call productions, when he talked about dope art. Productions take a team of artists to execute and usually take a week or weeks to finish, depending on the scale of the surface on which they are painting, the time they have, and available resources. Poet's comparison of what he referred to as dope art (i.e., aerosol murals and productions) in contrast to tagging is not surprising. What Poet is doing is articulating an already established hierarchy that conforms with the rules and values of graffiti writers: aerosol murals are considered better compared to tags among graffiti writers.

Poet's second point referred to an ordinance some cities in Los Angeles passed in the early 2010s that charged businesses that allowed graffiti to remain visible on their property for over 2 days. Companies were held liable for their walls as part of a proposed graffiti abatement program. By charging small business owners in this way, the city outsourced responsibility for cleaning graffiti to the businesses and created animosity toward taggers who defaced their property.

Aware that writers needed the consent of neighbors to paint in the alley, Poet requested permission from residents because the walls in the alleys were technically their property. The process involved making sure residents knew the difference between graffiti writers and gang members and reassuring them that the alley would be cleaned and there would be no violence among the people painting. Poet shared:

> I started asking the neighbors if it was okay with them for us to paint the walls in the alleys every weekend. I needed to tell them because even if the businesses let us paint, it was right next to the houses, on the back walls of their houses in the alley. I had to explain to them that we weren't gangsters and that we were artists just trying to paint. I went door-to-door knocking and telling them "Hey, I live here, too, I grew up around here. Me and the guys just want a place to paint." I told them exactly what we were planning to do. We would clean the alley and keep the walls clean.

Making the distinction between gangs and writers intelligible to residents was difficult. Unlike graffiti writers, many residents cannot easily distinguish hip-hop graffiti from gang graffiti. Poet again made use of his blackbook to offer examples of the type of art he and his peers were planning to produce. He showed them his most elaborate, colorful pieces and original characters. Some neighbors were ambivalent about the project and others gave permission to paint if the artists kept the alley clean. In this respect, Poet was quick to point out the garbage that accumulated over months

in the alley, which the city hardly picked up. At the same time, Poet and his peers knew firsthand the constant harassment that accompanied the questioning from police officers whenever they saw Black and Latino people spray paint on the streets, and strategically acknowledged this issue upon their request. Poet recalled saying:

> Look at the garbage and the dumped furniture here. We are going to clean this up and all we are asking for is your permission in case the police come and start tripping and we can tell them that y'all gave us permission.

The Black and Latino graffiti writers who regularly meet here rely on the permission they obtain from the residents and local businesses to offset any problems with the police. This permission is crucial. I heard several stories of graffiti writers being stopped, handcuffed, and questioned, even when they communicated to the police officers that they had obtained permission from residents. Aux, a Latino graffiti artist from South Central, recalled being stopped by police at a wall in an alley several writers had organized to paint with the permission of residents. Police came swiftly to detain and handcuff Aux. Aux and the others were explaining the situation to the police and it took residents over an hour to convince the police they commissioned the graffiti. Incidents like these highlight tensions not only between graffiti writers and police, but also between working-class Black and Latino people and law enforcement in South Central. These incidents are also one of the reasons why Poet and other writers sought consent from residents in establishing the Vermont Arts District as a legal graffiti yard.

Poet's initiative and strong commitment to establishing a graffiti yard came from his experience in creating other legal graffiti yards in Los Angeles between

2000 and 2010. His first project took place around 2006 in the Pico-Union District, just west of Downtown Los Angeles, where he organized what is now known as The Graff Lab. Later, around 2008, Poet and a pastor from a Catholic church organized a place called Graffroots in Norwalk. At both sites, he sharpened his skills in speaking with parents, residents, and gang members. For each project, he also envisioned creating what he called a “roundtable of graffiti writers,” or a place where writers could organize themselves to produce aerosol murals for the neighborhood and involve Black and Latino youths in the production of aerosol art.

Disappointed with the leadership in both of these prior projects and fueled by an urgency to develop a project in his hometown of South Central, Poet started the Vermont Arts District. The yard is in South Central Los Angeles, which is important not only for Poet, but also for the multiple Latino and Black writers who frequent the yard. For many of these youth, hardly any teen centers or community centers take their interest in this art seriously. Rather than being arrested by police for painting illegally, Poet gathered as many people as possible to join him. Conscious about this lack of teen centers, community centers, and access to safe public spaces in this area of Los Angeles was instructive for Poet in his commitment to actualizing his vision.

The Vermont Arts District can be interpreted as a remedy for policies and processes that leave many Black and Latino youths in impoverished neighborhoods structurally vulnerable to hunger, subpar education, inadequate healthcare, racial profiling, and interpersonal violence. By structural violence, I refer to the multiple ways social, political, and economic systems negatively impact Black, Latinx, and

other poor and racialized communities by putting them at risk to the point of death. These systems include racism, residential segregation, imprisonment, and other forms of social marginalization and exclusion that lead to poverty, crime, incarceration, and lack of care or access to safe public spaces. In other words, structural violence refers to the social forces that harm vulnerable populations by producing and perpetuating inequality in health and well-being. Like many Black and Latino writers who frequent the yard, Poet was aware that the harmful conditions in economically impoverished areas like South Central can induce and produce both the worst and the best in people. Frequent fights, territorial grudges, and lack of dialogue fuel violence and hostility among writers outside of the yard.

Interpersonal violence among and between young Latino and Black men is an unfortunate reality for many residents and graffiti writers in South Central Los Angeles. Aux experienced multiple instances when he got “hit up” (i.e., confronted and questioned about gang and graffiti crew affiliation) by local gang members from his area. He usually answered by denying any affiliation to gangs and replying, “I don’t bang.” This response elicited multiple responses depending on the mood and intentions of Aux’s interrogators, but it was usually enough for them to leave him alone and not pursue further confrontation. Yet, gang members were not the only ones who demanded to know where Aux was from. In recalling these moments, Aux shared:

> There are a lot of hotheads out here who are all about tag-banging, you know. They be like, “Where you from?” because they are looking for people who they beef with. I usually tell them I don’t write to avoid problems.

The "hotheads" Aux described were not quite writers and not quite gang members, but were what are typically known as *tag bangers*, a strand of graffiti writers who resemble the structure of a gang and typically stick to one specific area but do not claim it as their territory. They care less for the aesthetic practice of mastering graffiti skills and prefer to remain local rather than being "up" across the city. Compared to all city writers who resolve issues through their styles or the consistency of their crew being "up" in the city, tag bangers often resolve problems using physical force.

Importantly, interpersonal violence between graffiti writers, tag bangers, and gang members is often gendered and sexualized. Young, working-class Latinas like Meus, for example, were not usually hit up in the same aggressive manner by either men or women who wrote. Meus was also a long-time resident of South Central and was aware of the interpersonal and gang violence prevalent among young people in the area. Reflecting on the times she had been "hit up" (i.e., asked if she identified as a graffiti writer), Meus replied it was rarely the case, sharing:

> To think about it, they usually hit up guys. I'm like, I write, too, but I'm glad I don't put up with that shit. The other day, I was walking with Aux and another dude, and they got hit up by some bald-headed guys, but they didn't ask me anything.

Tag bangers and gang members perform what Connell (2017) called *hegemonic masculinity*. By aggressively demanding to know where people are from and similar unsolicited confrontations, tag bangers and gang members assert what a society rooted in dominance naturalizes as men's natural right to dominate and subordinate men, women, and nonbinary groups.

Rather than assuming monolithic, essentialist, and pathological ideas about and conceptions of Latino and Black men as inherently *machistas* (i.e., patriarchal), this form of masculinity is learned and earned across racial and ethnic lines. It is an assertion of power and control over women and other men that is not simply a Latino, Black, or working-class trait. As Chant (2002) and other scholars demonstrated, men asserted—in fact, performed—their masculinity in front of other men as an expression of patriarchal domination.

This form of dominance is not a natural or inherent aspect of Latino or Black men (Rios & Sarabia, 2016). It reflects the values, expectations, attitudes, and behaviors dominant in the society in which they live and the social conditions limiting their exposure to alternative forms of being men. Patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity obstruct other ways through which young Latino and Black men can develop alternative masculinities. Studies have demonstrated that, when it comes to Latino and Black men, punitive forms of policing, incarceration, and state supervision encourages and emboldens a rigid form of masculinity that provides them with a deceptive sense of manhood (Rios & Sarabia, 2016). These studies have suggested punitive treatment toward youths of color enables a set of violent and gendered practices that hinders them from obtaining upward social mobility, limits their interaction with each other in alternative and wholesome ways, and rewards violence and crime (Rios, 2007). Interpersonal violence, in other words, is closely connected to larger structural and systematic forms of violence.

Speaking about the tensions and animosities between graffiti writers and his involvement in them, Poet recognized he was not innocent of this form of confrontation with other writers in the past. Yet, reflecting on his experiences as both a perpetrator and victim of violence gave him the incentive to find ways to right his wrongs. Poet shared:

> You have a weird mixture of kids picking up [spray] cans thinking that they could just write over people and cross people out and then you have the creation of tag banging crews that ended up mixing gang violence with graffiti culture. I am not innocent of this. I mean, I hate to say it but, I took part in developing one of the most violent graffiti crews. I am not going to say the crew's name. We were young, and we didn't know how much damage we would do to each other. People got jumped and shot. We didn't know the damage we were doing to each other, how far we strayed from the culture, you know. My crew created beef with other writers who were not from our crew and with kids that were from different crews in our neighborhoods and outside of our neighborhoods. We began beating [fools] up just because they were rivals. The beefs usually started by slashing each other out, by having similar letters to our crew. It is an ugly story. People were no longer excited to meet other writers. We feared each other. We feared being hit up and being caught slipping. . . . I am not innocent of all this. I had to leave Los Angeles because of all the beef. I went to Arizona to be with my pops. I came back in the 2000s to L.A. and even when I came back, the beef with other crews was still popping. I made sure that I tried to correct my wrongs. That's why I started organizing spaces like this. To return to the principles of graffiti. To start focusing on spaces like this. Shit, that is one of the reasons why I appreciate the RTN yard on Slauson and always kept painting there with people like King Cre8. That is one of the reasons I started organizing places like the Graff Lab in Pico-Union.

Poet's personal experience as both a victim and perpetrator of violence informed his goal of alleviating past injuries and calling communities into being through graffiti art in places like the Vermont Arts District. His assessment of his past and his goal to right his wrongs was a process that took several years. His return to Los Angeles from his stay in Arizona involved renaming himself from Pre One to Poet. As he later

revealed, changing his name was part of the process and essential to transforming his politics. This process was further encouraged by his time building meaningful relationships with Black veteran graffiti writers from South Central like King Cre8, a veteran graffiti writer and artist, and others at the RTN yard, which was popularly known as the Slauson Tracks.

In many ways, the Vermont Arts District builds from the history of the RTN yard, or as some call it, the Slauson yard, which was created and led by nearly all Black members of the RTN crew, one of the oldest graffiti crews in South Central Los Angeles. Like other veteran graffiti writers at the Vermont Arts District, members of the RTN crew prioritized what they perceived as the original principles of the art itself. For them, graffiti was an accessible method of self-determination, an artistic form of individual and collective expression, a method to make oneself visible in a society that renders Black and Latino youths invisible, and a way to claim spaces otherwise denied to many youths in marginalized communities.

As described in the following sections, the social relations at the Vermont Arts District are focused on community building and popular education. Through graffiti, Poet and other co-organizers brought together and uplifted disenfranchised youths of color. Weekly painting sessions served as the meeting ground where Black and Latino youth and graffiti veterans from the area articulated their shared struggles and affirmed their identities as Chicano, Black, and more saliently, writers and artists from South Central. Artistic development, community building, and interracial and

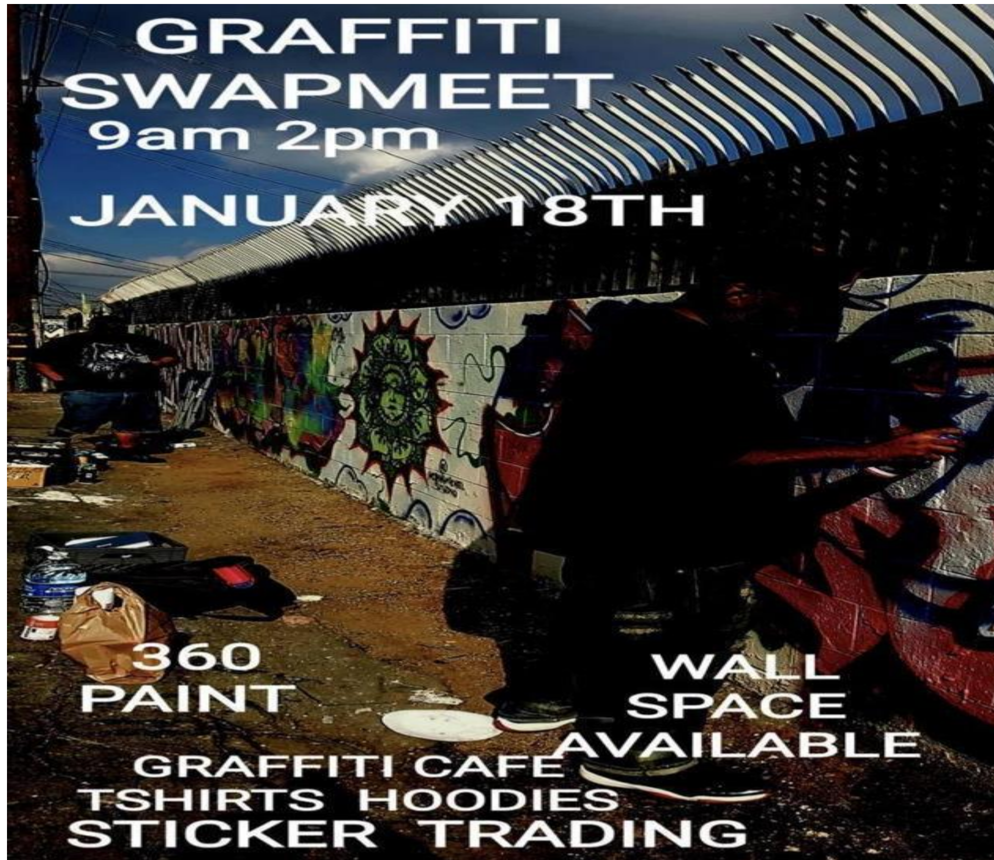
intergenerational cooperation take place in the weekly events referred to as the Graffiti Swapmeet, which I discuss in more detail in the next section.

The Graffiti Swapmeet: Mentorship and Empowerment Among Black and Latino Writers

The Graffiti Swapmeet is a project at the Vermont Arts District. It is composed of weekly events where graffiti artists from diverse backgrounds and different parts of the city affirm their identities as graffiti writers and artists and develop meaningful social relationships. At these events, they meet to paint alongside each other, exchange stickers with stylized signatures, and sketch on each other's blackbooks. The events occur every Saturday or Sunday from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. The yard is maintained through $5 donations for what organizers call "walls-space," to cover the expenses of cleaning the alley and parking lot and purchasing roller paint to have clean walls for writers who participate in the weekly painting sessions. Here, writers meet other writers from across the city in their attempts to beautify the neighborhood with the talents they developed over time. Although open to all, mostly Black and Latino men frequent the yard. As I demonstrate in this section, the Graffiti Swapmeet (see Figure 20) is a site where Black and Latino graffiti artists create meaningful social relationships based on mutual respect and dignity for the art they produce and for the neighborhood both groups consider home.

Figure 20

Promotion Flyer for Graffiti Swapmeet



Note. Photo taken by Poet in 2019. Reprinted with permission.

Each One Teach One

The "each one, teach one" philosophy guided the weekly interactions and practices of mutual respect between Black and Latino writers at the Vermont Arts District. This philosophy derived from an African American proverb originating from enslaved African peoples, who were denied an education during chattel slavery in the United States. "Each one, teach one" is a pedagogy of community care and

empowerment where the learned or initiated holds responsibility and duty to teach others. I first heard of this philosophy during my interview with King Cre8. To him, people who are more skilled and trained have a responsibility to teach, educate, and mentor the younger generation. Speaking about his philosophy and approach to graffiti at the yard, King Cre8 shared:

> I am a firm believer in the "each one, teach one" philosophy as a principle of "going back" [and giving back]. A lot of people grow and never tend to give back. Sometimes it's not everybody's responsibility to do that, but I guess it is in me that I want to reach back and give not just only to my community, but to the world because my thing is, if we don't pass down the torch to other up-and-coming talented young people, then we will have a generation gap of people who don't know the history of the art form, nor will they understand the principles of different things [like] who invented what, where did this style come from, what does it mean. . . . [Mentees should have an] understanding of the fact that there is a lot of room for growth for them to invent new things as well to the art form.

As a Black veteran graffiti writer from the RTN crew and a resident of South Central, King Cre8 interpreted "each one, teach one" through the principle of "going back and giving back." This idiomatic expression refers to the duty of experienced, seasoned, and especially successful graffiti writers to share the knowledge and resources they have acquired for themselves throughout their career with others from their community. To be sure, King Cre8 was talking about "going back and giving back" to specific communities: the Black and Latinx community of South Central Los Angeles and the larger community of graffiti writers and artists. These politics emerged from a people who have been negatively impacted by what Gilmore (2008) called "organized abandonment" (p. 31) and feel the brunt of racial discrimination, mass imprisonment, financial disinvestment, subpar education, and other social ills

that create cumulative vulnerabilities. Thus, the principle of “going back and giving back” can be interpreted as a politics of valuing undervalued art, places, and people.

As a responsibility of more seasoned graffiti writers and artists, King Cre8 situated himself in a genealogy of graffiti legends. Through mentoring, veteran graffiti artists pay their respect to their mentors and continue the tradition of imparting knowledge to mentees. In doing so, they imagine themselves as teachers and masters like those who taught them and who now have a responsibility to relinquish traditions and knowledges to another. King Cre8’s stated:

> I am what you can consider a style writer. I am an extension of other great masters and kings of this culture and of this art form. So, it is my responsibility and duty to bring the most elite, magnificent, and talented artists that haven’t got their shine. It is my responsibility to bring some of the best into a project.

This lineage is especially important for an art that is popular yet noninstitutionalized. For King Cre8, “each one, teach one” is a philosophy of empowerment and a method through which subjugated knowledges, in the words of hooks (1995), is transmitted from generation to generation of writers.

The passing down of knowledge is important when considering that cultural institutions in the United States like museums and academic research largely ignore the contributions of these artists and their form of art. Although books such as *Graffiti L.A*. (Grody, 2006) and *The City Beneath* (Phillips, 2019) have recorded the broad community of graffiti in Los Angeles, many historical figures from South Central and their contributions to the art are minimally recorded. In this sense, the knowledge King Cre8, Poet, and the other veteran graffiti writers who frequent the yard pass

down to younger generations is knowledge often bypassed by cultural institutions and academic work. The graffiti writers and artists at the Vermont Arts District are the main vehicles through which a tradition of knowledge native to this area is transmitted and inherited. This last point will become clearer in the upcoming discussion of the significance of storytelling at the Graffiti Cafe.

More broadly, King Cre8, like Poet and the other Black and Latino graffiti writers and artists who occasionally participated in the weekly events, spoke of graffiti as a tradition rooted in their shared past. For every project in which they engaged, they acted as a collective, or an extended family of artists that share an identity. This grounding in a cultural tradition of graffiti writing becomes significant in recognizing the potential of everyone at the art-based community projects in which they engaged both in the yard and beyond. In speaking about the social relationship among writers and their collective efforts at the yard, King Cre8 stated:

> We have an extended family of different artists that are like brothers, and we share a common thinking about knowing who we are, and when I say who we are, I am talking about our roots, our cultures, our richness, and our legacies. And so, everybody that I pull on the team, I already know what kind of superpowers they have. With the fact that I know their superpowers, I put everyone in assigned places to be able to navigate and orchestrate what they need to do.

In collective art projects at the yard, Black and Latino graffiti writers and artists get to know each other more closely, to the point that they slowly come to recognize each other as kin (i.e., as relatives and extended family members). To illustrate the type of social relationships that emerged in the weekly events, consider

the case of Aux, who shared his experience painting with King Cre8 and other members of the all-Black graffiti crew, RTN.

Aux

Aux met and became King Cre8's mentee in 2019. They met through different organizations, like Intervention, Prevention, and Response Healing Artz Space in South Central Los Angeles and the South Central Arts project, but they first painted and developed a relationship at the Vermont Arts District. I asked Aux, a Latino man, how he was recruited to RTN, a historically Black graffiti crew, and how he became King Cre8's mentee. By explaining how he developed a commitment to becoming a graffiti artist, Aux related a story of his earliest memories of practicing graffiti.

Aux began writing during middle school, but never had a mentor or anyone who was, in his words, "rooted in the culture." His early graffiti days were spent tagging and "never really practicing [his] letters and style." Like many other teens, the crew he was a part in those early years was more into getting into fights rather than battling through style. It was not until he met King Cre8 and other serious graffiti writers and artists years later that he began to take seriously his role as an artist. This change took a lot of dialogue and constant interactions with older graffiti writers and artists.

During one of the weekly painting events organized at the Vermont Arts District, Aux remembered being chosen to be part of a collective effort by people he began to perceive as his mentors. King Cre8 was the lead artist on this project and decided to give each member of his team a role in the production of a piece they were

invited to paint at the yard. Rather than paint a (master)piece of his name, King Cre8 chose to do a piece of the crew. Despite being a newcomer and what some would consider an apprentice, Aux was chosen to take part in painting with the rest of the crew. King Cre8 stated:

> I was chosen by Cre8 to do the lettering. He could have chosen anyone. He said, “They invited me, but I do not want to do my name. I want to do an RTN. I want to do a group effort.” So, he invited me. I showed him the sketches I had of RTN. He told me “you’re going to do that. You’re going to sketch out the letters.” And it was me, Mark 7, and my homie Mask1. I met Poet the same day. We exchanged a few words, and he gave us a spot.

I asked Aux how he felt being called to participate in the production of this piece at the yard with graffiti veterans, to which he replied:

> I felt at home. It’s like, how can I describe it? It’s hard to describe. I felt like I was among legends and people still learning what it is like to be a graffiti writer, you know? It’s not just tagging. It’s building masterpieces and learning [how to provoke] that perception in the audience like, “Wow, how did they do that?” I am in the middle [of legends and beginners]. I’m like, I have been through that phase, but I am also learning how to master my skills and my letters, and I have the right teachers around me and the right mentors, so it is like it felt blissful. I saw AOne there, the I2Ws, and P45. I was so inspired and started piecing on my backpack when Digital came up to me and was very supportive, saying, “You got style right there.”

What Aux described is the process of engaging in an intergenerational transfer of knowledge between veteran graffiti writers and novices at the yard. This intergenerational transfer of knowledge means more than simply teaching the next generation how to tag or piece; rather, it is a method that calls communities into being. Aux’s mentors recognized his “superpowers” and assigned him the task of sketching the letters of the crew. The others helped by drawing from their own artistic strengths, producing characters, adding 3-D or shadows to the letters, and providing a

colorful background, among other tasks. In this example, the principle of "going back and giving back" translates to a willful recognition of the creative potential in each individual—and, in this case, Aux—and encourages resourcefulness, reciprocity, and collective effort.

The weekly graffiti events known as the Graffiti Swapmeet at the Vermont Arts District are an art-based community project in which Black and Latino graffiti writers and artists affirmed their identities and developed meaningful social relationships. The neighborhood of South Central was extremely important for these writers. Although graffiti is the artistic expression tying them together, respect and a deep sense of pride in being from South Central also informed their identities. This privileging of their neighborhood becomes evident through their weekly gatherings, called Graffiti Cafe, to which I turn to next.

The Graffiti Cafe: Storytelling and Developing a Place-Based Identity

The Graffiti Cafe is part of the art-based community project in the Vermont Arts District. This project began around 2018 with the goal of gathering graffiti artists of all ages right before weekend painting sessions to have conversations, build relationships over coffee, and, most importantly, have the older generation share a history of local graffiti legends. In these sessions and throughout the weekly events, storytelling takes a central role. The stories shared are mostly centered around Black and Latino graffiti writers who had been bypassed by the larger graffiti community and books published about graffiti. These stories highlight how racial and place-based identities are connected, and how Latino and Black residents of South Central share a

deep love and pride for their neighborhoods because they grew up and tested their resilience in this place. The Graffiti Cafe may concentrate on stories of graffiti, but in doing so, it illustrates the ways older generations, especially Poet and King Cre8, articulated an emerging identity in which Black and Latino youths find common ground and in a common home.

As stated previously, for many veterans now in their 40s and 50s, South Central graffiti history is largely ignored by both mainstream graffiti exhibits and even in books written on Los Angeles graffiti, which tend to privilege and emphasize the Eastside of Los Angeles for its development of Barrio calligraphy or the Westside of Los Angeles in developing hip-hop graffiti. The conversations that occur in the Graffiti Cafe are important to the older generations of South Central for reasons beyond sharing space and drinking morning beverages. Through these conversations, they share the histories of people who they imagine as part of their legacy and who have contributed new social relationships through art yet are rarely acknowledged in the graffiti community.

One of my early meetings with Poet and Shiver at the Vermont Arts District was over a cup of coffee in the parking lot. Here, they began to share histories of graffiti writers who, for many of the older generation, were influential in the development of their styles, ways of life, and manners in which they carried themselves, and shaped their views of graffiti as an artistic expression of a people who were rich in creativity but limited in resources. Here, we begin to see how stories

articulate a meaningful and empowering identification with the historically underserved neighborhoods of South Central Los Angeles.

Standing near Shiver's car during a weekly gathering, Poet shared stories of the earliest graffiti writers he met during his early days as a beginner. Leen One was a kid who left a deep impact on Poet's style of writing; Leen's audacity to paint his moniker in memorable places during the 1980s influenced how Poet saw graffiti. Poet spoke of Leen poetically, in a vernacular, easily comprehensible form:

> Early 80s! A kid named Leen One. See the alley. The corner of the alley entrance. It once was the back of the little market that was there. That back wall was pieced by Leen, which was in Orange fill-ins and with a green outline. By 1984, it faded away quickly like so many, but that piece impacted some of us with his style of letters. He was one of the first to paint on Normandie. That whole wall was hit by TW2 and OTB, and the Harlem crips. I don't have pictures but good memories and locations.

The naming of streets representing South Central is important to note. Normandie is best known among youth for being the avenue where the 1992 Los Angeles uprising began. Poet specifically focused on areas not far from Vermont, where the yard is located, with which South Central residents are familiar. In telling these stories, Poet and others demonstrated they too began their graffiti careers by admiring and being mentored by a generation who came before them. In essence, what Poet was doing through these narratives was situating himself and those who come to share space and paint in the yard as inheritors of a tradition of writing that emerged in these streets. More closely to the yard, Poet shared a story of another influential writer, highlighting again the intersections of South Central:

> Seeme One. 88th and Vermont. An Afro-American writer from New York city was here in Los Angeles. I met Seeme in 1987. Coming home from an art

> store in Manchester and Vermont, I heard this huge guy say, "Yo, you write?" Because back then, writers dressed like writers, and you were [recognized] as a writer just by the way [you] dressed. He told me where he lived. In the building [of 88th and Vermont,] so the next day I show up at his place and he busts out some piece books with some pieces and a dude named Bizarre from Los Angeles [with] computer styles, with blocks, color schemes, 3D, all that AND some, photo albums of some trains from New York. He let me have a few sketches but I lost them through the years. Just another South Central history I wanted to share.

The emphasis on place, particularly 88th Street and Vermont, a few blocks away from the yard, reveals the centrality of South Central in these accounts. His personal story of meeting Seeme One was, in essence, an account of how graffiti writers created relationships through their common practice of graffiti at an early age. Indeed, what many of the older interlocutors shared with me was a feeling that younger generations might be missing out on certain things that benefited them when they began writing. Mentorship from older and knowledgeable writers, traveling to different graffiti yards across the city, and doing commissioned work alongside older writers were among some of the things they mentioned.

Acknowledging these South Central graffiti writers, many of whom either moved out of South Central or no longer paint, is a form of paying respect to older generations who helped them establish an identity as graffiti writers. This point became clear when people like King Cre8 began to identify many of them as part of his "family tree of style and flavor." After sharing how Poet met Seeme, King Cre8 quickly confirmed the legitimacy of the account and encouraged others to learn about them so they may know the "roots" of L.A. graffiti. For him, older generations play an important part in educating younger generations on this place-based and

noninstitutionalized art history. Like his comments during my interviews, King Cre8 continued to position himself as "an extension of other great masters and kings of this culture and of this art form."

Referencing the multiple writers Poet mentioned in his stories, King Cre8 shared:

> No one knows who they are and it is our responsibility and duty to share these jewels and educate. [This] is my actual family tree of style and flavor. Seeme taught me. I have some of Seeme's artwork and I have some of Bizzare's artwork from way back when he was teaching ME. Thank you greatly for sharing this with people who need to know. South Central L.A. True history.

The repeated reference to South Central and the streets in this area were deliberate. Like many residents of South Central Los Angeles, Poet, Dazer, Sight, 6er, and the youth who frequented the Vermont Arts District were conscious of the negative connotations the label of South Central historically carried. When questioned about why he continued to reference these streets, Poet responded:

> They think that just cuz we're from the ghetto means we are stupid. We have knuckleheads, sure, but some of us are smart, intelligent, sharp, talented, and underappreciated. Even in the history of graffiti, we are left out of the conversation and story. When you hear about Los Angeles graffiti, people focus on the East and the West, but never the South. South Central gets little to no recognition even when we had dope crews and styles come out of this place. We are our own historians of our culture. This is not to disrespect anyone else (from either the East or the West). We just have to put ourselves on the map.

Poet's response was instructive in articulating these histories as correctives and encompassed multiple grievances. It challenges dominant portrayals of South Central as solely crime ridden and its residents as thugs, gangsters, thieves, vandals, and drug dealers. It also contests the circumventing of South Central graffiti writers'

and artists' contributions to graffiti writ large. This grievance of being overlooked comes at a time when cultural institutions like city-sponsored cultural development agencies, local and national museums, and mainstream art galleries are turning their attention to the artistic and creative merits of graffiti and street art on a broad scale. Even art historians who have documented Los Angeles graffiti tend to bypass the contributions of artists from this area of the city. These bypasses are the reason why Poet stated they were their own historians. In telling these stories, graffiti writers and artists author and authorize their history.

The Graffiti Cafe can be interpreted as a way through which a place-based identity is constructed through storytelling. It is a space where identity formation among Latinos raised in historically Black neighborhoods occurs through social interactions, artistic affinity, and shared experiences. The process of storytelling that occurs during the Graffiti Cafe at the Vermont Arts District reflects a relational identity formation in which Black and Latino graffiti writers find common ground through a common artistic practice that shapes their conception of a common home.

Discussion and Analysis

The development of interracial and interethnic graffiti yards like the Vermont Art District demonstrates a relationality between the development of Black and Latinx urban space and Black and Latinx identities. Morales's (2019) study of Latinx urban space and identity suggests the formation of urban identity among Latinx and Black communities emerges in earnest during the white flight and capital flight of the 1960s and 1970s when multiple industries and white residents fled from inner cities,

making places like South Central Los Angeles incubators for the development of a shared urban identity between these two groups. Since the 1960s, Black and Mexican American communities have been in competition with each other for low-wage jobs and, at the same time, have also made coalitions to better their living conditions and their future. They have both inherited urban space through processes of migration, displacement, and violence.

Similarly, Kun and Pulido's (2013) *Black and Brown in Los Angeles* demonstrate how intercultural and cross-racial collaborations may be found throughout the cultural history of Los Angeles. Recalling this history, Kun and Pulido (2013) stated:

> Since the late 1940s and 1950s Mexican-American in particular and African American musicians, dancers, and fans were central to the creation of what Anthony Macias has called "a multicultural urban civility" on the post-World War II dance floors and bandstands of East and South L.A. nightclubs and ballrooms. (Kun & Pulido, 2013, p. 4)

As Kun and Pulido (2013) and others demonstrated, cross-cultural and interracial collaborations and solidarities amass in the realm of expressive culture; in the lowriding scene; in visual art traditions like murals, street art, and contemporary art; and in larger cultural formations in the media and the built environment. Relatedly, Cheng's (2013) historical case study on Asian American and Latina/o residents of the San Gabriel Valley demonstrates how these communities were able to enact a "moral geography of differentiated space" (p. 18) that signifies an emergent multiracial identity that challenges the dominant understanding of race and class entrenched in whiteness and property in U.S. suburbs. What these studies show is that, since the

post-war era, Black and particularly Latinx youths have engaged in multiple instances of cultural exchanges at different historical points and through different forms of expression. From zoot suiters to music production, from jazz and hip-hop, and urban aesthetic apparel, there have been ongoing points of exchange and collective expression between racialized and marginalized communities (Alvarez, 2008; Ramírez, 2009). Graffiti writing is also one of those points of connection. Yet, one of the things that remain underexplored is the actual spaces where these collaborations and solidarities take place.

The legal graffiti yard produced by Black and Latinx graffiti writers and artists calls for a more robust and relational approach to contemporary Latinx expressive cultures and placemaking. The visual, concrete, and discursive claims over the parking lot and alleyway constituting the Vermont Art District demonstrate the strategies Black and Latinx graffiti writers take to enact place and create space in relation to—rather than in opposition to—one another. Interracial and intercultural places like the Vermont Art District push scholarship in Chicanx/Latinx studies to focus on how these communities produce "enacted environments" (Rojas, 2003, p. 278). The existence of these environments prompts new questions, including: (a) What type of social relationships emerge in the process of constructing interracial, interethnic, and intercultural spaces in the neoliberal city? (b) In what ways do racially aggrieved groups use expressive culture to contest unlivable living conditions? and (c) How are spaces like the Vermont Arts District examples of how historically marginalized communities work to restore and re-spirit economically

impoverished neighborhoods that have been ravaged by years of punitive neoliberal policies?

I want to stress that legal graffiti yards like the Vermont Arts District can be a poor substitute for structural transformations that guarantee fair housing, employment, adequate education, and healthcare for underserved communities of color. Yet, places like the Vermont Arts District are effective registers of how Black and Latinx peoples from impoverished communities respond to processes of hyper-criminalization and dispossession. Their spatial claims through legal graffiti yards demonstrate their audacious determination to refuse to live an unlivable destiny. Even if ephemeral, fleeting, and impermanent, producing graffiti and assuming a form of spatial entitlement in places like the Vermont Art District demonstrates their anticipation of a potential emancipatory reality.

In this potential emancipatory reality, there is creation of new subjectivities, new social affiliations, and meaningful places. This creation is evident in the interracial socialization among graffiti writers like King Cre8, Poet, Shiver, and Aux, who, although identifying respectively as Black, Latinx, and white, momentarily suspended these social categories and primarily related to each other by the work they created individually and collectively at the yard. Thus, the Vermont Arts District and similar spaces were places where new visions of social membership among working-class, racialized, and dispossessed peoples—some for whom their citizenship and humanity are too often in question by authorities—take place. This is social justice.

Reflecting on why this form of art matters and why spaces like the Vermont Art District matter, I am reminded of hooks's (1995) study on visual politics. In that book, hooks recalled a person asking her if art can really make a difference in our lives, or if art can actually transform our social reality into a better reality. In response, hooks (1995) asked the audience to consider "why, in so many cases of global imperialist conquest by the West, art has been either appropriated or destroyed" (p. xv). It was only through her amazement at seeing all the African art that was essentially stolen and showcased at museum galleries in Paris that she realized, "If one could make people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete," and if this was the case, "Such work can be undone only by acts of concrete reclamation" (hooks, 1995, p. xv). By creating concrete places to affirm their identities through graffiti, the Black and Latinos were asserting their right and power to make art and to imagine and enact alternative social relationships that transgress given racial and class categories. As hooks (1995) suggested, the transformative power of art is to help us decolonize subjectivities and our minds. For descendants of colonized, diasporic, and marginalized peoples, particularly for Black and Latinx communities, graffiti is a visual expression of freedom.

As a visual articulation of their spatial politics, the legal graffiti yards Black and Latino graffiti writers create offer a way to see how social justice takes place on the ground. Although social justice usually and rightly translates into arguments and demands concerning wealth distribution, equal political representation, and

enfranchisement, Black and Latino graffiti writers engage the matter through bold assertion of their freedom of expression and freedom of assembly in a context where these rights are systematically denied to them and have been tarnished by zero-tolerance policies against loitering and vagrancy laws. The pieces they paint and the yards they create are indeed impermanent and fugitive by nature. Yet, their actions demonstrate that having these places and developing alternative social relationships based on mutual respect and dignity is a possibility, germinating in a society structured in dominance. This prefiguring of a more just and equitable society, however, is not immune to cooptation. The acceptance of graffiti under the title of street art has produced and exacerbated contradictions concerning unauthorized art. Although spaces like the Vermont Arts District are examples of autonomous spaces that writers create to meet their needs and desires, more institutionalized spaces like the Arts District in Los Angeles is an example of what happens when graffiti aesthetic is repackaged and commodified as street art. I critically examine this topic in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Gentrification Street Art and The Revamping of the First City-Sponsored Graffiti Mural at the Arts District

Speaking to 75 people on a small stage built beneath the towering *Undiscovered America* mural at the Tokiwa Foods Building on East 4th Street in Los Angeles (see Figure 21), the graffiti artist Angst—one of the original painters of this mural in 1992—spoke about the purpose behind the painting of this mural and it's revamping in 2018. Angst drew the audience into a story of a mural's revamping that went beyond a narrative of neighborhood beautification through art. Looking beyond the crowd gathered on the sidewalk beneath this mural, to an area that was once considered a part of Skid Row in Los Angeles, he spoke of the purpose of representing various Indigenous peoples and cultures of the Americas, and the significance of repainting the mural in 2018.

Figure 21

"Undiscovered America" Mural at the Arts District, July 2018

Note. Original photo taken by author.

The purpose of visually depicting the multiple Indigenous populations of the Americas was to challenge the myth of discovery, as revealed in the title and the content of the mural. Another reason for painting the mural was to use art as a way to empower the houseless and Indigenous peoples at the time of the mural's initial production, when the area was economically impoverished and, consequently, irrelevant to developers. Finally, the mural was painted to demonstrate to the world the type of art young Chicanx, Latinx, and Black inner-city kids can make with spray paint—long before the hype or popularity of street art. In doing so, Angst encouraged the audience to consider how much has changed since 1992 and how much has remained the same. Indeed, the massive mural is no longer located in the

economically impoverished Skid Row. In fact, this place has now been relocated into, or remapped, as the Arts District (see Figure 22), an increasingly gentrified area that is adorned with street art east of Downtown Los Angeles.

Figure 22

Map Depicting the Arts District in Los Angeles

Note. Map was created by the author using Google Maps.

The Arts District borders Alameda Street and Little Tokyo in the west, the Los Angeles River in the east, First Street by the Aliso Village in the north, and 7th Street serves as its southern border. The area was legally recognized as a district by the city during the 1980s (Arts District Los Angeles, n.d.). It acquired its name through the various artists who, struggling to survive and find affordable housing during the late 1960s and 1970s, migrated to and occupied the empty buildings abandoned by manufacturing companies fleeing overseas as Los Angeles underwent processes of deindustrialization in the 1950s. Former industrial and manufacturing spaces were

reconverted into working studios and living stations. The area experienced an explosion of artistic activities. Art galleries and performance venues and cafes opened as the population grew.

Although the Arts District was filled with artistic activities, it was not the same as it is today. In fact, the shift to remapping the area where the Arts District is located is part of a longer historical process of the neighborhood and territorial displacement that primarily affected people of color at different points in history. Between the 1980s and 1990s, harsh policing practices, mass incarceration, the roll back of social services, racial segregation, and the closing of cherished community centers in aggrieved Latinx and Black communities were widespread (Davis, 2006). Graffiti was rejected as a visual nuisance at best or framed as outright vandalism and crime by the public and the media at worst. In other words, the *Undiscovered America* mural was originally painted under very different conditions and context. When Angst asked us to think about how much the area had changed and how much it had remained the same, he was prompting us to consider the changes and continuities in the ways by which dispossession and attempted erasures of marginalized peoples' histories gets pushed to the margins to reinforce a dominant narrative at particular historical moments. At the same time, he was also prompting us to be attuned to the ways in which marginalized communities refuse to be silenced or erased by those dominant narratives.

The main theoretical puzzle that surfaced during my fieldwork at the Arts District was figuring out why the revamping of the *Undiscovered America* mural was

so important to the graffiti artists who painted it 26 years ago. I wondered how this mural was different from the other massive public works of art that cover almost every building in the area. These questions require situating the mural in time and space.

The mural was originally painted by the Earth Crew in 1992, a group of young graffiti artists from across the city, with the explicit knowledge of the significance of this date: 500 years after 1492. The mural was intended as a visual challenge to narratives of Christopher Columbus's so-called discovery of the Americas by portraying a richness of Indigenous cultures, which can never be fully erased, despite centuries of violence perpetrated for that purpose. At the same time, the revamping of this mural in 2018, in an area once considered Skid Row but recently rebranded as the Arts District, draws attention to other kinds of violence and attempted erasures that happen to marginalized populations through processes of dispossession and gentrification.

Situating the mural in this way reveals how to evade static understandings of time and space. It revealed space not just in the local, but symbolically as covering all the Americas. The revamping of the mural reveals continuities and the presence of Indigenous and other racialized communities and peoples that endure, despite attempted erasures of their presence, cultures, knowledges, and ways of being. In other words, the unveiling of the revamped *Undiscovered America* mural was much more than a visual representation of Indigenous populations in an area that has been rapidly gentrifying; rather, it was a site to examine how space is socially constructed

and socially produced (Lefebvre, 1992) with very material, discursive, and embodied and imagined purposes between different agents with unequal access to power (Low, 2014).

If I consider this mural, the graffiti artists who painted it, and its representation of Indigenous peoples who have historically faced violent processes of displacement in varying forms in different spatial scales—local and hemispheric—I wonder how to understand the connections between identity, space, and place. I ask: How does this mural and the revamping of the mural speak to both erasures and presence, continuities, and change? What is the role of public art—in particular, murals and graffiti—in revealing these connections in a way that challenges static understandings of time, space, and the identities of people and places in a context where street art now operates in the branding of cities and not outside of it?

I argue that the revamping and unveiling of the *Undiscovered America* mural is a way that aggrieved communities spoke back and resisted dominant narratives of discovery and its variations. As a metaphor, it continues to operate under colonial logics justifying ongoing dispossession through processes of gentrification. The unveiling of the mural in 2018 at the Arts District served as a way for veteran graffiti writers to challenge the existing appropriation and mobilization of street art in processes of gentrification. Way before the Arts District was covered in murals and different forms of street art, graffiti writers had been converting this area of Los Angeles into a canvas. To fully understand how the Arts District became such a hub for local and international street artists, I first examine the struggle to lift the mural

ban, an ordinance the City of Los Angeles imposed in 2002 as a way to ban illegal commercial advertisement and graffiti.

Lifting the Mural Ban and a Proliferation of Street Art in the Arts District

The Arts District is saturated with various forms of street art. Nearly every building, utility box, utility pole, and sidewalk in the Arts District is adorned with some form of art, including wheat-paste posters, murals, public art installations, and metal plaques. Local business owners employ artists to paint murals on the walls of their businesses. Under-construction buildings are plastered with wheat paste murals, and large posters and public art installations can be widely seen in this area. The unsanctioned art that now adorns the walls of galleries, breweries, restaurants, cafes, and bars is part of the image that attracts financial investment, international artists, and tourists to this site. The area is saturated with many forms of art, but the efforts of the graffiti writers, street artists, and organizers to lift an ordinance popularly known as the mural ban in 2013 were foundational to the development of this space. As I demonstrate in this section, the rapid increase of public murals and various forms of street art in the Arts District must be understood by examining the struggles to lift the decade-long mural moratorium. Although many organizations and actors were crucial in lifting the ban, this section focuses on graffiti writers and street artists who were at the forefront of this struggle.

The ban on murals in Los Angeles began in 2002 (Berg, 2012). It was a result of a series of lawsuits between the City Attorney’s office and billboard companies that plastered advertisements throughout the city illegally. City officials did not have

a working system to help regulate illegal advertisements that were rampant in the city. They also lacked a system to protect murals, and often lumped any public visual form of art with advertisements, rendering them the same under the original ordinance. Murals were considered the same or indistinguishable from commercial advertisements and vulnerable to erasure, especially those that had letters read as signs. The ban on murals really began to intervene in illegal commercial advertisements and against aerosol murals graffiti writers painted that advertised their names and graffiti collectives/crews across the city. To prevent illegal advertisements, the city felt forced to ban the production of murals and advertisements altogether across the city.

Figure 23

Public Artwork in the L.A. Arts District

Note. Original photos taken by author in 2018.

Despite the ban, the Department of Cultural Affairs approved public artworks they considered not to be advertisements to remain visible and painted in the city. This move prompted advertisers to file a lawsuit against the city in 2007, arguing they also had a constitutional right to public space. An amendment to the ordinance was implemented the same year to allow any form of sign to be displayed only on private property with the permission of the owners of the building where the artwork or

advertisement was painted. Yet, upholding a mural ban while approving exceptions was a difficult task. The city abatement programs began accidentally painting over aerosol murals that were painted with the permission of owners and murals that they themselves had commissioned in the past, issuing fines to property owners for artwork that the owners approved to be painted on the walls of their businesses, and the sheriff department began targeting artists, mainly muralists and graffiti writers who engaged in producing legal artwork (i.e., producing aerosol murals painted with permission by the property owners).

The Department of Urban Planning came under extreme pressure from various organizations including Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC), muralists, and artists, including well-known graffiti writers such as Saber and street artists like Shepard Fairey. They pressed Los Angeles City Council to lift the ban on public murals through various means. Saber, a white Glendale Angeleno who, at the height of his graffiti career, had the largest graffiti piece in the world—as large as a football field at the bank of the Los Angeles River—and was one of the most active graffiti writers involved in revoking what became known as the Los Angeles Mural Moratorium. Saber, like many other graffiti writers who were trying to legitimize their art and crossover into the official art world, thought the ban limited the scope of their careers. In protest over the ban, Saber and other graffiti writers who were part of the Seventh Letter, a cohort of graffiti writers in Los Angeles trying to legitimize their artwork, engaged in what is called *skywriting*, a reference to tagging the sky. They organized messages in the sky that read “Art is Not a Crime” and “End Mural

Moratorium" (see Figure 24) above the Los Angeles City Council the day the Council met to discuss the possibility of lifting the ban.

Figure 24

Saber's "End Mural Moratorium" Skywriting

Note. From "Saber Takes to the Skies to Protest Mural Moratorium – Downtown LA," by A. Blazedale, 2011 (https://www.lataco.com/saber-takes-to-the-skies-to-protest-mural-moratorium-downtown-la/)

As a public figure, Saber was open on his stance against the mural ban ordinance and his advocacy for public art. In a statement on the subject, Saber (n.d.) stated, "The reason I hired five jet planes to sky write over City Hall and Downtown Los Angeles is to bring awareness to how ridiculous a moratorium on public art is"

(para. 1). In his statement, he mentions the multiple ways the mural moratorium not only effectively bans public murals, but also does it at taxpayers' expense. Funds that would otherwise support local muralists and artists are funneled to graffiti removal companies and are financially supported through fines imposed and collected from small businesses. Further, he referenced the ways public funds go on to support police officers to raid homes and workplaces that disobey the mural ban ordinance. Gathering public support, Saber presented a petition with over 60,000 signatures to overturn the ban to the City Council and openly critiqued city officials for allegedly spending over $10,000,000 on graffiti abatement programs but refusing to consider investing in programs for the arts that would divert youths from illegally painting in the streets to painting legal walls. Referencing the 2008 economic crisis popularly referred to as the Great Recession, Saber linked how the targeting, arrests, and taxing people who produce and support public art was a way the city could extract money from the most vulnerable and easily targeted.

A month later, Shepard Fairey, an Echo Park resident and well-known street artist, sticker bombed the Department of City Planning as a way to pressure city officials to seriously consider lifting the ban (Brasuell, 2011). Fairey, widely known for his Obama "Hope" poster during Obama's presidential campaign, sent an envelope full of "Obey" stickers, his signature graffiti moniker, to Tanner Blackman, who worked for Codes Studies, a subsection of the Department of City Planning. Ironically, Fairey's popularity, which he largely gained through his wheat pastes and stickers of Andre the Giant, had granted him a corporate-like reputation by the time

he was advocating for the lift of the mural moratorium. More than simply a street artist, Fairey's art is a brand that merges notions of street authenticity with commercial advertisement—both criminalized due to the ban. I discuss this contradiction more thoroughly later in the chapter. For now, it is worth recognizing that lifting the mural ban was a crucial component of the branding of the Arts District as a site of creative expression/hub.

Drafting a new ordinance encompassed developing new ways to enforce the law and developing new criteria for granting permission or approval by the city. Blackman worked with five other members to draft a new ordinance that would lift the mural ban, and develop a way to distinguish between commercial advertisement, graffiti defined as tags or vandalism, and preexisting and newly approved murals (Brasuell, 2011). Several factors were considered to implement this new ordinance and new criteria. In the process of developing these new criteria, councilmembers Jose Huizar and Tom LaBonge immediately requested the Department of Building and Safety and the Department of City Planning to stop issuing fines or warnings to comply with the original sign ordinance until the city solved the issue and established a new ordinance. Discussions on creating criteria for approval by the city involved considering several factors, including assessing artistic quality, context, the use of particular media, the scale of a proposed mural, promoting diversity of arts, the feasibility of a proposed piece of public artwork, originality, structural and surface soundness, building owner maintenance agreements, the amount of community support, duration of mural on public view, issues of public safety, and accessibility.

Several approaches were considered in developing a new ordinance that would replace the mural ban (Brasuell, 2011). One of them included establishing a mural district in Los Angeles, which backfired because the only entities applying for permits were megadevelopers eager to saturate parts of the city with commercial advertisements. Another alternative included creating a permit system administered by the city that would redefine murals and would distinguish them from commercial advertisements. A third option was instituting what was called an *art easement system* in which building owners would give the city limited use of their walls to be painted by muralists. These conversations demonstrated the ways in which graffiti, street art largely codified as murals, and advertisements were being differentiated by institutions that dealt with cultural and urban planning affairs. New criteria that continued to differentiate graffiti from street art via murals and corporate advertisements emerged. These conversations and strategic planning resulted in the Council of City Affairs' new ordinance.

The new ordinance approved in 2013 distinguished street advertisements from murals or public works of art (i.e., street art) by creating two applications, or two different forms, the city would have to approve. It established a 2-year limit for murals as an incentive for commercial agents to change corporate messages periodically and to ensure building and business owners did not receive payments for the art they publicized during the allotted time. Notably, the new ordinance did not include any meaningful conversation concerning the legalization or decriminalization of graffiti. It was clear this ordinance was not a graffiti ordinance despite many

graffiti artists questioning the extraordinary amount of funding for unsuccessful graffiti abatement programs and the criminalization and incarceration of young people charged with graffiti vandalism. As far as the new ordinance was concerned, graffiti would continue to be considered a violent crime, worthy of imprisonment and a hefty fine. The new ordinance redefined the parameters of what could be considered art.

The lifting of the mural moratorium had several implications for the proliferation of legal and illegal graffiti and street art across Los Angeles, especially in the Arts District. But rather than seeing the creation and implementation of this new ordinance as a gift granted to muralists, businesses, and advertisers by benevolent city officials, it was largely the audacious collaboration of multiple organizations, muralists, and veteran graffiti writers, well-known street artists, and experimental undertakings like the L.A. Freewalls Tour Project that made it a concrete reality.

The L.A. Freewalls Tour Project

The L.A. Freewalls Tour project was one of the main undertakings that pushed Los Angeles councilmembers to lift the mural ban. The project began in 2009 and was spearheaded by Daniel John Lahoda, a fine art printer and gallery curator who moved to Los Angeles and was involved in the graffiti and street art scene for a few years upon moving to the area. Lahoda organized and created the L.A. Freewalls Tour project in the Arts District by bringing together landlords, business owners, and

graffiti and street artists to collaborate in beautifying the Arts District with murals and street art.

Lahoda acted as an art broker and mediator between local and international artists and the businesses seeking artists in the Arts District. His message was simple. Business owners were promised new murals that would at once appeal to consumers and cover unsolicited graffiti, and graffiti writers were promised free walls and supplies to produce their art. The project resulted in the production of over 120 murals throughout their campaign, most of which now cover the area of the Arts District. Lahoda became so successful that he was called "Downtown L.A.'s Mural mayor." He thought the illegal mural production happening in the city left both businesses and artists in a precarious legal situation, which would result in fines and arrests. He believed the practice needed to end, and had the support and sympathy of the graffiti and street artists community.

Operating outside of the city's rules until the ban was lifted, Lahoda was able to mobilize artists, businesses, and community members of the Arts District to support the production of murals in the area. The acceptance of graffiti murals was largely due to the popularity of their aesthetics as counter cultural, hip, and trending among consumers. Business owners who desired to increase their cultural capital by having the unsanctioned or transgressive aesthetic attached to their brands welcomed Lahoda's efforts. Similarly, graffiti and street artists who were seeking painting materials and accessible wall space were attracted to the idea of doing their part and painting their art in this project.

The L.A. Freewalls Arts project practically converted the Arts District into an open-air street art gallery, exhibiting street art and graffiti-influenced works between 2009–2013. One of the first major artworks of the L.A. Freewalls Art project was Fairey's wheat paste mural "Peace Goddess" at the Arts District in 2009 (see Figure 25). Several local and international street artists produced most of the murals that adorn the area today. All of them were created through the L.A. Freewalls project. The *Bloomfest* mural was painted by West Los Angeles native and veteran graffiti artist Risk in collaboration with Seen, a Spanish street artist, at the corner of 3rd Street and 4th Place. *Cream of the Crop* was painted by Australian street artists Dabs Myla and German street artists How and Nosm. The *Decaying Sea-lion* was painted by the Belgium street artist ROA and depicts a decaying sea lion on Imperial and Jesse Street. *Heartship* was a large red, black and white mural painted at the corner of Traction Avenue and Merrick Street. *Wrinkles of the City*, a part of a series of murals painted by French artist JR in Los Angeles, was painted on the side of Angel City Brewery on Traction and Rose Street. Although there are many more examples to cite, the important point is that the L.A. Freewalls project transformed the Arts District, not by engaging local and talented graffiti writers but by employing and offering free walls to internationally known street artists, mostly from Europe.

Figure 25

"Peace Goddess" in the Arts District, 2009

Note. From "Peace Goddess," by O. Giant, 2009 (https://obeygiant.com/peace-goddess-downtown-la/)

Despite the success of L.A. Freewalls in creating murals that beautified the Arts District with street art, its main organizer, Lahoda, was a polarizing figure. In 2009, the Los Angeles Police Department issued a crime alert that smeared Lahoda's image and requested additional information about complaints from people who did business with the street art broker (Vankin, 2013). In the report, Lahoda was accused of theft and unfair business practices, although he was never arrested or formally charged with any of the accusations. Whether a smear campaign, competition, or being part of the politics of graffiti art over wall spaces, Lahoda's reputation was repeatedly questioned by the sheriff's department. Despite these reports, the local and international graffiti and street artists, looking for walls and fame, and the business owners, eager to brand their businesses and buildings with edgy aesthetics, continued to make deals with him.

By bringing in international street artists, Lahoda successfully converted the Arts District, but also set a precedent of hierarchy between graffiti writers and the bourgeoning street artists at the Arts District. The L.A. Freewalls project determined who could be employed and whose art could be considered art. Employing famous and international street artists was a strategic move to demonstrate that murals and street art can have a transformative impact on areas of the city. In this sense, the Freewalls project was a success. The Arts District was a strategic site to undertake such an illicit project given its history and the community of artists in the area that would be more open to supporting such initiatives. Nevertheless, it is important to note that new murals, most of which are still in the Arts District, were painted without

city permits. They were painted illegally. And although they were welcomed by business and property owners in the area, but did not have city approval.

This project was successful in making the case for street art, which was a newly popular form that, in the words of some graffiti writers, was largely based in and drew its inspiration from the graffiti movement; yet, it distanced itself from the movement to conform to legal or city standards. In this sense, street art became increasingly involved in the commercialization of graffiti and its aesthetics and the branding of cities as creative hubs. Rather than seeing unsanctioned graffiti as a part of unsanctioned street art, neither the new ordinance nor the L.A. Freewalls project made the case for the decriminalization of graffiti. After all, street artists needed to convince city officials, especially the councilmembers, of the legitimacy of street art to open the doors for prospective future employment. The line between what can be considered art or crime remained in parameters of what constitutes legal street art and illegal graffiti. The severe penalties for producing graffiti remained intact, but opportunities for street artists began to open.

Despite its success—or, perhaps because of it—the L.A. Freewalls project was influential in lifting the mural ban in 2013, demonstrating that public murals and street art had a part in the city, with or without city permission. In doing so, it also demonstrated that, rather than being a law or ordinance that was created from the top down, it was part of a struggle waged by local veteran graffiti writers like Saber and Risk and street artists like Fairey. Nevertheless, the ordinance to lift the mural ban did nothing to decriminalize or legalize graffiti. Instead, it can be interpreted as a way

that street art converged with the branding of urban spaces and neighborhoods, and how graffiti and street art became tied to processes of gentrification and urban redevelopment. At the conceptual level, the acceptance of graffiti and street art with redevelopment projects illustrates the ways in which notions of street authenticity and commercialization of the arts converged under the logics of commodification and in the urban realm logics of urban redevelopment.

In this context, the revamping of the *Undiscovered America* mural in 2018, originally painted in 1992, becomes important to note. The revamping was much more than repainting a mural that was originally painted in 1992; it was meant to interrupt the commercialization of the area and graffiti. Rather than simply adorning the wall of an area to attract tourists, the *Undiscovered America* mural stands as a reminder of the politics of presence, of what made the present-day murals, aerosol or otherwise, possible. As the next section demonstrates, the revamping of the *Undiscovered America* mural differs greatly from the other aerosol murals painted at the Arts District.

Entry Into the Arts District

My entry into the Arts District and engaging with questions about the role of graffiti, street art, and gentrification was largely shaped by my observations as a tourist in the Downtown L.A. Graffiti/Mural Tours. The Downtown Graffiti/Mural Tour is part of a larger project of a nonprofit organization called L.A. Art Tours that started when Kevin Flint, a local artist, began the tours in 2010 when he gathered a bunch of people interested in art to his loft and took them to other local artists' lofts

in the Brewery Arts Complex near Lincoln Park. L.A. Art Tours has grown and expanded to include guided tours in Downtown Los Angeles Arts District, Santa Fe Art Colony, and occasionally tours in San Pedro, Echo Park, Hollywood, and other areas across Los Angeles County. It is only one of the many guided tours that focus solely on street art, graffiti, and muralism in Los Angeles. The tours are led by artists who take people interested in art on walking and bike tours to appreciate the graffiti, murals, and bourgeoning street art covering nearly every surface throughout the Arts District.

The tours I participated in generally started at the corner of Colyton and Palmetto at the Arts District. They lasted about 2 hours, and were scheduled on Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday mornings. The cost or participating was $18, and the tours were led by artists and longtime members of the Arts District community. My first guide was with the main organizer, Kevin Flint, and the rest of the tours I participated in were led by Shandu or Galo, two L.A. graffiti veterans who presented themselves as experts on the history of graffiti in Los Angeles. The tours started with the guides sharing a bit of information about urban art; the different techniques, like the focus on lettering and signage, that distinguished graffiti from street art; and the various styles of graffiti writing. The tour guides were also very knowledgeable about each artist who had a piece of artwork in the area, and knew how to distinguish them by name and background. The tour included over 100 works of art, from large wheat posters on the sides of buildings to public installations to grand aerosol murals painted across this area. Beyond viewing public works of art, the guides made

frequent stops at iconic places like ArtShare LA, The American Hotel, and the Arts District Brewing Company, which had been previously and famously known as Al's Bar and Crazy Gideon's before it was converted. The tour also offered tourists the opportunity to stop and browse at local galleries like the Arts District Co-Op, Cleveland Art, and Hauser & Wirth.

I met Shandu, Galo, Nuke, and Odder, along with other veteran graffiti writers, during my observations at these guided tours at the Arts District. Shandu was a Chicano man in his 50s and was a pioneer of Los Angeles graffiti. He was credited with developing one of the first, if not the very first, graffiti crew known as Los Angeles Bomb Squad in 1984 at Belmont High School. He was also credited for inaugurating the legendary Belmont Tunnels, a popular graffiti yard among writers in Downtown Los Angeles. He was born in Cuidad Juarez, and lived in El Paso, Texas, before moving to Los Angeles in 1975 with his family. At Belmont High, he studied graphic arts. He was best known for producing large aerosol murals, stencils, canvases, and sculptures. Shandu was well known among both graffiti writers and cultural institutions, which is why he had been included as a primary figure on books such as *The History of Los Angeles Graffiti Art* (Alva & Reiling, 2005) and *L.A. Graffiti Black Book (*Brafman, 2021). Shandu took me through the tour, and through him that I met Galo and a group of graffiti veterans who worked with local galleries or as tour guides themselves.

My observations during the Graffiti/Murals Tours at the Arts District led me to question why street art had become a key element connected to processes of

gentrification, redevelopment, and commercialization of the arts and culture. Indeed, the relative increase of street art in the area coincides with the construction of new studios that most local artists in the district cannot afford. There is a large displacement of local artists. Even the art tour guides cannot afford to live anywhere in or near the Arts District. According to Shandu, the old industrial factories and warehouses in the area that once housed local working-class artists were converted to art galleries. The remaining industrial or manufacturing warehouses left in the area were relocated to the City of Vernon, southeast of Los Angeles County.

The commercialization of graffiti and street art in the Arts District is also indicative of larger processes of the political, economic, and cultural transformation across postindustrial cities. Since the crisis of the 1970s, the role of culture as a generator of economic growth has been central to postindustrial cities that were affected by capital flight and processes of deindustrialization (Zukin, 1988). In Western cities, the implantation of neoliberalism meant the dismantling of the welfare state, which brought a realignment of public and private leadership to work towards promoting urban economic growth no longer based on manufacturing products but on an expansion of the service economy, informal labor markets, and cultural industries. In this context, cultural meanings, aesthetic ideals, and selected cultural themes like graffiti and street art began to be built in to the built environment (e.g., aerosol murals, wheat-pasted arts) became part of the branding of specific places like the Arts District. Abstract cultural representations become central to converting spaces as

market-oriented for consumption that works to create spaces and places for financial capital investment.

The popularity and commercialization of street art in the area coincides with the construction of new art studios that most local artists in the district cannot afford. There were multiple times during my observations in the tours, when guides would share with tourists that the old industrial factories and warehouses in the area were increasingly being converted to art studios and galleries, consequently pushing manufacturing factories to relocate in the City of Vernon, southeast of Los Angeles County. When I asked Kevin, a Downtown L.A. Graffiti/Mural Art tour guide, why he believes artists are moving to old industrial warehouses, he replied, “Artists want art studios, not studio lofts. The lofts that are being constructed are half the size, with carpets; they are not designed for artists who work with cutting or bending metal, with the dirty work that comes with sculpture and using paint. They are meant for artists who work with their laptop or digital technology.” Kurt was not alone. Shandu and Galo, two other tour guides and artists, also shared a similar sentiment. To them, the displacement of local artists corresponded with the influx of what Florida (2014) might call a “creative class” (p. 197) that is composed of upper-middle-class individuals who mainly work in high-tech industries and are depicted as being a new engine of urban economic growth.

The old-fashioned urban boosterism has by now been replaced by a more standardized, coordinated, and capital-intensive practice that Greenberg (2009) called “urban branding” (p. 10). Urban branding entails a visual and material strategy that

mingles with intensive marketing policies of a city in accordance with neoliberal political and economic restructuring—deregulation, privatization, and austerity measures that negatively affect poor and working-class communities (Greenberg, 2009). The process of branding constitutes both the real and symbolic commodification of cities. It refers to the "simultaneous production and marketing of a hegemonic, consumer- and investor-oriented vision" (Greenberg, 2009, pp. 10–11) of cities. During the turn toward neoliberalism, "branding became the virtual template and an approach, if not a wholesale paradigm, that cities and regions would adopt in times of crisis across the United States and abroad" (Greenberg, 2009, p. 14).

The broader implications that branding had for cities is that it serves to bolster a utopian imaginary where divisions among a supposed cosmopolitan group are established on personal "lifestyle choice, consumer niche, and neighborhood vibe" (Greenberg, 2009, p. 139) rather than on the larger social exclusions based on race, class, and gender that these processes actually produce. In other words, the revitalization of some areas of the city like the Arts District also means that much-needed resources shift away from providing social services in historically impoverished and racially segregated areas of Los Angeles such as South and East Los Angeles, and especially Skid Row. Social services that, for the most part, would assist the poor, working-class, and racially marginalized communities in finding affordable housing and employment.

Interruption: The Unveiling of the Undiscovered America Mural

The production and unveiling of the *Undiscovered America* mural was quite different from the productions painted during the gentrification of the Arts District. Local artists took great pride in retelling how the mural preceded the proliferation of street art in the Arts District. The mural was also politically charged. It has to do with claiming space and honoring the Indigenous peoples of Los Angeles and others across the Americas. As opposed to most of the art that has been painted since the ban lifted, the revamping of the *Undiscovered America* mural had no middleman or cultural broker. It was organized by Nuke, and the original graffiti artists who painted it provided their assistance by donating spray paint, time, and effort. Nuke called them his "graffiti family." And instead of adding monetary value to a particular business or advancing a particular artist's career, the unveiling was used to center our attention on the enduring presence and politics of Indigenous peoples of the Americas, whom the artists consulted prior to the original painting of the mural in 1992 and who were the main speakers at the unveiling event in 2018.

The Unveiling of the Undiscovered America Mural

In September 2018, I made my way to the Tokiwa Foods building on 843 East 4th Street, the address where the mural was painted and the unveiling was set to take place. I arrived at the event a few minutes early. A small circle of elderly women from the Tongva tribe were at the front near the makeshift stage, drums at hand, who seemed ready to start the opening ceremony. There was a mic check, the scent of burning sage, and the sound of drums. Hereditary Chief Phil Lane Jr., an honorary

member of the Ihanktowan Dakota and Chickasaw Nations, opened the event with a prayer and a blessing; he explained that Gloria Arellanes, the Tongva Nation grandmother originally supposed to open the event, could not attend the event because she was not feeling well. The chief proceeded to bless the gathering of the 50–65 people who were present and began to give thanks to the Earth Crew for creating a "beautiful representation of the Americas that most people won't understand, but through this [the mural/the event] they will." The chief stepped down from the stage right after delivering what seemed to be a prayer.

As the organizers of the event were strategizing how to proceed with the unveiling, I began to observe who was present at the event. There were children, families, elders, and people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. Most of the attendants were Latinx/Chicanx, but there was also a considerable amount of white people from all ages. I decided to stand near the back because nearly all of the seats were taken. Kids were running around the sidewalk, reporters were setting up their cameras to record the event, and organizers moved back and forth from the Art Share L.A. Office, a local nonprofit art resource center for struggling artists, across the street where refreshments and an original film documenting the first unveiling of the mural in 1992 would be screening later today. People started crowding the sidewalk, and some even begin to stand next to parked cars on 4th Street.

Chief Lane Jr. returned to the stage and told the crowd he would be the one opening the event. He started by giving thanks to Helen Samuels, a climate change activist and youth organizer who cofounded the Earth Crew in the late 1980s. The

Earth Crew consisted of 20 youth who grew up in different parts of the city and were from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Nearly all of them were men. They resided in the neighborhoods of South Gate, Bell Gardens, South Central, East Los Angeles, and Venice. As graffiti writers, they were also members of different graffiti crews in Los Angeles. The fact that Helen was a central figure in the development of the Earth Crew was continuously repeated by speakers and the graffiti artists whom I conversed with throughout my time at the event. From what I was able to gather, Helen assisted in the politicization of the members of the Earth Crew by having them speak with and learn from different Indigenous elders throughout the United States. Helen's mission was to encourage youth who were producing graffiti to use their talent as writers to deliver messages of hope and resistance on walls that spoke to the general population about the devastation of mother earth.

According to the members of the Earth Crew, the *Undiscovered America* mural was painted after consulting with Indigenous elders throughout the United States they met through Helen. Only after learning directly from different tribe members like Tongva Nation Grandmother, Gloria Arellanes, and Hereditary Chief Phil Lane Jr., did they start painting the mural.

The *Undiscovered America* mural is only one of many murals the Earth Crew painted throughout the 1990s. Most of the murals they painted from 1989–1999 focused on the perils of environmental degradation and depicted the significance of the Indigenous cultures of Los Angeles and the Americas. Some of their murals, like *La Virgencita*, were painted in 1990 in the Pico-Union area with the assistance of

local youth who were already engaged in producing graffiti. The huge painting, which predates the *Undiscovered America* mural by 2 years, depicts the Virgen de Guadalupe and was the first aerosol mural that the members actually painted. In the same year, they painted the *We Don't Have Generations* (1990) mural, which depicts an Indigenous mother embracing a child next to a waterfall at the left side of the mural, a jungle with roots, trees, and a jaguar on the right side that splits the mural in the middle. A depiction of nuclear plants, smog on the city skyline, and storms of fire on the right side of the mural stands in as the ultimate destruction of earth.

On the far right there is a depiction of the same Indigenous mother and child embracing each other as skeletons. In 1991, they painted *A Call to Earth's Caretakers* mural, which carries a message dealing with environmental devastation like some previously painted murals. This mural depicts a man sitting on a chair with death patting him on the shoulder as he blows a breath of smoke/air into a sphere depicting nature with the earth thrown out of its orbit. All these murals (except for *The Virgencita*) center around issues of environmental devastation and a call to care for the earth and pray to what they often referred to in their mural as the Great Spirit. It is not surprising that by 1992, they would paint the *Undiscovered America* mural to contest the narrative of the discovery of the Americas. And it is also no wonder why the Indigenous elders they consulted with as young men, would be present at its revamping in 2018.

By understanding this history of the members of the Earth Crew engaging in producing politicized murals, we can surmise that the revamping of the mural in 2018

was in its own way a critique of the so-called discovery of the Arts District. This sentiment is largely shared by most of the graffiti artists that I spoke with during my participant observations at the Graffiti and Mural Art Tours and in my general interviews with graffiti artists who reminisced about the ways the Arts District was compared to today. One graffiti artist shared how the “Container Yard,” located at the center of the Arts District, used to be a place where any graffiti artists could paint or showcase their art freely. Those days, according to Sight, are over. Indeed, the Container yard has become an exclusive space to host the artwork for international, world-renowned artists.

Shan also shared similar sentiments about the area. He was mad when he found out that a random street artist painted flowers over a calligraphic letter spelling “Los Angeles” made by a veteran graffiti artist and member of his graffiti crew who goes by the name Prime. Nuke also shared some frustrations with the ways he perceived the area was changing. At one point in an interview, he stated he was frustrated with the international artists that come to paint in the Arts District, and often disrespect artwork by locals that had been here for some time.

The narrative of the discovery of the Arts District by international artists and developers was continuously criticized. In revamping the mural, Nuke, Angst, and the other graffiti artists who provided spray paint, time, and/or labor, were in fact reasserting themselves and their presence.

Discussion and Analysis

The revamping of the Undiscovered America mural raised questions about the role of graffiti and street art under processes of gentrification and the commercialization of the arts and culture. While the Arts District was transformed into a site where street art covers nearly the whole area partly because of the struggles to lift the travel ban, graffiti remains criminalized while street art (and some forms of graffiti or vandalism) is celebrated, welcomed, and commercialized. I engage with this contradiction in the following section, offering a brief and critical analysis.

Convergence Culture

One of the fundamental elements of convergence culture is the struggle over cultural expression and the use of public space through creative practices. Graffiti writers and street artists use their art to challenge the public's right to public space but that thrives in the branded city, not outside of it (Banet-Wiser, 2011). Fairey and other street artists who have transformed the Arts District demonstrate a convergence between creative work and processes of commercialization, not only in increasing the property value of this area of the city and consequently driving processes of gentrification but also in the commercialization of their cultural practices that can be interpreted as a brand. In this content, street artists can be interpreted as enterprising individuals. The cultural economy of cities now authorizes individuals to be entrepreneurs and their productions as brands. This process shifts and creates new boundaries between what has largely been thought of as the autonomous activity of creating art and the financial realm of commerce. Street art converges the public with

the private, the independent with the mainstream, and the artistic self with a brand (Banet-Wiser, 2011). Branding the authentic is normative in the present neoliberal cultural economy.

A unique aspect of the present economic model for growth is increasingly associated with the entrepreneurial nation of the arts and culture under neoliberalism (McRobbie, 2004). The structural abandonment of the state in providing social services and safety nets has at the same time promoted and endorsed a market society that is increasingly based on hyper-individualization, consumption, and service work. This form of economy promotes and endorses freelance work and self-employment. Street artists and even graffiti artists, especially veteran writers who are economically struggling, are a cohort of individuals who are impacted by this form of market. Yet, this new labor market reproduces existing inequalities rather than solving them. Banksy and other writers like JR, usually international and white artists, are exemplified as successes of this form of economy, but what about the artists of color like Nuke, Shandu, Galo, all veteran graffiti writers who have in their words "put in the work" and respect the arts yet continue to be largely marginalized from this economy and labor market?

Race and the Politics of Omission and Politics of Exception

Very few Latinx and Black graffiti writers and street artists crossover into the mainstream. This became clear with my conversations with Nuke, who although has been working at the Arts District and was the main artist who revamped the mural, does not have the same funding, backing, and support from the cultural affairs

department or other funding institutions. In fact, he was on the verge of being houseless during our conversations. The very few that do crossover are considered an exception rather than the norm.

The art that crosses over often mimics acceptable criteria that are usually defined in the realm of the abstract, in the realm of the commercialized authenticity that white dealers and purchasers are comfortable with (even when political until it articulates racial difference). Thinking about how race plays a key role in valuing particular forms of street art, determining which artists and whose artwork are worthy of being funded and included in galleries and museums, I am reminded of Shandu's experience with a gallerist who refused to showcase his work.

After a Graffiti and Mural tour, Shandu and I went over to a closed alleyway to meet graffiti writers painting. He finished doing a throw-up, and after others like Odder, Sen, and Seko finished their pieces, Shandu began sharing his experience. The conversion started when Odder asked Shandu why he didn't consider showcasing his art at a gallery since he had so many connections in the Arts District. Shandu replied by stating that he has tried, and the last attempt demonstrated certain barriers in the art world. He met with a gallerist asking if they'd be interested in showcasing his art. He shared his canvas work, his murals, and stencil art with the gallerist only to be met with rejection. The gallerist replied that his art was too "Chicano" or too "Latino" to draw a large audience. The work, especially his murals, reminded her of the colorful window glass that adorns catholic churches. She overlooked or perhaps was ignorant of the ways Shandu blended graffiti wild style with "sacred geometry" into his art.

She read his work as too racially or ethnically specific. The stereotype and assumption that Latinx art, street art in this case, only focuses on identity or whose themes are too ethnic do not give credit to artistic merit.

Shandu's case is upsetting but it also reveals how racial identification and discrimination continue to permeate society. As Dávila (2020) suggested, the arts are not exempt. The unfair coupling of art and racial identification, and how for some reason this drives down the appeal or value of art, are apparent in Shandu's experience. His case reveals not just how racial discrimination and identification impact the value and patronage of Latinxs art, but also how whiteness appears invisible, universal, and the norm. Shepard Fairey's work, after all, is not evaluated by his race, ethnicity, or class. To put it bluntly, the evaluation of Shandu's and other Latinx and Black art, whether that is graffiti, murals, or canvas, more often than not has nothing to do with the content of the artwork and a lot with the racialized position they and their art are forced to occupy. Engaging Shandu's and other street artists of color's work in all its diversity and complexity and on their own terms is perhaps a path to challenging the white-centric and Euro-centric spaces that dominate the world of art and street art. This last point leaves me thinking about how Eurocentric notions of art, the way art is critiqued, valued, evaluated, or praised must be provincialized to really capture the genius of graffiti writers and street artists of color.

Epistemic Occidentalism (Hierarchies of Value)

In thinking about the case of Shandu and other graffiti writers and street artists of color, I am reminded of Zavala's (2010) notion of epistemic occidentalism.

Epistemic occidentalism refers to a tendency to position all forms of art in European frameworks (e.g., modernism, minimalism, pop art, conceptual art). Graffiti, largely made of diasporic traditions that draws from multiple cultural registers, interrupts, and transgresses dominant criteria. In the eyes of gallerists like the one in the case of Shandu, Black and Latinx graffiti and street art are aberrations. Indeed, some even read graffiti as non-art, as simple tags that are not meaningful. The lack of knowledge of its diasporic assemblage perpetuates the devaluation and limits the full appreciation and understanding of graffiti, especially those produced by Black and Latinx artists. When these street artists do a crossover, their art is often critiqued using a lot of jargon that is foreign to the actual art. Notions of multiplicity, ambiguity, abstraction, or absences strategically avoid discussions of racial difference, history, and cultural registers that inform the art.

There is a limit to the theorizations of the expansiveness of this form of art. Art critics, cultural institutions, gallerists, and others have a lot of catching up to do. Curators, art critics, and gallerist who are knowledgeable about this form of art usually work independently from major institutions although this has recently been changing. Large exhibitions at popular cultural institutions like the Museum of Contepmorary Art in Los Angeles have recently showcased the art of certain graffiti writers in exhibitions like “Art in the Streets” in 2011 and more recently “Beyond the Streets” in 2018. Yet, in more underground spaces, graffiti writers, especially those from racialized and aggrieved communities organize their own spaces to showcase and exhibit their art. There is still more research to be done comparing these two

different sites, but one thing is clear: to fully appreciate the value of graffiti, gallerists, critics, and scholars must engage new terminologies of appreciation and adequate criticism that originate from the artists themseleves. Who best to learn from than graffiti writers and artists who are experts in their craft yet are hunted down, silenced, discredited, and put away by police officials and city governments?

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how the recent transformation of the Arts District as a neighborhood saturated with a variety of street art has been partly the success of the struggles of graffiti writers and street artists who worked to lift the mural ban in 2013. But rather than the legalization or the decriminalization of graffiti, the results of that struggle led to the commercialization and commodification of graffiti and street art. In so doing, graffiti writers and street artists face a neoliliberal regime that disciplines through the market or through punishment. In this context, graffiti writers and street artists become caught within market logics that enforces the entrepreneurialism of the arts and culture and punishes those who refuse the commercial avenues open to them through punitive means of fines, arrests, and incarceration. This process has created new boundaries between what has largely been thought of as the autonomous and oppositional activity of producing graffiti and street art with the financial realm of commerce. It has created the permitted vandal who may align themselves with nonprofit and corporate backing and the criminal vandal who remains at the margins of this new market.

In lifting the mural band, graffiti writers and street artists have used their art to struggle for the right to public space but that struggle now thrives within the branded city and within neoliberal logics of commercialization, not outside of it (Banet-Wiser, 2011). Yet, even within these confines, renegade graffiti writers who operate in this context locate contradictions in the spaces that this urban political economy has engendered to speak back. The revamping of the Undiscovered America mural in 2018 illustrates this point.

I interpret the revamping of the Undiscovered America mural as a way that aggrieved communities speak back and resist dominant narratives of discovery and its variations, that as a metaphor, continue to operate under colonial logic justifying ongoing dispossession through processes of gentrification. The unveiling of the mural in 2018 served as a way for veteran graffiti writers to challenge the current appropriation and commercialization of street art to provide a platform for indigenous elders to speak about issues that threaten life like climate disaster, wars at home and abroad, and to articulate a shared responsibility to take care of one another and the earth.

By illustrating the ways that the revamping of the mural provided a space for indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities, I have attempted to demonstrate that the revamping of the mural was a critique of the so-called discovery of the Arts District. This sentiment was largely shared by most of the graffiti artists who I spoke with at the Graffiti and Mural Art Tours, in my interviews with graffiti writers, and with the main organizers of the event. I also interpret this event as a way

that Nuke, Angst, and the other graffiti artists who provided spray paint, time, and labor, were in fact reasserting themselves and their presence.

I want to stress that while there is a convergence between the authentic and the commercial, between a oppositional culture like graffiti and the market, I am not fully convinced that the contradictions it engenders will be resolved by the full incorporation of writers as entrepreneurs. In thinking about this context, I am particularly interested in the contradictions that emerge. This context raises new questions. While I can see how the dynamics of capitalism have marketized the arts and culture, how this system of capitalism commodifies everyday life in postindustrial cities, and how it absorbs critique and oppositions to it, I want to challenge this framing while not denying the commodification of everyday life or how capital is able to do absorb oppositions. More importantly, I see the contradiction embedded within convergence culture as a site full of possibilities.

Rather than a one-sided battle, I want to pause and recognize that young, often working-class and poor, graffiti writers of color brought city administrators and landed capitalist to a point where they could no longer avoid the significance, popularity, and persistence of their artwork. Rather than accepting the incorporation of graffiti and street art into the mainstream as only a form of cooptation, which it certainly is, I question why this incorporation was necessary. Are graffiti writers a force to be reckoned with? Despite the harsh and punitive policies that exists against graffiti, young people continue to paint and try to make the city their own. In that sense, writers help outsiders of their culture foresee a very possible and extraordinary

relationship between ordinary people and the built environment; a type of relationship that works to abolish private property.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This dissertation has examined the ways in which graffiti is a way through which Black and Latinx youths create new cultural identities, social relationships, and social spaces amidst structural violence. I have worked to intervene in discourses that represent graffiti writers, especially Black and Latinx graffiti writers, as simply vandals or criminals out to destroy property. In the face of these conventional and pejorative representations, I have attempted to demonstrate that Black and Latinx graffiti writers are in fact cutting-edge producers of culture by showing how they have developed a unique and oppositional way of representing themselves, and in the process, transformed their relationship to urban space in prefigurative, creative, and transformative ways.

Focusing on Los Angeles graffiti led me to seriously consider in Chapter 2: From Barrio Calligraphy to Hip-hop Graffiti: A Latinx Genealogy of Southern California Graffiti how Chicanx visual culture, specifically graffiti like placas, plaqueasos, and Old English fonts has influenced the development of a unique and native form of graffiti in Southern California. My close reading of contemporary graffiti itself demonstrates the influence of Chicanx visual culture. But more than just analyzing textual patterns and motifs, I have tried to illustrate the social meanings embedded within these fonts. Placas and plaqueasos were one of the ways that Chicanx youths historically affirmed new and transnational identities and collectivities rooted in respect, dignity, and honor. It is important to consider this creative arch and lineage because it challenges dominant representations and

discourses of graffiti writers as simply vandals or criminals and renders visible the genius that is often denied of Chicanx, Latinx, and other youths of color.

More broadly, I have demonstrated how early Chicanx graffiti became a way for colonized peoples to transform the languages imposed through Spanish colonialism and U.S. imperialism to inscribe new and empowering meanings to them. By making this argument, I advance the arguments made by Sanchez-Tranquilino (1991) who is perhaps the most astute scholar of Chicanx graffiti. Sanchez-Tranquilino argued that Chicanx muralism and graffiti were tools for visually articulating and affirming individual and collective identities of Mexican American and Chicanx youths in East Los Angeles. Rather than being antithetical or in opposition to one another, murals and graffiti are systems of signification that battle over the limited urban space in the barrio. The identities that are created through these systems of signification are in effect transnational and diasporic — never fully American nor fully Mexican. Indeed, the languages that informed the development of these identities and styles were English, Spanish, Spanglish, and Cálo. The symbols incorporated into the graffiti itself also register the lived experiences and knowledge that emerge within their experience as diasporic peoples in the barrios themselves. Publicly displaying these inscriptions on urban surfaces was a way to demarcate their sense of place and develop a unique relationship with the spaces and places they had been relegated to by processes of racial residential segregation.

In a broader and more critical sense, graffiti can be interpreted as a way through which youths, especially Black and Latinx youths, blur the dominant

distinction between images and texts that are so profoundly embedded within Western or European culture and make linkages between graffiti and their diasporic identities For example, Dazer relates the origins of graffiti to Mesoamerican codices, and considers contemporary graffiti a continuation of the communicative method of indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica. For Black graffiti writers like King Cre8, graffiti is not a foreign artistic practice. He links contemporary graffiti to Egyptian hieroglyphs. In doing so, he is discursively situating contemporary graffiti writing as an extension of an imagined lineage. I take these claims very seriously and interpret them as a way that Black and Latinx graffiti writers make linkages between their graffiti to their diasporic identities. In other words, Black and Latinx writers have been engaging in a process of decolonizing their imagination and transgressing the borders of what constitutes literature, culture, and art as defined by Western society.

While I focus more specifically on Chicanx and by extension Latinx visual elements and symbolic meanings within Southern California graffiti, future research might explore the contributions of other races and ethnicities in Los Angeles to the development of Los Angeles graffiti culture and the ways that graffiti might even tie into diasporic spiritual healing practices. Southern California has been a site of intense migration from people across the world (Pulido 2006), especially from countries in Asia. Indeed, many Asian American artists like Alex Defer Kizu and Gajin Fujita, both veteran graffiti writers, also inscribe their own diasporic traditions into their graffiti,which raises questions. What other diasporic meanings and traditions, may also be inscribed into L.A. graffiti that we might not easily see or

comprehend? What does this tell us about the cultural diversity within the art itself and the identities that are produced by specific individuals? I raise these questions thinking of a recent interview with Defer where he described his work as a form of "spiritual language". Defer's interview made me think about how graffiti may be a means of healing for youths who have undergone years of structural violence, and how producing graffiti may be a healing ritual for many aggrieved youths of color.

While the placas, plaqueasos, and other forms of barrio calligraphy that emerged within the barrios of East Los Angeles were all place-based and demarcated territory and neighborhood boundaries historically and in the present, the introduction of what is often called New York graffiti or hip-hop graffiti changed this aspect of LA graffiti culture. The introduction of this new form of graffiti provided a much more expansive spatial vision to place-based inscriptions. In Chapter 3: Going All City: Black and Latinx Graffiti Writers Cultural Mapping Los Angeles, I trace this shift and show how a new social and spatial imaginary - going all city - had a profound impact on the ways that youths related to each other and to the urban infrastructure and the city of Los Angeles.

This form of graffiti brought with it a new spatial imaginary of going all city to many young people, and for Black and Latinx youths from working-class and racially segregated neighborhoods, going all city became a way for them to gain respect, recognition, popularity, and prestige among their peers, and to transgress and challenge the borders of residential segregation and create a new vision for the city. Rather than staying within the confines of their neighborhoods that decades of

redlining and housing covenants produced, Black and Latinx graffiti writers began inscribing their monikers across the city in their attempts to be all city. They developed their own vocabulary, their own vision of the city, alternative institutions of socialization (Vigil 2002), and what Austin (2001) called a "political economy of prestige" (p. 38). To gain respect, honor, and prestige, graffiti writers sought and continue to seek to be the most "up" or prolific member of their community. This required and produced a reimagining of their place in the city. This required developing a new map of the city. This required and produced what I call illicit cartography.

What illicit cartographies reveal to us are the innovative and subversive imaginings and mapping of cities and creation of space within conditions of structural violence. The illicit cartography that writers produce is unfamiliar to many outsiders for good reasons. The cartography is composed of places and spaces that writers have created, usually in spaces that have been abandoned by businesses and forgotten by city governments. Some of these spaces are usually called graffiti yards. They are scattered throughout the city and only insiders often know of their locations. They are secret and fugitive sites of congregation among insiders.

In addition to yards, illicit cartographies are made up of the ways that graffiti writers transform, and reinscribe new meanings to the built infrastructure of the city. Bus benches, freeway signs and overpasses, paved rivers, electricity poles, billboards, and rooftops of buildings are all reinscribed meanings and functions for writers. Once painted, for example, the back of freeway signs become heavens, and a tag that lasts

more than ten years becomes a landmark. Graffiti on buses and freight trains transport more than people and merchandise, they transport graffiti writers' identities. Graffiti painted on freeways become a way for writers to personalize the impersonal city, to become visible on the walls that try to marginalize them and keep them from view. While these things aren't necessarily visible to outsiders in this way, illicit cartographies reveal to us the world of meaning present in each tag and each piece around our cities.

At the same time, I use the term "illicit" purposely to also draw attention to the fugitive aspects of writing and the illegality and subversiveness of graffiti. The nodes or spaces that create illicit cartographies are as fugitive as the art itself. There is never a guarantee that any place that is tagged, pieced, or bombed will last. Furthermore, the reimagining of the city that happens through these graffiti also happens within a structure of violence. Working-class Black and Latinx youths bear the brunt of racial profiling, aggressive policing, disproportionate incarceration, mass disinvestment of social services in the neighborhoods where they live, and structural marginalization in the economic, political, and social spheres. Those who are caught producing graffiti face hefty fines, jail time, and even long prison sentences. Sight's case, — the Black graffiti writer who was sentenced to six years in prison — might be the best example of how graffiti writers of color are negatively impacted by the criminal justice system. One wonders why producing graffiti warrants such drastic forms of punishment and discipline. It is perhaps because of the ways city

governments privilege the protection of private property under capitalism over the lives of young people that warrants such punitive measures.

Systems of domination, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and xenophobia contextualize the terrain of struggle that many writers traverse. The context of Los Angeles is just one example of the ways that racial capitalism (Robinson 2000) shapes cities in ways that produce racialized inequalities that deeply and negatively affect the lives of Black, Latinx, and other racialized groups (Gibbons 2018; Villa 2000; Gilmore 2008. Indeed, racial segregation obstructs many Black and Latinx youths in working-class neighborhoods like East Los Angeles and South Central access to life-affirming resources and institutions like healthcare, well-funded educational institutions, jobs that pay living wages, community and youth centers, and safe public spaces. By producing graffiti, Black and Latinx writers refuse to live an unlivable destiny. The terrains they navigate in creative ways, the identities, and relationships they forge, and spaces they create amid and despite the structural violence they encounter are examples of how they refuse to live an unlivable destiny.

Amid the reality of poverty, violence, and structural marginalization, I demonstrate in Chapter 4 on The Vermont Arts District the ways that marginalized and criminalized Black and Latinx graffiti transform places of devastation into spaces of congregation and empowerment. I focus here on the legal graffiti yard the Vermont Arts District, which is in South Central Los Angeles, a neighborhood that suffers greatly from institutional divestment and over-policing.

The Vermont Arts District is a site of possibilities; a site where Black and Latinx writers affirm their identities and develop meaningful social relationships with each other across racial and class divides. Creating places like the Vermont Arts District are ways that writers of color from working-class backgrounds stake their claim to their neighborhoods and allow us to examine how interracial and interethnic identities and relationships are constructed through graffiti in historically disinvested communities. This is a site where young and veteran graffiti writers from Los Angeles affirm their right to space, create a grassroots arts-based community project, and assert a sense of dignity and respect amid the reality of endemic poverty, racial and class segregation, structural marginalization, and the ongoing criminalization and policing of their communities.

Writers produce alternative social relationships at the Vermont Arts District through various means. The weekly events popularly known as the Graffiti Swapmeet and Graffiti Cafe, for example, are illustrative of how intergenerational and interacial relationships take place through expressive culture. The social identities and social relationships that are forged not only through their production of graffiti but also through storytelling. Poet, the main organizer of the yard, along with other veteran graffiti writers impart a public history to young participants at the yard that is specific to South Central Los Angeles. These stories highlight the significance to writers from this community to the making of graffiti writ large. But more than this, their spatial claims to the yard itself, is an example of how Black and Latinx writers assert their rights to public space, their freedom of expression, and their freedom of assembly in a

context where these freedoms and rights have been tarnished by zero-tolerance policies and broken windows policing. By doing so, they enact a sense of sovereignty over land that is not tied to capitalist or colonial forms of ownership, but instead, based on reciprocity, respect, and mutual responsibility over land.

This chapter prompts new questions for analyzing the creation of interracial and interethnic spaces within neighborhoods that are left to their own devices to survive. Are these spatial claims to urban space examples of how marginalized and racialized groups exercise or prefigure autonomy, sovereignty, and self-determination? What is the role of expressive culture in reimagining and taking symbolic and concrete ownership of space and place? I raise questions around ownership, sovereignty, and autonomy to impress upon our minds alternative ways to conceptualize how graffiti may be more critically related to the question of land and spatial claims. At the same time, I am also aware that grassroots spaces like the Vermont Arts District stand in stark contrast to the more institutionalized Arts Districts in cities that are increasingly linked to processes of gentrification and urban displacement.

In Chapter 5: Gentrification Street Art and The Revamping of the First City-Sponsored Graffiti Mural at the Arts District, I engage these contradictions to examine the ways that graffiti and street art are celebrated and commodified under processes of urban redevelopment and gentrification. In this chapter, I demonstrate how the recent transformation of the Arts District as a neighborhood saturated with a variety of street art has been partly the result of the success of the struggles of graffiti

writers and street artists who worked to lift the mural ban in 2013. But rather than the legalization or the decriminalization of graffiti, the results of that struggle led to the commercialization and commodification of graffiti and street art. In so doing, graffiti writers and street artists face a neoliberal regime that disciplines through the market or through the carceral state. In this context, graffiti writers and street artists become caught within market logics that encourage the entrepreneurialism of the arts and culture while punishing those who refuse commercial avenues e through punitive means of fines, arrests, and incarceration. This neoliberal process of commercialization has created new boundaries between what has largely been thought of as the autonomous activity of producing graffiti and street art with the financial realm of commerce.

The commercialization of street art has created the "permitted vandal" who aligns themselves with nonprofit and corporate backing and the "criminal vandal" who remains in the margins of this new market. Graffiti writers and street artists who have historically used their art to struggle for the right to public space now do so within a context of the branded city and in neoliberal logics of commercialization (Banet-Weiser, 2011). As such, renegade graffiti writers who refuse the commercial avenues of street art reveal to us the contradictions of this urban political economy and speak back to the incorporation of art into neoliberal market logics The revamping of the Undiscovered America mural in 2018 illustrates this point.

I argue that the revamping and unveiling of the Undiscovered America mural is a way that aggrieved communities speak back and resist dominant narratives and

colonial logics of discovery and its variations, that as a metaphor, continue to justify ongoing dispossession through processes of gentrification. The unveiling of the mural in 2018 served as a way for veteran graffiti writers to challenge the ongoing appropriation and mobilization of street art as part of processes of gentrification. The mural also created space for marginalized communities in a rapidly gentrifying part of Los Angeles, for example by providing a platform for indigenous elders to speak about issues that threaten life like climate disaster, wars at home and abroad, and our shared responsibility to the earth.

By illustrating the ways in which the revamping of the Undiscovered America mural provided a space for indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities, I demonstrate that the revamping of the mural in 2018 was in its own way a critique of the so-called "discovery" of the Arts District. The narrative of the discovery of the Arts District has been widespread amongst international artists and developers, yet it has also been continually criticized by the graffiti artists who I spoke with at the Graffiti and Mural Art Tours, in my interviews with graffiti writers, and with the main organizers of the Undiscovered America event. In revamping the mural, Nuke, Angst, and the other graffiti artists who provided spray paint, time, and labor, were in fact reasserting themselves and their presence in a rapidly gentrifying area now rebranded as the Arts District. Indeed, despite the opening of new art markets that include a space for graffiti and street artists, very few Latinx and Black graffiti writers benefit and crossover into the mainstream. This became clear with my conversations with Nuke, who although has been working at the Arts District and was

the main artist who revamped the mural, does not have the same funding, backing, and support from the cultural affairs department or other funding institutions. In fact, he was on the verge of being houseless during our conversations. The very few that do crossover are exceptions rather than the norm. The artists who manage to cross over produce work that meets the abstract criteria for commercialized authenticity as defined by mainly white arts dealers, purchasers, investors, and developers. But what about the rest of the graffiti writers who refuse to succumb or do not have the right credentials to crossover?

I want to stress that renegade graffiti writers continue to create new visions of cities where people can relate to the built environment beyond market logics and the primacy of private property. While there is a convergence between the authentic and the commercial, between an oppositional culture like graffiti and the market, I am not convinced that the contradictions it engenders will be resolved by the full incorporation of writers as entrepreneurs or as brands. In thinking about this context, I am particularly interested in the contradictions that emerge. What I am interested in is how graffiti writers locate the contradictions within the commercialization of graffiti and street art, and how they use that commercialized platform to create an opening to insert their struggles: to 'speak' or to communicate important issues publicly to as many people as possible. Future research could continue to engage and explore these contradictions between graffiti and street art in rapidly gentrifying cities and Arts Districts around the US and the world.

This dissertation began with a curiosity about the contradictions between the ways that street art has been celebrated while graffiti remains criminalized. I have seen through my research how the dynamics of capitalism allows for the marketization of the arts and culture and the commodification of everyday life in postindustrial cities, as well as the ways that critique and opposition are absorbed and often punished. There remain questions to be answered; for example, rather than solely accepting the incorporation of graffiti and street art in the mainstream as only a form of cooptation, which it certainly is, I want to ask why would there be a need to incorporate graffiti into a market if it is only a simple or meaningless form of vandalism? Do graffiti writers help people foresee a possible and transformative relationship between people and the built environment that does away with dominant notions of private property under capitalism? I see the contradiction embedded within convergence culture as a site full of possibilities. Rather than a one-sided battle, I want us to continue to consider the ways that young and often working-class and poor graffiti writers of color show us different ways of imagining the city and relating to space and each other. In the face of structural violence, ongoing dispossession and gentrification, and punishment, the Black and Latinx graffiti writers in Los Angeles that we met in this study open to us a world where they are more than the conditions, expectations, and life chances ascribed to them, and that they are active agents in telling alternative histories of the city and in transforming their own realities.

Appendix A

Semistructured Interview Questions

Defining Graffiti Writing Culture and its History in Los Angeles:

- How do you define graffiti writing?
- What makes a writer a writer? Can anyone claim to be a graffiti writer or do they have to be recognized by this particular community to be considered a graffiti writer?
- What do you know about the history of graffiti writing in Los Angeles? Where did it come from? Who were the earliest graffiti writers you heard of writing in the city?
- What do you think makes Los Angeles graffiti scene different from New York and other places around the world?
- What do you share with other graffiti writers in other cities?
- What are some of the things you love about doing graffiti?
- What are some of the things that you do not like about doing graffiti?

Initiation to the Graffiti Writing Career:

- How old were you when you first started doing/writing graffiti? What year was this? [This is to compare the ages of each respondent's involvement in the culture and to examine what was going on in the city during this year]
- How did you begin writing?

    - Did anyone introduce you to it? Or did you come to graffiti on your own? [To find out how they entered in their career as graffiti writers]
- How did you learn how to write, paint, scribe, etc.?
- Did you have any immediate/initial inspirations?
- Who did you look up to when it came to style? How come? What was so distinct about their particular style or what made them so influential to your own style? [Writers are usually assisted in perfecting their lettering and color scheme by their peers or someone who is already involved in graffiti]
- How did you get your graffiti-writing name? Did you choose it or was it given to you? Does it stand for something? Like an Acronym? [To find out what meaning they have assigned to their alias/monikers that they write].
- Did you join any graffiti crews? Are you currently a member of a graffiti crew? If so, why or why not?
- Why did you join this or these particular crew(s)? Who introduced you to this crew? Who were its originators? Are there a main-representative of the crew?
- What makes your crew meaningful?

Questions of Unsanctioned and Legally Produced Graffiti:

- What makes graffiti legal or illegal?
- Have you ever asked for permission to paint?
- What do you think of writers who showcase their graffiti in galleries and museums?

- What about those who have begun selling their graffiti online?
- Do you consider your work art?
  - If yes, what makes it artistic?
  - If not, why not?
- Have you sold or considered selling your graffiti writing skills/art either online or showcasing it at a gallery?
- What do you think makes graffiti different from other forms of art?
- Have you heard of the term street art?
  - If so, what do you think of this term?
    - And how is it or is not connected to graffiti writing?
- What would you say is the difference between street art and graffiti art/writing?
  - What makes them different?
- Have you attended any museums or galleries that showcase graffiti?
  - If so, what did you think about it?
  - If not, why not?

Graffiti and its penalties:

- Have you ever been caught by law enforcement or security guards while painting or producing graffiti? Have any of your friends ever been caught?
- What are some of the best tactics to avoid getting caught?

- Why do you think graffiti is considered a violent crime, worthy of a felony conviction?
- What is the most time (spent in jail) someone has done in jail for doing graffiti?
- Are there any exciting or memorable stories you would like to share of one of your painting missions?

Demographic questions concerning nationality/ethnic-racial background, etc.:

- How long have you lived in Los Angeles?
- Were you born and/or raised in Los Angeles?
- What do you love about this city? What do you hate or find frustrating about the city?
- What type of education did you obtain growing up? Did you attend and graduate high school? How about higher education? Like college? Or art school?
- Was writing a way to deflect/reflect bullying or poor performance in school?
- Where are your parents from?
- What is your nationality?
- What is your ethnicity?
- What is your age?

Appendix B

Maps of Los Angeles

Note. From “Map of Los Angeles,” by *Los Angeles Almanac*, 2004. Copyright Given Place Publishing.

Note. From "Map of Los Angeles," by TeleAtlas, 2005

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