

INTRODUCTION

My initiation into the world of graffiti writers began in the fall of 1995. I remember riding my bike over the Williamsburg Bridge from Brooklyn and being overwhelmed by a large and colorful graffiti painting. The piece said “SENTO,” and each letter had a different style, each twisting into the next and producing a wholeness that was readable even to my novice eyes. Various greens melded into blues, twisting back into the forest-green background, yellow highlights, orange accents, light-blue shading, and white outlined letters: S E N T O. Although I had been surrounded by graffiti in New York City this was the first time that a piece had penetrated my indifference. This was the first time I had really looked at one as something to be seen, instead of just as white noise or as trash littering the street, something to be overlooked and avoided. I related my bridge incident to a co-worker who I had overheard was involved with graffiti. He lent me his copy of the classic book *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York* by Craig Castleman, which gives a descriptive history of graffiti and the young artists who created it.¹ The book told the story of one of graffiti’s most colorful periods, the 1970s. I badly wanted to know more, but since then not a single text had been written about the post-subway graffiti like the piece I had seen on the bridge.²

I quickly became a student of graffiti. I watched the films *Style Wars* and *Wild Style* and I read the classics: *The Faith of Graffiti*, *Subway Art*, and *Spraycan Art*.³ I bought a camera and started to photograph graffiti. I had lived in New York for three years, but suddenly I was in an entirely new city; it felt like the walls around me had burst to life. I began to explore my city looking at graffiti, and this gave me a greater appreciation of the diversity of its architecture and its people. I learned how to take photographs, improved my penmanship, and got into lots of fascinating conversations.

For seven years I was immersed in graffiti culture.⁴ This constituted talking to writers, going on missions to watch writers paint, taking thousands of pictures of graffiti, exploring new areas of the city with writers as my guides, reading the numerous magazines devoted to the culture, and constantly reading the walls in my daily travels.⁵

I learned that graffiti is not a monolithic culture. In 1982 Castleman wrote that few generalizations could be made about the type of kid who writes graffiti, and that remains true today.⁶ Writers are white-skinned, brown-skinned, light-skinned and dark-skinned; they are rich and poor, smart and dumb; most are male (more on this below); some are militantly opposed to social norms, some are quiet conformists, while others are political activists; they span a broad range of ethnic groups; they come from the cities, from the suburbs, and even from the country. They can be found in many cities, including New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Paris, Berlin, Stuttgart, Amsterdam, Tokyo, Sao Paulo, and Santiago.

The culture that writers share is not bound together by appearance, language, birthplace, or class. Although many writers recognize and respect these differences, what binds them is the history of graffiti and the process of doing it. Whatever their class, race, ethnicity, religion, or age, writers define themselves not by what they look like, or what language they speak, or what clothes they wear, but by what they do.⁷ Their identities are as writers first, and as members of ethnic, religious, and other subgroups second. I am not trying to claim that writers never experience or evince the racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia that are typical in our culture; but it is important to understand that these young people's identities are largely constructed from their achieved status as writers rather than from an ascribed status imposed upon them by the larger society.

Because so many misconceptions exist, it is important to have an accurate portrait of who writers are. While many of the original pioneers of the graffiti movement, like DONDI, DEZ, KASE 2, SKEME, STAN 153, STAY HIGH 149, and FUTURA, were black, in the last fifteen years graffiti writing has diminished among black kids, even as it has gained popularity among white kids. As hip hop grew and progressed many talented African-American youth chose rap over writing because of the possibility of monetary reward. However, white kids writing graffiti should not be construed as an act of cultural thievery or imitation; it is not the same as white kids playing the blues or rapping.⁸ Unlike most indigenous forms of American music, graffiti is not specifically steeped in African-American cultural traditions,

and white kids, black kids, brown kids, rich kids, and poor kids have all participated in the creation and perpetuation of graffiti culture from the beginning. Graffiti is rich in the cultural traditions of New York City urban youth, with kids from many backgrounds playing starring and supporting roles.

The reason that so many white kids now write graffiti does perhaps follow class lines. Graffiti is not part of the sports and entertainment industrial complex; there is no dream of huge monetary rewards that will offer a way out of impoverished circumstances. Since race continues to limit access to opportunity in this country, kids of color are more likely to be poor, and hence, more inclined to focus their talents on more lucrative endeavors such as academics, sports, or music. That is, sports and music offer a chance for the “American Dream,” while graffiti does not. Athletics and rap music are at least in theory lucrative career paths. White kids practice graffiti because they can afford to do something for which the monetary rewards are not immediate. Let me be clear—I am not trying to claim graffiti for white boys, or even to suggest that white privilege does not operate in graffiti, but it is the case that this subculture is primarily a meritocracy.

However, graffiti attracts a wide range of kids because the startup costs are virtually nil. Although Jeff Ferrell claims in his book *Crimes of Style*⁹ that Denver writers buy most of their paint, New York City writers are dedicated shoplifters, and the reality of race means that it is also easier for white kids to steal paint, since many store owners and security guards tend to adhere to a racist stereotype of black criminality. Writers, however, have used this to their advantage. Teams of black, white, and brown kids would enter stores together, and while owners and security guards focused their attention on the kids of color, the white kids would be stuffing their jackets and bags with paint that they would then share with their fellow writers.¹⁰

This is not to suggest that black kids don’t have what writers call “racking” or shoplifting skills. In fact, considering the additional burden of racism, black kids must be more skilled. The first time I met a well-known black writer in a bar on the Lower East Side, he was wearing a \$550 ski jacket and proudly proclaimed that he could become a professional shoplifter. Since then he has founded a graffiti collective, which writers call a “crew,” starred in a documentary film, all the while using his charm and guile to “boost” or steal everything from markers and cans to jeans, North Face jackets, and even designer Prada shoes.

Race, however, can be a contributing factor in whether someone decides to become a graffiti writer. White folks do not have to weigh the issue of whether or not they will be beaten or shot by police for their misdemeanors. A Jamaican-born rapper and illustrator who calls himself Skam told me that racism was the reason he never wanted to be a graffiti writer. This was around the time when New York City police had without provocation killed an unarmed West African man named Amadou Diallo in a hail of forty-one bullets,¹¹ and Skam said he feared that if he was on the streets alone at night engaged in shady business the police would shoot him. As Ron K. Brunson has shown, the accumulated experiences that black males have had with the police factor into their decision-making throughout their everyday lives.¹²

Black graffiti writers, like black folk in general, have had to overcome more obstacles than their white counterparts. This is also the case for those writers who pursue post-graffiti careers. However, it would be too simplistic to suggest that white writers turn graffiti fame into monetary success while black and brown writers do not. Ambitious men and women seem to find a way to achieve their goals.

Although a minority, women have participated in writing culture since the beginning. Writers such as BARBARA AND EVA 62 were famous for tagging the Statue of Liberty, and GRAPE and STONEY were prominent in Brooklyn. PINK was one of the few female subway superstars, and her work inspired a new generation of 1990s writers, including BLUE, MUK, DONA, HOPE, JAKEE, DIVA, and SARE.¹³

While graffiti talent is not gendered, graffiti writers must literally fight for their reputations, and this turns off many women, who often choose to concentrate their efforts on legal walls. But of course there are the exceptions. PINK wrote right along with the boys during the train era in the 1980s and has achieved legendary graffiti and artistic fame. CLAW, who describes herself as a nice middle-class Jewish girl,¹⁴ has been a dedicated street bomber (illegal graffiti writer) since the mid-1990s, with pieces, throw-ups, and tags all over the city. Today her fame is everywhere. She is the subject of a book, *Bombshell: The Life and Crimes of Claw Money*, is featured in the Doug Pray film *Infamy*, and runs her own successful line of clothing featuring her iconic claw with three fingernails.¹⁵

Women writers often team up with men for protection and comradeship, and this was the case with CLAW when she bombed New York City in the 1990s with MQ of DMS crew. However, more recently she has taken a young up-and-comer, MISS 17, as her partner in her PMS crew (Power,

Money, Sex). These women are no doubt tough, and while they are less likely to be roughed up or harassed by cops or male writers, women have had their share of beef. Nevertheless, women face enormous challenges negotiating dangerous streets alone at night. The street, in many ways, is a place for maleness, but these women and many like them have braved the night and demanded inclusion. While female writers have no doubt experienced sexism from their male counterparts, their accomplishments are duly noted and respect is given if they have indeed “gotten up” and are “all-city,” a term used to describe writers who have saturated the city with their names.

Anyone who can get large quantities of paint, is able to fight, and is willing to break the law can become a graffiti writer. In theory, writers are not even excluded from the subculture for lack of artistic talent, what writers call “style.” To be sure, novice writers with bad style and poor technique will be ridiculed by their peers, and they often quit, but with proper instruction and practice even people who cannot draw can develop an adequate tag and throw-up. When writers first start, their tags are often sketchy; but eventually, after writing their names thousands of times, they get good. The task of writing is to saturate the city with your name and any writer who does this will get fame and respect, regardless of style, race, gender, class, age, nationality, or sexuality. In its purest form, graffiti is a democratic art form that revels in the American Dream. With desire, dedication, humility, courage, toughness, and most of all hard work, anyone can potentially become a successful graffiti writer, and maybe even make a living as a result.

Illegal Writing

Graffiti, many are quick to point out, is illegal. Unlike me, not everyone sees the beauty of the form. In fact, as New York City looked to improve its image as a tourist destination and financial capital, graffiti became a target in the 1980s. Much of the effort to clamp down on graffiti writers was undergirded by the so-called “broken windows theory” first advanced by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in a 1982 article in the *Atlantic Monthly*.¹⁶ The New York City Police Department embraced this theory—which argues that petty crime increases the propensity for more serious criminal activity—and quickly enacted “zero tolerance” policies for many petty crimes such as graffiti writing, subway jumping, and vagrancy. Many police departments have followed New York’s lead in embracing the

principles and tactics of this theory in their approaches to crime control. In this view, graffiti writing is regarded as creating a visible invitation to commit further crime in a given area.

Although the broken windows theory was popular with police, and with Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's administration in particular, it has been critiqued by criminologists for the way in which it provides rhetorical justification for the harsh treatment of the homeless, poor people, petty lawbreakers, and, often enough, people of color. Cultural criminologist Jeff Ferrell describes the broken windows theory as "damn good demagoguery, assigning the blame for street crime not to poverty and marginalization, but to the poor and marginalized. A slippery piece of dishonesty, it in turn justifies the removal of such groups from the spaces they occupy, and in a still slicker trick, hides the occupied gentrification of these spaces—windows repaired, graffiti removed—inside an ideology of crime prevention and restored 'community.'"¹⁷

More recent scholarship has shown that "broken windows" or "quality-of-life" policing, especially with respect to misdemeanor marijuana arrests, severely and disproportionately impacts black and brown kids, who are more likely to be detained, and given harsher treatment when arrested, than their white counterparts.¹⁸

New York City politicians applied the broken windows theory to graffiti, arguing that graffiti not only damaged property but actually made public space more dangerous by encouraging major crimes. As a result, they were able to devote more and more resources to getting graffiti off of the subways, where it once dominated most cars. This is the argument that American studies scholar Joe Austin makes in his book *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Became an Urban Crisis in New York City*.¹⁹

Technically, graffiti is treated as an act of "criminal mischief" and the penalty for this oxymoron is dependent upon the "damage in dollar amount to property." While this provision speaks to the vagaries of graffiti's criminality, for the writers it can be precarious. In 2006 New York City lawmakers attempted to pass a law banning the sale of "graffiti instruments," including glass-etching cream, aerosol paint, and broad-tipped markers, to anyone under the age of twenty-one. This law was challenged in court for being too broad, and a judge eventually overturned the portion that dealt with paint and markers.²⁰

Those who are caught writing graffiti are processed through Central Booking. This means anywhere from six to twenty-four hours spent sitting on a hard cement floor, followed by a monetary fine and a penalty



"Graffiti Vandalism,"
New York Police
Department reward
poster, circa 2006.

depending on, I would argue, how big a vandal or how famous the police deem you to be. The key, therefore, to being a good writer is not to get caught, but inevitably some do. Arresting young writers is thought to be a preemptive strike against future criminality. Since 2005 the NYPD has increased its anti-graffiti efforts, utilizing digital cameras and lots of manpower to track and capture "graffiti vandals." That year saw more than 2,230 graffiti arrests, a 93 percent increase over the previous year.²¹

Despite the fact that much of the allure of graffiti writing is getting away with something that is illegal, as some criminologists point out,²² lots of graffiti is done legally with permission and, often, even compensation. In fact, the ubiquity of big and colorful murals, along with museum and gallery shows that highlight the movement's early roots and rising stars, have lately made it difficult for anti-graffiti forces to argue that all graffiti is vandalistic in nature.²³ That said, critics often focus, not on the graffiti subculture, but on more sensational topics such as gang graffiti and violence. The NYPD has recently found it necessary to remind citizens that graffiti is harmful and illegal through a campaign flyer that advertises a \$500 reward and includes the tag line "Remember, Graffiti Vandalism is a Crime."

While black and brown youth in general are more likely to be stopped, harassed, or even killed as a result of mistaken identity, the special Vandal Squad detectives of the NYPD are interested in the writers who, in their terms, have done the most damage. This means that they go after the writers whose names are up the most and are hence the most famous. This is one area where race plays less of a factor in policing. Graffiti cops, for the most part, don't discriminate by race, class, or gender. In fact, for the big busts they spend their time researching and developing a profile of the writer's identity. They take photographs, scour the internet, and show up at legal spots, all in an effort to put a "government name" (slang for the name on one's birth certificate, something that many writers keep secret) to the tag. Since active writers are extremely secretive about their identities, the Vandal Squad has often made very public arrests of older writers who are transitioning out of crime and have begun to focus more on art. This was the case with ESPO, EARSNOT, REVS, and, most recently, KET, who founded *Stress Magazine* and is the publisher of *From Here to Fame Books*.²⁴

Despite these continued pressures, graffiti subculture has flourished. From the walls of Philadelphia in the early 1960s to New York City subways in the 1970s and 1980s, to urban walls all over the world, name-based graffiti writing has persisted into the twenty-first century, and its presence continues to be part of the urban aesthetic. In a history spanning more than thirty years, graffiti writing has become a worldwide cultural phenomenon with many thousands of participants. Despite the continued public outcry and increased criminal risks, graffiti writing is an established cultural pursuit attracting hundreds of urban and suburban youths.

Even though graffiti is less visible today to those who aren't looking for it, it continues to grow and progress. While the early history of graffiti writing was documented by outsiders, now much of the growth of this culture is being documented by the writers themselves.²⁵ Since most graffiti paintings are eventually removed from the walls and trains of the city, writers rely on photographs to document their exploits. These photos get traded by various writers and wind up in the many magazines and websites devoted to graffiti.²⁶ This links writers from different cities all over the country and the world. Graffiti writers paint and publish magazines in the United States, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Australia, Japan, and South America, allowing writers to compare styles from all over the world.

The Meaning of Graffiti

Many commentators seek to explain graffiti by attempting to define its aesthetic, often treating it as a monolithic movement and characterizing writing, for example, as deviant expression, radical politics, or visual hip hop.²⁷ I myself first attempted to understand writing as symbolic communication. As I tested this theory of what I thought graffiti meant, however, I discovered that it meant different things to each writer. For some it was strictly art, for others a vandalistic thrill, for others a means to communicate one's worth. For some, it was an addiction, a medium that produced endorphins, but ultimately proved to be self-destructive.

Through my research, I discovered that the theoretical generalizations about the aesthetics of graffiti quickly became a moot point, as the theory could only be upheld at great cost to what writing meant to individuals. Theorizing about what graffiti pieces mean in the abstract also seemed to me to be at odds with trying to understand the critical sociological issues about who writes and how the practice of writing and the experience of the subculture community affect their lives. In other words, my training has taught me to place people before theory, to try and bring out their own voices, and to let personal narratives rather than theory drive what is put forth.

Furthermore, I owe a great debt to my graffiti teachers, who refused to let me generalize. Instead, through conversations about and exposure to so much writing, they pushed me to see graffiti for its crudeness and its complexity, its subtleties and its stupidities, its banality and its beauty, and ultimately as a medium capable of embodying contradiction. From high art to low vandalism, the graffiti writers that I know taught me to appreciate and criticize graffiti in a sophisticated fashion.

Although I greatly admire graffiti, it does not mean that my relationship to it or to the writers that do it is void of ambiguity. Let me be clear, not all graffiti is worthy of attention; like most pursuits, some of its products are great and some are awful, and this range requires seeing graffiti as a complex expression rather than a monolithic act.

However, this does not mean that there is no argument in this book about graffiti culture. Although my pursuit of thick cultural description inevitably privileges individual voices and makes it difficult to generalize about the aesthetics of graffiti writing, I still believe that it is imperative to bring out the larger sociological significance of this culture. This commitment led me to distinguish between the graffiti pieces and the people who

create them, between the aesthetics of graffiti and the people who make up the culture. This approach allows me to make specific sociological conclusions about the culture itself, without imposing that theory onto the personal expressions of individuals.

One of the most exciting discoveries of this research is that many graffiti writers have found a way to make careers out of their participation in the culture. The term “deviant career” was used by sociologist Richard Lachmann in 1988 to describe the time kids spent in the service of deviance. Yet Lachmann also theorized that some of these kids who had experienced gallery success might go on to pursue careers in the arts, because graffiti writing would eventually fade away. Lachmann was correct about writers pursuing other opportunities, but the subculture of graffiti writers is still very much alive.²⁸ Many writers have taken their illegal youthful pursuits and turned them into legal adult careers. I will show that any understanding of contemporary subcultures must take into account the various ways in which youth subcultures have led to adult careers.

Graffiti writers do not go on to become hardened criminals, as “quality of life” advocates argue. Rather, the writers that I have known for over a decade, and so many others, have used their graffiti experience to get educations and make careers for themselves. There are a broad range of career opportunities that successful writers have forged, from professional aerosol muralists and fine artists to graphic designers and clothing designers, as well as the numerous careers within the graffiti industry, which include documenting the culture in magazines, videos, and websites or supplying a global network of writers with graffiti supplies from paint to caps to specialized inks.²⁹ Specifically, in the second half of this book, I will highlight the careers made by my own informants who are now very successful adults in the fields of tattooing, studio art, magazine production, journalism, and guerilla marketing.³⁰ But before I discuss “getting out” I’d like to talk about “getting in.”