

# Hip hop learning: Graffiti as an educator of urban teenagers

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Graffiti writing is as ancient as human communication, but in the United States, it gained widespread attention only with its proliferation in urban neighborhoods in the late 1960's and 1970's. 1 Most Americans have come to associate this graffiti explosion with urban gangs, regarding its markings and murals as visible, invasive challenges to middle class and elite aesthetics, property concepts, and sense of security. Although gangs have produced a portion of urban graffiti during the last three decades, most is more accurately linked to hip hop, a mix of cultural practices that appeared in the neighborhoods of New York and other U.S. cities during the mid-1970's. 2 Anthropologist Susan Phillips and other scholars argue that hip hop graffiti has actually functioned as an alternative to gangs, with "writers" organizing themselves in crews that spar with each other "through style and production as opposed to violence." Over the years, graffiti crews have focused urban adolescents on putting their art up around the city, inventing new styles, organizing nocturnal visits to the subway yards, and other experiences that, although often illicit, are far less destructive than most gang activities. 3 The writer expression "graffiti saved my life" is no exaggeration; without it, many more urban kids would have become entangled in violence and crime. 4

Although seldom recognized as such, graffiti crews are also educational organizations that promote valuable learning among their members. This paper will examine the ways in which crews and other graffiti groups have educated urban youth since the early 1970's, comparing their pedagogy to that of more acknowledged learning institutions such as schools and art societies. Using the comments of graffiti writers from a range of time periods and places to reconstruct this experience, it will argue that graffiti education both parallels and diverges from the teaching of these traditional institutions, functioning paradoxically as both a status quo and transgressive organization. 5 Graffiti provides poor and disadvantaged adolescents with knowledge, skills, and values important for success in the mainstream. At the same time, it bonds young people to their urban neighborhoods, empowering them to challenge the dominant society and to transform rather than escape their communities.

## The Beginnings of Hip Hop Graffiti

Hip hop graffiti began in New York City during the late 1960's when a small number of teenagers from Washington Heights, the South Bronx, and other impoverished neighborhoods began blanketing the city with their "tags"-stylized signatures of names they had invented for themselves. 6 The marking of names, slogans, and images in shared spaces was not new to the city, but limited in size, number, and to certain neighborhoods or sites, the earlier inscriptions of gangs, activists, and other scribes had attracted little public notice. 7 In contrast, new writers like Taki 183, Julio 204, and Frank 207 were primarily concerned with visibility and recognition-"getting up" their names often and in places where they could be seen by as many others as possible-and they used the city's walls, bridges, monuments, subway stations, and other public places as their billboards. They quickly gained the admiration of their peers as well as many in or associated with the art scene; but public officials and the mainstream press, despite some early indications of neutrality, regularly excoriated graffiti as "one of the worst forms of pollution we have to combat." 8 Meanwhile, in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Manhattan, hundreds if not thousands of mostly Black and Puerto Rican adolescents ignored these attacks and began saturating public places with their tags. 9

As the numbers of New York City taggers multiplied during the early 1970's, simply getting up one's name in large numbers was no longer sufficient for recognition. Writers began to seek out even more risky and conspicuous tagging spots to enhance their reputations, and the exteriors of subway trains, with their combination of danger and visibility across large sections of the city, rapidly became their most prized canvasses. 10 Inspired by the long, thin, tightly packed letters of Top Cat 126, some writers began to enlarge and embellish their tags. 11 Soon originality in design and color-what the writers called style-was the primary source of status among writers, the thing, according to pioneering writer Vulcan, that "defines who you are [and] separates the men from the toys [unskilled beginners]." 12 New spray paint technologies and the introduction of ultra wide markers made bigger proportions, new hues, and more complex techniques possible, and writers responded with a rapid succession of innovations. Stay High added images to his stretched letters. Super Kool used the wide nozzle from a can of spray starch to decorate a car with thick pink letters silhouetted by a band of yellow, a technique that Phase 2 further developed in his "bubble letters" and other styles. One of the most inventive and respected of the early "style masters," Phase 2 recalls this flurry of creativity as a time when "I'd develop some ideas and a few styles and other styles were feeding and

bouncing off of them, transforming, or just going in other directions . . . then these styles and maybe a few others would go through the same process." 13

The writers' began to refer to their larger and more technically sophisticated creations as "masterpieces" or simply "pieces" to distinguish them from the simple tags of beginners, and before long, they were covering the subway trains with pieces such as "top to bottoms," "end to ends," "whole cars," two-car "worms," and even "whole trains," often decorating their lettering with cartoon characters, landscapes, depictions of urban life, and other imagery. Lee describes one such piece:

The best piece I ever done to my mind was the "Earth Is Hell-Heaven is Life" two-car. "Heaven is Life" had clear letters and soft colors. It was my view of heaven. Flowers and mountains, the sun, a dove, butterflies, and God in a preaching attitude with his hands up. On the next car, I went off. I told the city how it really looks. There was a soldier holding a gun, his whole body was Shadow Green, and near him it said, "Stop the War." I drew factories that were gray and dim with smokestacks. I drew a man hanging his dog, to emphasize cruelty to animals. I drew a dude choking his lady. I drew blood splats and I drew the President up there preaching, with people looking up to him. Behind him was an American flag, but it wasn't really, and it said "Vote for Nixon," and all that. It had missiles laid up, the sky was dim, shaded with orange from fires. And it said, "Earth is Hell" in burning letters. 14

By the mid-1970's, the city's most skilled writers were painting elaborate works like this on trains, walls, tunnels, outdoor handball courts, and in a few cases, for mainstream art galleries and collectors. Quantity would continue to bring fame to writers such as IN and CAP, who in the late 1970's and early 1980's covered the subways and other surfaces with throw-ups-large, bubble letter tags executed quickly and with little attention to style. But for many if not most writers, the "piece" and the artistic skill necessary to create it had become the primary currency of respect. 15

Exciting new music and dance forms were also emerging in New York City during the mid-1970's. 16 In the Bronx and Brooklyn, for example, several DJ's who provided music for house and neighborhood block parties began to experiment with new sounds, manipulating records back and forth to create a scratching sound and to mix segments or "breaks" from existing recordings into a thick carpet of dance music. Soon, emcees were fronting the DJ's and entertaining the crowds by overlaying the music with verbal play or "rapping" while "break dancers" performed acrobatic moves drawn from African and Brazilian dance traditions. The graffiti pieces covering the subways and other public sites had much in common with these music and dance forms. All germinated in the same urban neighborhoods and conditions, and some of the DJ's, rappers, and dancers were or had been graffiti writers. Most others were friends, who often recruited artists to decorate the sites of their music and dance events. They also shared a similar method, with each reassembling and reshaping bits from the past into exciting, original forms. Together these music, dance, and visual expressions comprised a new urban culture, a rich mix of artistic practices that have come to be known as hip hop. 17 Today graffiti in the tradition of Phase 2 and other pioneers is commonly referred to as "hip hop graffiti," a designation that some writers find inaccurate or even, in the words of Lady Pink, "extremely annoying." 18 Indeed, tags, throw-ups, and pieces originated independently and should not be considered a mere subsidiary of the hip hop music conglomerate. Still, the label is useful in distinguishing most graffiti from the scrawling of gangs and others and as a reminder that a number of kindred cultural forms rose from what many consider to be the barren urban landscape of the 1960's and 1970's.

Hip hop graffiti has become an international phenomenon over the last three decades, expanding from its New York roots to other cities in the U.S. and across the world. Despite massive eradication efforts by public agencies, it remains a persistent, visible characteristic of modern urban life. In New York, for example, the Metropolitan Transit Association has greatly reduced the amount of graffiti in and on the subways since the mid-1980's, but writers have responded by "taking the streets," blanketing buildings, highway walls, freight trains, and other conspicuous sites with throw-ups. Meanwhile, the painting of "pieces" has gravitated toward "invisible" spaces under highway bridges, around abandoned buildings, and in isolated warehouse and industrial areas, where writers can paint with less fear of arrest. Located in areas where most of the city's middle and affluent classes seldom travel, many assume that these elaborate murals have largely disappeared. The proliferation of graffiti "zines," videos, and websites over the last 10-15 years demonstrates otherwise. These alternative media have assumed functions previously performed by the subways, connecting writers across the U.S. and world into a common culture and making their work available to a wider public. 19

## **The Attraction of Graffiti**

Propelled by new media forms and the expanding popularity of hip hop music, graffiti is suddenly reappearing in art galleries and commercial settings and captivating a new generation adolescents from all races, social classes, and nations. But while graffiti's public visibility has waxed and waned over the last three decades, its attraction to urban youth has remained relatively consistent, especially among the poor Black and Latino teens, predominately male, who continue to constitute its core constituency in the U.S. 20 How does one account for this appeal? What has drawn thousands of adolescents to graffiti over the years? The general public perceives writers as "just a bunch of little bastards who want to deface property," and many certainly use graffiti as a way to rebel, to lash out, and to destroy. 21 But graffiti writing satisfies a complex set of needs, functioning for most participants as a furious but relatively benign antidote to adolescent isolation, boredom, powerless, and anonymity-the same experiences that draw many urban kids to gangs. Writers often cite their desire to bond with siblings or to "keep occupied." 22 Pioneering writer Flint 707 saw graffiti as a challenge, growing up in Brooklyn in the early 1970's as "a pure daredevil" who sought "experiences that could heal [sic] the social scars and wounds found deep within the city's clusters of ethnic neighborhoods." He involved himself in neighborhood games and salsa dancing to keep out of trouble, but "there was always an urge to do more, to dare mighty things and to achieve great conquests." 23 His peer Vulcan recalls similar motives: "I did it for the thrill. You like to be able to say, I can do this and you can't catch me." 24

Graffiti also offers adolescents a cherished opportunity to proclaim themselves to the world. Ernest Abel and Barbara Buckley contend that graffiti markings have historically been "announcements of one's identity, a kind of personal testimonial to one's existence . . .

scratched, carved, or painted onto some surface seemingly for the purpose of leaving one's mark." Such imprints, they point out, have traditionally been the preoccupation of adolescents from lower socio-economic backgrounds, those with the least power and voice within society and the group most attracted to graffiti. 25 The early writers support these assertions. Tagging, Phase 2 insists, was for many disadvantaged urban teens "the only significant vehicle to represent their 'existence.'" A tag filled the "expression void" encountered by urban teens, according to Tasar 32. "In its simplest form, a name on a vacant building signifies that 'yes, I am here. I do interact with society and I do matter.'" For Il Crusher, graffiti was simply "the ultimate self-expression." 26 A graffiti declaration often brings respect and fame as well as a sense of identity. Kaves describes how "the recognition for a kid coming up was crazy. Everybody in the neighborhood knew who I was." 27 In the end, however it is approval of other writers that most matters to the writers. Phase 2 insists that they put their name up in the most visible, public sites, not out of a desire to vandalize, but "to please each other, with the ultimate gratification being the accolades from those other writers who, more than anyone else, knew what was appreciated and considered the ultimate." 28

## **Graffiti Groups**

Those who write graffiti for more than a few months typically go through a series of structured stages similar to those of more recognized careers. 29 As we have seen, the writer begins with tagging, a solo activity that satisfies a range of individualistic needs. After a few months, most taggers abandon the marker and spray can for non-graffiti pastimes, but those who continue on to the next career stages-the painting of "throw-ups" and larger, more complex "pieces"-begin to collaborate and in the process forge close personal and professional relationships. 30 The new emphasis on style prompts them to cluster in groups, constructing, according to Richard Lachmann, "a total art world" for discussing new designs, devising aesthetic standards, and judging innovations. 31 Historically, writers from the same schools and neighborhoods began gathering at local coffee shops and parks in the early 1970's, and eventually "writers corners" appeared-subway stops where writers from across the city would gather to share ideas and to watch and evaluate train pieces. Many of the early artists also dabbled in neighborhood gangs, which, like graffiti, satisfied their craving for identity and recognition. Anxious to paint across the city, most found the gangs too restrictive, however, and eventually broke these ties, often advertising their independence by wearing gang-style denim jackets on which they painted their graffiti tags. Preoccupied with rivalries and impressed by the writer's fearlessness and skill, gangs generally left them alone, but for a short time in the early 1970's, artists in areas where gang wars were especially intense sought safety in numbers and established writing gangs such as Brooklyn's ex-Vandals. This strategy backfired, however, sparking conflicts among writers and with some of the larger non-graffiti gangs, and by 1973, the ex-Vandals and similar groups had disbanded. As the graffiti gangs dissolved, writers began to organize more informal groups or crews, not for protection, but for companionship, collaboration, and support. 32 The first crews were master groups of highly skilled and experienced writers-"crack team[s] that couldn't be touched ... a chosen few that were in a class by themselves," according to Phase 2. 33 The high standards and exclusivity of these crews created intense competition among those vying for membership as well as between rival groups. Beginners' crews and groups composed of writers at various levels of proficiency also surfaced. 34 The Baltimore writer Deka became involved in one of these multi-level crews as a teen. Touched by "a fever" for graffiti at the age of ten, he regularly cut his high school classes to watch and draw with older, more accomplished writers who would critique his work and at times share letter models with him. Eventually some took him into their crew, where Deka assisted on pieces designed and executed by his mentors: "they took me on, and I just started doing characters and stuff like that cause they were doing heavy detail work," he recalls. "Its almost like an apprenticeship, they'd start you off with characters so you couldn't mess up the wall too bad . . . ." 35

## **Graffiti as an Educational Activity**

The mentor-apprentice relationship that Deka describes is the primary way that young writers have learned their craft over the last three decades. According to Lady Pink,

We're not taught in school, this is nothing formal in a book or anything. It's all taught word of mouth, handed down master to apprentice. The only way to learn any of this stuff is to take up with a master or just somebody that knows a little bit more than you do and have them teach you the ropes.

Those without a mentor are at distinct disadvantage, Pink argues, because they have to "figure out how to get into the train yards all alone, figure out how to do lettering just from the books that were out and there wasn't anyone there telling them correct or not correct. They just learned the hard way, by trial and error." 36 Over the years, however, most aspiring writers have joined crews and in the process attached to one or more mentors. The most organized of these crews resemble medieval guilds or trade unions, with apprentices assisting on works designed by masters, often painting backgrounds and filling in outlines in preparation for the finer detailed work. Since writers are not limited to one crew, ambitious novices can also join or even organize beginners' teams where they execute their own pieces. Later, as accomplished writers, they enter master crews and begin to mentor novices within multi-level groups. 37 Taking on proteges has always been an expected step for highly regarded masters, and a special dedication to teaching might bring them added esteem. Zephyr captures the graffiti culture's educational ideal in his eulogy of Dondi, a writer known for his commitment to "the shorties."

Dondi subscribed whole-heartedly to the apprenticeship system common in graffiti society. He was quick to provide guidance and advice to friends and cohorts. He crafted outlines for his fellow crew-members and often aided them in the execution of their pieces. Over the years he helped foster the talents of countless graffitiists, many of whom made their own significant contributions to the culture. 38

The mentoring of Dondi and hundreds of other masters raises the graffiti crews from mere associations of writers to educational organizations. Lawrence Cremin defines education as "the deliberate, systematic and sustained efforts to transmit, evoke, or acquire knowledge, values, skills, and sensibilities," all activities that clearly take place within crews. 39 Although originally organized to support the painting of pieces, pedagogy has become one of their most important functions; crews are, in the words of John Dewey, "framed

with express reference to influencing the mental and moral disposition of its members," sites where experienced writers pass on their knowledge, skills, and values to eager disciples. 40 The teaching and learning of painting techniques is the most obvious education taking place within the crews. Santa Barbara writer Posh One fondly recalls those masters who "took time to school the kids" in the skills needed to create a sense of depth, three-dimensional figures, and balanced compositions. From these mentors he learned "the piecing side of things," including specific skills such as how to "stencil tip . . . 3Ds, inner-outlines, backgrounds, and concepts." 41 According to Lady Pink, young writers "learn the ropes" from crew mentors, which include very practical knowledge and skills as well as painting techniques: "how to use spray paint, how to break into the yards, how to steal paint, how to evade the police, how to run tracks, you know, how to do characters and how to do nice lettering, and all sorts of things, even the social skills that will get your ass not beat up." 42

When engaged in these activities, whether legal or illegal, young crew members also absorb many important values and habits of mind. Writers plan and execute complex, original projects, collaborate with others, manage time, and practice to improve, and in the process, build self confidence, resiliency, and other useful academic and job skills. 43 Deka emphasizes the work ethic needed to create quality designs. "I got experience painting" with the crew, he recalls, "[but] most of my experience was in sketchbooks. I would stay up crazy hours sketching. I would get a hundred page sketchbook and in a small amount of time I'd have eighty done." 44 Spokane's Tom swears that "Its like school for me everyday. I wake up and draw, draw, and draw." Such hard work and practice is unavoidable, even for the most talented, according to LA writer ManOne: "I don't care how good you are, first you must pay some dues, practice, and get up a little bit before you try to flex some raw styles. It took me about 3 years before I even attempted to bust a burner at Belmont. I had too much respect for the cats who were up at that time and I knew if I went over them it better burn or I'd be toyed up." Teako insists that the graffiti rewards are significant, however. Writing "has helped to inspire within me my own creative talents without the fear of criticism or failure," he acknowledges. "Art, any art . . . is a difficult and sometimes lonely road to travel. It does take hard work, patience, and perseverance if you want to see your creation come to life." 45

Some of the learning within crews is less obvious. For example, writers build and enforce their own rules and, in the process, learn an essential premise of democratic citizenship-that they have the right and responsibility to govern themselves. A U.K. crew's effort to define borders between acceptable and unacceptable use of another's writing style offers a case in point. The early graffiti writers held originality in high regard and condemned improper borrowing or "biting." "A real writer," many believed, painted in a unique style rather than borrowing "from the masters and reapplying it and passing it off as theirs." 46 At the same time, the appropriation of the old to create the new has always been a valued method within graffiti and the hip hop culture in general. 47 U.K. writer Shok 1 explains how he and his crew resolved this dilemma:

Biting for [my crew and] me is not when someone uses a style or is influenced by another writer. There is a fine line between influence and biting, and to me the turning point depends on the taker's attitude toward the other writer and to the style. Biting to me is taking and then denying the writer the credit for that which was taken. I think it also depends on the relationship between the writers.

The difference, he concludes, is like that " between a stranger walking in and stealing [a precious belonging], then denying it, or a mate that borrows it and says thanks." In adopting this behavior code, Shok 1 and his crew certainly avoided many conflicts and cleared a path "to learn graff and for [outstanding] style to proliferate." But they also learned and practiced the duties of group membership. 48

Graffiti also immerses adolescents in a highly competitive environment. Fierce rivalry for respect begins at the tagging level, spurring new writers to get up as much as possible, to take great risks, and to develop their style. Tags, according to Kel, are "the marks that get you noticed and help determine your place in the food chain. If your tag is weak you were immediately pushed to the back of the class and you took a lot of shit for it on the way." 49 Competition is even more intense within crews, where the reputation of a writer is as much the product of his or her own accomplishments as those of the group. Members support each other by sharing ideas, collaborating on pieces, serving as lookouts at the yards, and showing loyalty when questioned by authorities; but they also battle each other for individual respect within the crew's hierarchy, engaging in struggles that push most to higher levels of creativity and achievement. Crews also conflict, often jousting for the increasingly limited painting space or over the quality of their work. 50 Within this contentious environment, writers have developed ways to resolve conflicts with markers and spray cans rather than violence. In the mid-1970's, crews wrote the word 'HOT110' over the works of a writer who had violated the subculture's rules or ethics in some way. According to Lee, "You go over someone's name and we'd put the 'HOT 110' over you. That was safety valve to prevent the going over of someone. If you dissed, you got 'HOT 110'd.'" 51 In the late 1970's writers began to go over another's name with their own, a more personal practice and more likely to escalate into fighting. Still, they usually remained detached enough to avoid violence. According to Col, to disrespect someone "you just go over what they did. It's very odd that a writer will go up to a writer they don't like and say it to his face because then there'll be a regular fight." 52 At times entire crews have engaged in cross-out wars, but even these typically end in a truce mediated with paint. Stan 153 describes the resolution of a conflict between two well-known Manhattan crews. "Our relations were a little bit shaky. They wanted to fight us . . . [But] everybody played some basketball and then we decided to go piece together. We all had paint, and that night we converged together and became one. It was a beautiful feeling and there were some amazing pieces done." 53

Graffiti crews encourage writers to value both self and community, effectively softening the sharp individualistic edges that they honed as taggers. In the conclusion to his book *Bomb the Suburbs*, Graffiti writer, author, and community organizer William "Upski" Wimsatt applauds the potential for graffiti and other hip hop practices to merge "cowboy individualism" with "organizational unity," "creativity and fun" with "character and commitment." 54 Painting within a crew has helped many adolescents to reconcile these poles. Jese, for example, admits that he began tagging "to destroy shit . . . and to look cool." Over time, however, his work has evolved "from just delinquency to something that's positive as far as putting a good day's work into a piece of art and finishing it up." Focus on the completion of a strong piece has certainly increased Jese's self-satisfaction, but it also testifies to his growing appreciation of responsibilities to others and of the benefits that his work might bring to the larger community. Jese continues to hold many of the solitary tagger's goals; for him, graffiti remains a way to test himself, to harass those with power, and to gain respect. But he also values

the impact it might have on others and to welcome the restrictions that a writing community imposed. "When you're starting out," he accepts, "you have to pay your dues before you can say that you are a part of a culture that has rules and boundaries." 55

It would be naïve, however, to claim that all learning within the crews is positive. After all, the writers break into train yards, vandalize property, and "rack" or steal paint. Some argue convincingly that many of these activities are much less destructive than most alternatives available to urban youth and that the criminalization of graffiti has been an arbitrary response to complex political pressures and ideologies rather than to the act itself. 56 But many common activities within graffiti culture have been and continue to be illegal, causing Ser to fear their effects on the young writers' character: "You got racking [stealing paint], which can turn into bigger things . . . Now you know how to steal . . . [and when] you go home and your mom's like, 'where were you?' Now you know how to lie." Nancy McDonald argues that the writers also receive negative gender lessons, imbedded in the culture's emphasis on physicality and in its demands for bravery, fortitude, and competitive mettle. She points out that many writers define their masculinity through these characteristics and by dismissing the typical girl as ill-suited for graffiti writing. Those girls who do write are seldom taken seriously; most males presume that they lack resolve and motivation, drawn to graffiti only by a boyfriend or a desire for sex. 57 "The minute you decide you want to be a girl writer, you might as well take your reputation and throw it in the dirt," according to Lady Pink. "Girls have a lot to put up against and you have to harden yourself to being called a whore and a slut, and that you're only going into the train yards to get down on your knees for a bunch of guys." Tomboys are the most likely to make it as writers, Pink claims. "They're tough, and sturdy, and can hold their own, carry a bag of paint and run from the law and get away, and stuff like that." "When I was young" she recalls, "I was able to take on boys the same size as me and kind of push them around and bully them." Although eventually respecting Pink, the male writers still needed to discriminate between her and them, to force her, in the words of McDonald, "to the outer edges of the subculture." 58 "I didn't pick the name Pink," she remembers. "My boys picked it for me. They decided that the name I had been writing . . . wasn't cool cuz it was like a guy's name and they really thought it was important that I show that I was a female when I put my name up." 59

### **Graffiti and Other Educational Organizations**

There are potential liabilities in any education, and whether teaching beneficial or problematic knowledge, skills, and values, the graffiti crews clearly function as educational organizations. 60 But how do their pedagogical goals and content compare to those of more traditional American educational organizations such as schools and more formal arts institutions? Schools have functioned as status-quo organizations since at least the mid-nineteenth century, when Horace Mann and other common school reformers promoted public schools as a way to assimilate Americans into the mainstream ideology of republicanism, Protestantism, and capitalism. 61 For the progressive reformers of the early twentieth century, schools were a way to ready students for the challenges of America's new urban-industrial society. Progressives disagreed as to how schools could best achieve this task—some favored child-centered, experiential approaches; others emphasized social justice and transformation. But in the end, most schools favored a social-efficiency model that prepared students for specific economic, social, and political roles in the U.S. 62 Since the progressive era, this pattern has become even more streamlined, with vocational preparation—what Neil Postman labels "economic utility"—arguably the most valued educational goal in today's schools. 63

In America's cities, cultural institutions such as museums and arts societies have also been important educational organizations, evolving during the first half of the twentieth century "from essentially custodial institutions with ancillary educational functions into primary educational institutions." 64 Urban arts societies have typically complemented but not replicated schools, supporting them in their efforts to assimilate students into mainstream society but preparing students for the private sphere rather than the public arena—domestic life and leisure time rather than jobs, voting, or political leadership. 65 For example, the popular progressive-era Arts and Crafts societies sponsored classes, workshops, and exhibitions that taught the appreciation of beauty in everyday objects and the importance of individual creative expression. For William Morris and other nineteenth-century founders of the Arts and Crafts movement, these concepts were the keys to altering the monstrous work and social conditions of the English industrial revolution. But the American Arts and Crafts societies paid little attention to social reforms. Instead they urged their mostly middle class and affluent adult students to counter urban-industrial difficulties with an ideal domestic life—a home filled with beautifully crafted goods and leisure time centered on the production and purchase of these objects. Their classes encouraged students to tap their creative sides and prepare them to recognize, consume, and even make beautiful objects for their private enjoyment. 66 Over the years, a number of American Arts and Crafts societies have broadened their clientele to include children and the working classes as well as prosperous adults, but they have continued the tradition of directing students toward a private life that copes with rather than attacks public problems. 67

The writing crews have broken from the traditions of urban arts education in a number of ways. In addition to obvious differences such as the crews' illicit activities and focus on disadvantaged urban adolescents rather than the affluent or middle class, a graffiti education extends beyond the private sphere. Certainly, it furthers personal growth by alleviating boredom, building identity, and tapping originality, but it also has communal purposes. Crew mentorships educate young writers to perform useful tasks within a group setting and to help create a quintessentially public art, often executed collaboratively and with mass visibility. In this way, their aims are more like those of schools than traditional arts organizations, preparing students to participate in public activities and to perform roles that benefit the larger community as well as themselves. The graffiti education described in this essay replicates much of what schools have traditionally taught, either overtly or in their hidden curriculum: technical knowledge and skills, citizenship, productive habits of mind, collaboration within a competitive context, conflict management, and gender roles. Given these similarities, it is not surprising that crews have often functioned as surrogate schools, with bad classroom experiences, even in what Deka calls "the art school thing," propelling many to graffiti. As the writer Reas bluntly puts it, "School was shit so I focused on getting good at writing." 68 William Wimsatt suggests that graffiti, with its focus on creativity, direct experience, and self-regulation, might offer a better education than even the best of schools. Students are more effectively prepared to make a difference in the city, he maintains, when they drop out of school and learn on the streets. Others emphasize the compatibility between graffiti and school success. 69 Student-writers have been found more likely to attend school and be promoted to the next grade because, as one high school counselor observes, "the sort of kid who can be motivated to work for hours each day tagging to become famous can also accept the grind of school to get a degree." Graffiti is "a smart

investment," according to another, since it gives writers the confidence to resist bad influences and to "get on with graduating high school." 70 Josephine Noah insists that in creating wildstyle graffiti—a popular style using interlocking and often indecipherable letters, arrows, and symbols—students learn important math skills. 71

Ian Maxwell's study of the hip hop community in Sydney, Australia suggests that graffiti, although considered counter-cultural if not blatantly subversive by most, teaches adolescents to function within dominant structures and expectations. Graffiti and hip hop ideology, Maxwell points out, conforms nicely to liberal, humanist ideals—individualism, free expression, brotherhood, and liberty—that have framed the dominant western ideologies since the Enlightenment. Drawing from British cultural studies scholarship, he posits that graffiti, like most counter-cultural youth scenes, is "fundamentally structured by, and recuperate[s] at least some of the values and structures of the parent culture." 72 Writers, to use Douglas Foley's phrase, are "learning capitalist culture." In a similar vein, Janice Rahn reminds us that graffiti culture, despite its focus on individual expression, assigns writers to hierarchical roles similar to those in the workplace. 73 Indeed, many writers have found success in mainstream pursuits, largely, according to William Wimsatt, because graffiti taught them a broad range of skills and values, serving as a bridge "into the world of people with promising futures." 74

## **Graffiti as Transformational**

The observations of Maxwell and others are correct to a degree. Graffiti crews teach competitiveness, the ability to work both independently and in collaboration, a sense of responsibility, and citizenship skills—all types of learning that blend with the dominant culture and potentially open doors to conventional success. But graffiti is also inherently transgressive, a public defiance of traditional property concepts and hierarchies. 75 "If I'm competing against anything, it's more against the system," Deka trumpets, "cuz the system is a fraud and its fucking everybody." Old school writers formed their attitudes toward authority in the era of Vietnam, the Black Panthers, and race riots, according to Lee. "You can't be unaffected by all of that," he recalls. "Once you see things clearly and understand the 'real picture,' at some point it's gonna help mold your mentality and it's not gonna be singing 'My Country Tis of Thee.'" Similarly, Prophetic the Alphabetic insists that writers "have grown to loathe and have contempt for [authority], for all the conceivably right reasons. We're not DREAMIN . . . our resolve may be awkward, but you know our vision is 20-20." 76 For these writers, graffiti is clearly a way to resist the status quo, a tool, not for escaping the ghetto, but for challenging the power of those responsible for its oppression. Most graffiti messages are not overtly political, but the act of writing is. According to Daim, adolescents worldwide use graffiti "to fight against laws and prejudice [and] to lead a self-determined and creative life [and] show society that they're unhappy with what it has to offer." 77

Perhaps graffiti's most significant educational contribution is that, unlike most schools, it introduces writers to a critical understanding of these power structures and involves them in the construction of alternatives. Henry Giroux points out that not all oppositional behaviors effectively challenge an oppressive status quo. Some offer little insight into the nature of domination and, like the school behaviors of the lads in Paul Willis' *Learning to Labour*, might actually reinforce existing hierarchies. True resistance, Giroux argues, has a "revealing function" that fosters a critique of power and opportunities for self-reflection and struggle for emancipation. 78 The actions and statements of most beginning graffiti writers bear little resemblance to Giroux's resistance; they crave voice, respect, and justice, but lack an understanding of the roots of these needs or the actions needed to address them. Over time, however, writers engage in a reform process that teaches and to some extent gives them elements of power needed to transform their individual and collective lives.

Control over communication is the first component of this transformative praxis. As a communication form, graffiti works on two levels. First, it allows writers to talk to each other, "an underground means of communication for those who are excluded from the public sphere." 79 Through graffiti, the writers proclaim themselves and their talents to those they have not actually met, assembling a broad community without physical interaction. Drax marvels that "even without the physical contact of networking with people, interaction is constantly being made between writers that don't even know each other." 80 Graffiti is also the writers' primary tool for communication with the dominant society. 81 For Coco 144, writing was "a cry, a scream from [New York's] streets. In doing this, we got to say something that was a statement. This was a way of saying, 'Hey, I'm Coco. This is where I'm from, and this is what I'm doing.'" 82 Like "shouting all over a wall," graffiti forces the wider world to finally pay attention to Coco and other writers, making as Ivan Miller puts it, "Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man' visible." 83

Paradoxically, the ambiguity of graffiti to non-writers magnifies the power of this message. Just as Herb Kohl felt "like a voyeur, peering into the lives of strangers" when he viewed graffiti, outsiders generally find this communication puzzling. 84 Writers revel in this confusion because it reverses the normal power relationships, giving them knowledge that eludes those typically in control. Many writers gain special satisfaction when the viewer's reaction is apprehension, fear, or bewilderment. When "people say, 'Oh it's threatening sitting on a train full of graffiti'. . . we like it," Stylo admits. "We don't want everyone to feel comfortable with graffiti, we'd rather they didn't." 85 For Zaki, "it's quite a wonderful feeling to be misunderstood by the rest of society . . . I'm glad they don't know, it's something they will never understand and if they did understand, would you really want them to in the first place." 86 The implications of these remarks are clear: these writers understand that the control of a communication form is a powerful and essential reform tool, one that stitches individuals together and equips them with recognition and power in their interactions within the wider society. 87

Graffiti writers also build and learn the value of inclusive communities. As we have seen, Shok 1's crew defined biting or the borrowing of another writer's styles in a way that promoted an expansive membership, one including both innovators and imitators. Crews, in contrast to the constrictions of gangs, also commonly reach beyond neighborhood, race, and class boundaries. For Coco 144, the crews "broke a lot of barriers. I'm talking about racial barriers—people from different neighborhoods, different boroughs. It wasn't a color thing." LA writers Ser and Tribe admire how in graffiti one "can get down with another race without even bugging out" and "have a conversation with someone that's a different race and age and have so much in common with them." They allowed, according to Prophetic the Alphabetic, "That kid on the other side of the tracks, [to] be out there side by side with you." 88 Crews also exhorted young writers to embrace past graffiti masters. "Take time to know the history!!!" Brooklyn writer Deathos 149 advises, for all new ideas are

"dependent on having a full understanding of where styles were derived." Deal recalls how his mentor Dondi "took inspiration from prior generation . . . [and] openly passed on knowledge and style to new writers." This linking of generations fueled the advancement of writing, according to Deal, for "if writers have an understanding of where they came from, they will know where they need to go." Vulcan agrees, condemning young writers who "ride their own egos" and give "no thoughts to and try to ignore their forefathers." 89

Despite this inclusiveness, crews have often succumbed to petty bickering, cross-out wars, and fighting. But many writers believe that for the most part they have successfully fused disparate individuals into groups with common interests, experiences, and values. "We all had the same attitude," Ski 168 recalls, "we weren't out to get on the next brother, most of us knew each other and were down together. Utmost respect. Respect to the utmost. We wouldn't allow disunity, no matter what clique you were in." 90 For writers like the Australian Atome, graffiti has evolved into much more than a fun way of "getting together with writers from all over the city."

The fun is and always will be there . . . [but now] we are like family. We have respect for each other as people. It goes much deeper than painting associates, you know. Mentally we're on the same levels. The painting might have originally brought us together but over the years you experience a lot of what life dishes out and you're there for each other. 91

Chicago writer-rapper Raven sees such "families" such as indispensable to his vision of "creatively, politically, racially, socio-economically, using the differences between us . . . to create a new thing." 92

The third transformative lesson learned and practiced in the graffiti crews is that real power lies within rather than outside of their communities. Richard Lachmann reports that graffiti muralists in the 1970's and 1980's generally painted in their own neighborhoods, due in part to the police's lack of interest in the ghetto, but also because local building owners, businessmen, school officials, and peers appreciated their efforts. Some craved broader recognition and wealth according to Lachmann, and abandoned writing in frustration when the gallery, filmmaker, or journalist didn't call. But local ties and audiences supplied the primary encouragement for the vast majority of those who continued to write for an extended period of time. 93 Today, most writers show little interest in joining the mainstream and retain close ties to the communities in which they grow up. Even many of the more successful writers choose to weave themselves more tightly into their neighborhood fabric rather than to "move to the suburbs," as Wimsatt puts it. Oakland writer Zore writes grant proposals and represents an international spray paint company to fund projects with local kids, and Raven teaches in a south Chicago public high school and runs various hip-hop youth programs.

Zore, Raven, and many other writers recognize the importance of reconstructing rather than abandoning or destroying neglected structures. The recombination of unwanted, ignored pieces into new forms, or as Tricia Rose writes, "stray technological parts intended for the industrial trash heap into sources of pleasure and power" is the dominant graffiti and hip hop method. 94 The DJ fashions fragments of old recordings into new dance tracks. The break dancer weaves traditional African and Brazilian moves into movements for the American streets. And graffiti writers "both tapped into and transcended their environment," transforming old trains, bridges, and buildings into sites of beauty and cultural pride." 95 As Brim puts it, "You look around the neighborhood and you've got all this rubble & shit, and yet you come out of there with the attitude toward life that you can create something positive." The theme of "making things look better that looked ugly" permeates the artists' interviews: "The spirit of writing is making the world a beautiful place," according to Lady Pink; Zephyr dreams of making "New York's grey and dirty subways the most exciting moving art spectacle the world's ever seen"; and Ace envisions transforming an empty concrete wall at his Montreal school into something more humane. "Beautification not gentrification," writers have cried over the years, and efforts such as these are potent symbols for the belief that much good exists within supposedly barren urban communities, that they should be protected from the bulldozers of urban development, that the neighborhood can be saved without being destroyed. 96

### **Possibilities for Graffiti-based Education**

In her influential book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, Lisa Delpit contends that if students from oppressed communities are to effect individual and social change, they must learn both the "codes" for participating in the "culture of power" and an understanding and appreciation of their own culture. The absence of one will obliterate diversity; without the other, marginalized groups will remain different but impotent. 97 Unfortunately, schools and other educational institutions regularly ignore one or both of these bodies of knowledge when educating poor and minority students. Most offer a traditional curriculum that privileges the learning necessary to function and succeed in the mainstream, but, at best, are only marginally successful at teaching it to non-dominant groups. Even many supposed multicultural programs focus on either increasing the effectiveness of learning dominant ways or the preservation of difference for its own sake rather than for empowerment. 98 What is needed, according to Peter McLaren, is "a view of multiculturalism and difference that moves beyond the 'either-or' logic of assimilation and resistance." 99 Or as Delpit puts it, we must develop an education in which students from non-dominant groups learn "the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life . . . [and] the arbitrariness of those codes and of the power relationships that they represent." 100

Graffiti crews offer an important example of how this integration might look. As we have seen, graffiti provides adolescents with opportunities to acquire knowledge, skills, and values that are prized and useful in the dominant culture. At the same time, writers construct individual identities rooted in their cultures and neighborhoods and participate in activities with the potential to transform their communities. Most schools neither recognize this first result nor value the second; but in some cases, educators have pushed for the inclusion of graffiti and other hip hop cultural expressions in the schools, convinced that they tap into the cultural capital that many urban adolescents bring to school. In his analysis of an alternative high school program in northern California, David Keiser asserts that a hip hop curriculum gives students a chance to tell their stories in their own language, while at the same time learning the knowledge embodied in current curricula, standards, and tests. 101 Although laudable, these efforts don't adequately tap into graffiti's critical potential and should be accompanied by graffiti-based activities that engage urban adolescents more directly in their communities. Such experiences would teach students that assimilation is not the only legitimate application of their knowledge of "dominant codes"; they

will use their learning to empower rather than to escape urban neighborhoods, to build links to the dominant society rather than to join it.

This is easier written than done of course, especially given the criminality currently attached to many graffiti activities. The relationship between graffiti and illegality is an ambiguous one, however. Taggers and piecers seldom aim at destruction, but their frequent recounting of dangerous adventures and close brushes with the law indicate that the illicit nature of their acts is far from irrelevant. Graffiti's illegality clearly heightens the risk, excitement, fame, and respect that writers crave, but many writers are more than willing to leave these thrills behind. Lady Pink, for example, recalls that as a beginning writer she did "illegal stuff for the fame, the excitement, for nothing better to do." Now that her reputation is secure and she receives commissions to paint on legal walls and canvases, she has abandoned that lifestyle. "I'm painting all of the time," she boasts. "The last thing I want to do is [go] . . . paint late at night in the dark." In contrast, the criminality of writing continues to attract the successful German writer Daim.

Working illegally, especially on trains, you combine things that writing legally can't give you. Adventure, excitement, trust in your friends, risk and an enormous activity. Combined with the possibility to do whatever you want, while at the same time not break your own rules. The feeling to shock and provoke, to get respect from your fellow writers, to have expressed yourself, to have worked creatively is something you can rarely get from today's society. I feel that someone who writes only legally cannot grasp the whole spirit of graffiti. 102

Yet, Daim regularly paints commissioned murals and canvases for galleries. While some writers brand all who do legal work as sell-outs, it seems as if most want to do both. 103 For Daim and others, illegal graffiti is important because writing is inherently a transgressive act. "Graffiti is most comfortable and appropriate slapped where it shouldn't be," according to Prime, and this defiance, most writers believe, is largely responsible for the excitement, creative opportunity, respect, and sense of community that it generates. Graffiti's renegade aesthetic separates writers from the dominant society and assures possession of something that others cannot control. "I don't want nobody in no three piece suit to like my stuff," proclaims Sae 6. "You see, I'm an underground person. . . we don't cater for these people, you see I just don't give a fuck." 104 But many writers also claim the right to make some money from their skills as well as safe spaces to ply them, things that only legal graffiti can provide. The key for most is balance, with illegal writing preserving the iconoclastic tradition and commercial graffiti offering the possibility of a livelihood. This compromise may work for the writers, but it creates significant problems for mainstream educators interested in graffiti's pedagogical potential. Even if a teacher recognizes the value of graffiti for students, he or she will find it difficult to recommend, much less sponsor, illegal forays. On the other hand, collaboration with the commercial side blunts the transformative potential of a graffiti education. There is a middle ground, however, one that is both legal and transgressive. Since the mid-1980's, eradication programs have impelled writers to search for safe spaces. Increasingly, they are painting in isolated sites such as abandoned warehouses, industrial areas, and in neighborhoods considered dangerous by most, and many writers have worked to set up legal permission walls and "walls of fame" at community centers, parks, and playgrounds. Here they learn, practice, and teach their craft legally, with less harassment, and most important, without coopting the transgressive nature of graffiti. They continue to work in crews and to earn respect from their peers, and, by painting non-commercially and in much-maligned neighborhoods, they are both challenging accepted norms and investing in urban communities. Over the last decade or so, a number of formal graffiti- and hip hop-based educational organizations rooted in these legal activities have emerged, building partnerships with schools and other traditional institutions. In southwest Chicago, for example, the University of Hip Hop provides urban teens with a space to practice their break dance moves and organizes projects such as a graffiti "Wall of Fame" to protest stiff sentencing laws for minors and "Graffiti Gardens," to plant flowers in front of existing pieces. 105 The Urban Arts Academy in Oakland, CA offers a range of after-school arts courses at Calvin Simmons Middle School-graffiti, break dancing, and DJ technology along with Salsa and West African Dance-and organizes public performances to showcase students. Each class session also includes a discussion circle, where trained student facilitators or "urban warriors" engage their peers in topics such as gangs, discrimination, and family. 106 Powerful examples of bell hooks' "engaged pedagogy," these circles challenge the hierarchies of power that permeate so many classrooms. 107

Higher Gliffs, a non-profit founded in Chicago in the early 1990's and now with a second base of operations in Oakland, also has been effective at formalizing the graffiti curriculum. Higher Gliffs has organized urban teens to create murals in schools and disadvantaged neighborhoods throughout the United States and in Brazil, Belgium, France, Italy, Scotland, and Spain. In the process, students learn a range of academic and confidence-building skills, and because the murals tend to focus on the cultural heritage of each site, they develop a community identity linked to both collective roots and the present environment. Higher Gliffs also engages students in social action through communication, community, and reconstruction. 108 A mural project organized by Higher Gliffs' director Mario Gonzalez, Jr. offers an impressive example of this integrative process. In the spring of 2000, Gonzalez gathered a group of West Oakland teens to paint the wall of a business in West Oakland, one of the poorest and most violent neighborhoods in the city. Using the funds from local "out-of-pocket" donations rather than outside grants, the artists designed an elaborate mural linking images of Malcolm X and Caesar Chavez. Lasting over several weekends, it was a community event, with locals, including numerous gang members, gathering to watch, applaud, and to share in food that was being cooked at the site. Several weeks later, Oakland city officials demanded that the mural be painted over. Although it obviously beautified the neighborhood, it had been painted without a permit. The city's action galvanized the local community, and in a textbook example of Giroux's transformative resistance, it organized to defend and ultimately to save the mural. 109

Higher Gliffs and similar groups offer little of the risk or thrill that has been one of graffiti's major attractions over the years, and it is likely that many involved in these organizations will begin or continue writing illegally. Still, these organizations offer promising models for partnerships between the graffiti culture and more traditional educators and institutions-collaborations that will provide legal settings for graffiti learning, bring the knowledge and skills learned in graffiti crews to a larger audience, and possibly avoid many of the negative lessons associated with crew membership. These organizations also preserve the transgressive nature of graffiti, engaging urban adolescents in their neighborhoods and enhancing their capacity to understand and transform these communities. They aim to create, in the words of Brooklyn rapper and educator Rha Goddess, a "community of hip hop intellectuals" who comprehend the nature of urban problems and are poised to work for reform. "There's street knowledge and then there's academe," according to Rha. "The ones who

marry both . . . are able to process what goes on and some step up and influence it." 110 A graffiti education, whether in a crew or any other educational organization, cultivates this marriage.

## Endnotes

1 See Robert Reiser, *Graffiti: Two Thousand Years of Wall Writing* (New York: Cowles Book Company, 1971) for a comprehensive history of graffiti.

2 Jeff Ferrell, *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality* (New York: Garland, 1993; Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 4.

3 Susan A. Phillips, *Wallbanging: Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 313; Jack Stewart, "An Abstract of Subway Graffiti: An Aesthetic Study of Graffiti on the Subway System of New York City (1970-1978), (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1988), 176, 226.

4 Mario Gonzalez Jr., presentation at the Oregon Association of Teacher Education Annual Meeting, March 2002. Also see, William Upski Wimsatt, *No More Prisons* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2000), 106.

5 This paper utilizes interviews found on graffiti websites, in primary and secondary sources, and, in a few cases, conducted by the author. Misspellings and minor grammatical errors found in these interviews have been corrected in the paper unless indicated.

6 For an overview of the beginnings of hip hop graffiti in New York City, see Craig Castleman, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982); Joe Austin, *Taking the Train: How Graffiti Art Became an Urban Crisis in New York City* (New York: Columbia University Press; Steven Hager, *Hip Hop: The Illustrated History of Break Dancing, Rap Music, and Graffiti* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1984); Stewart, "Subway Graffiti"; and Ivor Lynn Miller, "Aerosol Kingdom: The indigenous culture of New York subway painters," M.A. thesis, Yale, 1992. The famous writer Taki 183 merged a nickname for his given name Demetrius with his street number. Eddie Salgado adopted the tag of Flint 707 because of the "beauty and style of the letter F." "Graffiti: Tha Time 2 Bomb." Available from [www.members.tripod.com/~khaoscru/graf/html](http://www.members.tripod.com/~khaoscru/graf/html); Flint 707, interview in *The Dark Site: Interviews with Worldwide Graffiti Artists*, 1998-2002. Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org](http://www.graffiti.org).

7 Herbert R. Kohl, "Golden Boy as Anthony Cool," in Herbert R. Kohl and James Hinton, eds., *Golden Boy as Anthony Cool: A Photo Essay on Naming and Graffiti* (New York: Dial Press, 1972). Aaron Sheon, "The Discovery of Graffiti," *Art Journal* 36.1 (Fall, 1976), 16-22; Helen Levitt, *In the Street* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1987); and Phillips, *Wallbanging*.

8 City Council president Sanford D. Garelik, quoted in "Garelik Calls for War on Graffiti" *New York Times*, 21 May, 1972. One of the first discussions of graffiti in the popular media was a 1971 *New York Times* magazine article on the Taki 183. "Taki 183 Spawns Pen Pals" *New York Times*, 21 July, 1971. Perhaps the most highly publicized responses from the art community were Claes Oldenburg's much quoted statement that graffiti brightens the subways "like a big bouquet from Latin America" and Norman Mailer's essay, "The Faith of Graffiti." Oldenburg quoted in Richard Goldstein, "The Graffiti 'Hit' Parade," *New York*, 26 March 1973, 34-9; Norman Mailer, *The Faith of Graffiti* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974). For a detailed discussion of the early public responses to graffiti in New York City, see Austin, *Taking the Train*, 75-106.

9 Although many emphasize the multi-ethnic nature of the graffiti community, the vast majority of writers in the 1970's were Black and Hispanic according to Richard Lachmann. Nelson George identifies Puerto Ricans as the major Hispanic group attracted to graffiti. Richard Lachmann, "Graffiti as Career and Ideology" *American Journal of Sociology* 94:2 (September 1988), 235. Nelson George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps, and Bohos: notes on post-soul Black culture.* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 54.

10 Austin, *Taking the Train*, 168.

11 Tasar 32, interview. Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org/faq/tilt.html](http://www.graffiti.org/faq/tilt.html)

12 Vulcan, quoted in David Schmidlapp and Phase 2, eds., *Style: Writing from the Underground, (R)evolutions of Aerosol Linguistics* (Viterbo: Stampa Alternativa, 1996), 72.

13 Schmidlapp and Phase 2, *Style*, 51.

14 Lee, quoted in Castleman, *Getting Up*, 60-1.

15 Nancy McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity in London and New York* (New York: Palgrave), 81, 220; Austin, *Taking the Train*, 115.

16 See Hager, *Hip Hop* for a comprehensive discussion of the origins of hip hop.

17 According to Janice Rahn, the term "hip hop" has a number of roots, from the bebop musicians of the 1940's to a rhyme in the 1979 recording of "Rappers Delight" by the Sugarhill Gang. Janice Rahn, *Painting Without Permission: Hip-Hop Graffiti Subculture* (Westport, CT & London: Bergin & Garvey), 1-2. Rahn also discusses the links between graffiti and other hip hop expressions, 138. For other insights into these connections, see Austin, *Taking the Train*, 41, 66, 201; Miller, *Aerosol Kingdom*, iv; Tricia Rose, *Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, CT & London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) 34-5, 65-74, 85; and Pamela Dennant, "Urban Expression . . . Urban Assault . . . Urban Wildstyle . . . New York City Graffiti" (Humanities American Studies Project, Thames Valley University, UK, 1997), 6.

18 Lady Pink, interviewed by Miss Cortese, 2000. This interview was originally available at [www.hifiart.com](http://www.hifiart.com) but has since been removed from the site.

19 Austin, Taking the Train, 249-261.

20 Miller, Aerosol Kingdom, iv; Castleman, Getting Up, 67.

21 Jese, interview in Claustrophobia Magazine (Fall/Winter 1999). Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org](http://www.graffiti.org). Lee expressed similar sentiments. "You can look at it like something to do besides being a boy scout or an altar boy. It's an original extension of me." Lee, quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, Style, 22.

22 For example, GinOne was inspired to do graffiti when he saw in his brother's yearbook. Ket One began because "at the time everybody was writing." GinOne, interview by Wisk, 20 December, 1999. Ket One, interview by Look One. Available from GuerillaOne at [www.guerillaone.com](http://www.guerillaone.com)

23 Flint 707, interview.

24 Vulcan, quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, Style, 22.

25 Ernest L. Abel and Barbara E. Buckley, The Handwriting on the Wall: Toward a Sociology and Psychology of Graffiti (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), 16.

26 Phase 2 also recalls that "originality, no matter at what level and without saying, was held in high regard. Writing an already claimed name was a threat to the soleness of one's identity." Style, 32-3; Tasar 32, interview; Crusher II, quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, Style, 16.

27 Kaves. interview. Available from GuerillaOne at [www.guerillaone.com](http://www.guerillaone.com)

28 Schmidlapp and Phase 2, Style, 21-22. Also see Phillips, Wallbangin'. Dez expressed a contrary view: "I wasn't in it for the fame. It was something to do. I was in it for the fun." Quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, Style, 22.

29 McDonald, The Graffiti Subculture, 63; Lachmann. "Graffiti as Career."

30 According to McDonald, graffiti's inability to promise material gain causes this drop-off. The Graffiti Subculture, 65. Also see Abel and Buckley, Handwriting on the Wall, 143; and Schmidlapp and Phase 2, Style, 42.

31 Lachmann, Graffiti as Career, 242. KingTwo explains the writers' tendency to form groups in simple terms: "If you are a solo writer, that's cool, but its no fun by yourself." KingTwo, "Graffiti," 1997. Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org](http://www.graffiti.org). See Castleman, Getting Up for an extensive discussion of graffiti groups.

32 According to Tricia Rose, crews get together "to work on ideas, share knowledge, and plan trips to the train yards . . . [they] photograph each other's work, protect each other, and trade book outlines for paint supplies." Black Noise, 43.

33 Schmidlapp and Phase 2, Style, 28-9

34 Susan Phillips actually defines the crews by this characteristic, as "concentrated groups of graffiti writers at varying levels of proficiency." Phillips, Wallbangin', 312. Jeff Ferrell also defines crews by their collaborative work, as "groups of writers who collaboratively designed and painted the elaborate pieces for which hip hop graffiti was now known." Ferrell, Crimes of Style, 8.

35 Deka, interview in Claustrophobia Magazine (Fall/Winter 1999). Available from [www.charm.net/~claustro/claustro10/deka.html](http://www.charm.net/~claustro/claustro10/deka.html)

36 Lady Pink, interview.

37 See Austin, Taking the Train, 119-123 for a discussion of crew life.

38 Zehphr, "Dedicated to Dondi White," Stress 16 (8 October, 1999).

39 Lawrence Cremin, American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980 (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), x.

40 John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 19.

41 Posh One, interviewed by Brett Webb, 1998. Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org/posh](http://www.graffiti.org/posh) Jack Stewart identifies a new emphasis on perspective, three-dimensional figures, and characters in masterpieces painted around 1975. Jack Stewart, "An Abstract of Subway Graffiti," 1988, Ch. 13.

42 Lady Pink, interview.

43 Phillips, Wallbangin', 335-6.

44 Deka, interview. Also see McDonald, The Graffiti Subculture, 247.

45 Tons, interview in [The Dark Site](http://home.kabelfoon.nl/~gio/index.html) [<http://home.kabelfoon.nl/~gio/index.html>]: Interviews with Worldwide Graffiti Artists, 1998-2002.

ManOne, interview. Available from GuerillaOne at [www.guerillaone.com](http://www.guerillaone.com) and Teako, "Teako's Story, 1997. Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org/faq/tko.html](http://www.graffiti.org/faq/tko.html)

46 Spon, quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, Style, 68. Phase 2 recalls that "Originality, no matter at what level and without saying, was held in high regard. Writing an already claimed name was a threat to the soleness of one's identity," Style, 32.

47 Russell A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Albany State University of New York, 1995), 8.

48 To emphasize their anti-biting stance, Shok 1's crew adopted an apple blotted by an X as their symbol. Shok 1, "The Knowledge of Shok 1," *N-Igma* (August, 1999). Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org](http://www.graffiti.org).

49 Kel, interview, 2002. Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org](http://www.graffiti.org).

50 With the explosive growth of graffiti in the mid-1970's, many experienced New York City writers became suspicious of the skills and commitment of many novices and their master crews often threatened and stole paint from toys. Conflicts also erupted over the limited writing space in the city; fights and "cross-outs" became commonplace. For a discussion of these conflicts, see Castleman, *Getting Up*, 107-115; and Austin, *Taking the Train*, 119-21, 176-8.

51 Lee, quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, Style, 33.

52 Col, quoted in McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 214.

53 Stan 153, quoted in Castleman, *Getting Up*, 112.

54 William Upsi Wimsatt, *Bomb the Suburbs*, 2nd ed., (New York: Soft Skull Press, 1994), 157. Robert Bellah and his collaborators call for a similar fusion of individualism and community commitment. Robert N. Bellah, et. al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

55 Jese, interview.

56 Joe Austin, for example, contends that New York City officials and media could just as logically have defined graffiti writing as beneficial for urban adolescents and the city, one to be regulated or even promoted rather than condemned. Rahn, *Painting Without Permission*, xiii; Austin, *Taking the Train*, 1-7.

57 McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 94-150.

58 *Ibid.*, 150.

59 Lady Pink, interview; McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 150.

60 Jane Roland Martin discusses negative learning that is a part of any education in *Cultural Miseducation: In Search of a Democratic Solution* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 2002).

61 Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang), 75-103.

62 See Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum: 1893-1958*, 2nd ed., (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) for an account of the progressive battles over curriculum.

63 Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 28-9.

64 Cremin, *American Education*, x.

65 In a 1998 publication, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) urges arts and humanities organizations to partner with schools in helping students build decision-making, goal setting, critical thinking, and other skills that will help them resist drugs and violence. In practice, arts organizations have rarely taken such a public role, however. National Endowment for the Arts, *Creative Partnerships for Prevention: Using the Arts and Humanities to Build Resiliency in Youth* (Washington D.C.; NEA, 1998).

66 Richard S. Christen, "Surviving the City: The Arts and Crafts Society of Portland, Oregon" (Paper delivered at the 24th Annual International Standing Conference on the History of Education, Birmingham, UK, July 2001) 3-4. Also see Eileen Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

67 The Arts and Crafts Society of Portland, Oregon "was particularly anxious that people of lesser privilege have this opportunity," and Portland's Contemporary Crafts Gallery actively worked with schoolchildren. Margery Hoffman Smith to her children, December 6, 1952. *Smith Papers*, 2660:6. Oregon History Center; Contemporary Crafts Gallery, 3934 Corbett: Fifty Years at Contemporary Crafts (Portland, OR: Contemporary Crafts Association, 1987).

68 Daim, interview by Susan Farrell and Brett Webb, 1997. Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org](http://www.graffiti.org); Reas, interview by Brett Webb. Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org](http://www.graffiti.org); Shok 1, "The Knowledge of Shok 1." 69 Wimsatt, *No More Prisons*, 65. For a similar view, see Greg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 34.

70 Lachmann, "Graffiti as Career," 239.

71 Josephine Nash, "Street Math in Wildstyle Graffiti Art" (1997). Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org](http://www.graffiti.org).

72 Ian Maxwell, "Hip Hop Aesthetics and the Will to Culture" *The Australian Journal of Sociology* 8:1 (1977), 52. A counterculture is generally defined by its resistance to the dominant culture. Kenneth Westhues defines one as "a set of beliefs and values which radically reject the dominant culture of a society and prescribe a sectarian alternative." For J. Milton Yenger, a counterculture exists "whenever the normative system of a group contains, as a primary element, a theme of conflict with the dominant values of society, where the tendencies, needs, and perceptions of the members of that group are directly involved in the development and maintenance of its values, and wherever its norms can be understood only by reference to the relationship of the group to the surrounding dominant society and its culture." Nancy McDonald questions the notion of a dominant culture, however, insisting that society is comprised of many subcultures, best understood by their relationship to other subcultures. Kenneth Westhues, *Society's Shadows: Studies in the Sociology of Countercultures* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1972), 9-10; J. Milton Yenger, *Countercultures: The Promise and the Peril of a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 22-3; McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 151-3.

73 Rahn, *Painting Without Permission*, 150. Douglas Foley, *Learning Capitalist Culture: Deep in the Heart of Tejas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990).

74 Upski, *Bomb the Suburbs*, 52-3. Coax describes how graffiti spurred him to go to art school; for Rich, it was a stepping stone to a career in design and marketing. According to Castleman, of the twelve original members of United Graffiti Artists, an early organization to promote graffiti to New York galleries, eight went on to college and four to art school. Coax, interview by Eklips, September 14, 1999. Rich, interview. Available from GuerillaOne at [www.guerillaone.com](http://www.guerillaone.com); Castleman, *Getting Up*, 126.

75 Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, 311.

76 Deka, interview; Lee, quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, *Style*, 16; Prophetic the Alphabetic, *Ibid.*, 13.

77 Daim, interview; Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, 56; Hashim A. Shomani, *From the Underground: Hip Hop Culture as and Agent of Social Change* (Fanwood, NJ: X-Factor Publications), xiv.

78 Henry A. Giroux, *Theory and Resistance in Education: Toward a Pedagogy for the Opposition* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2002), 107-111; Paul Willis, *Learning to Labour* (Aldershot: Gower, 1977).

79 Les Back, Michael Keith, and John Solomos, "Reading the Writing on the Wall: Graffiti in the Racialized City," in David Slayden and Rita Kirk Whillock, eds., *Soundbite Culture: The Death of Discourse in a Wired World* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999), 71.

80 Drax, quoted in McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 203.

81 Back, "Reading the Writing on the Wall," 97-9; Phillips, *Wallbangin'*, 46.

82 Coco 144, quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, *Style*, 14.

83 Series, quoted in McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 203; Miller, "Aerosol Kingdom," 74.

84 Herbert R. Kohl, "Golden Boy as Anthony Cool," 9. According to the writer Prophetic the Alphabetic, "Someone outside of the situation won't feel what you feel. There's no need for them to feel it if there is nothing like it for them to relate with or respond to. Even if they could understand it, they could never feel it." Quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, *Style*, 17.

85 Stylo, quoted in McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 158. Similarly, Saber enjoys sitting back and seeing the reaction and repercussions that his painting causes, while ManOne emphasizes that writers should be careful what they say because people are affected by it. Interviews available from GuerillaOne at [www.guerillaone.com/g1\\_graff\\_interviews.html](http://www.guerillaone.com/g1_graff_interviews.html)

86 Zaki, quoted in McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 158.

87 Ivor Miller compares graffiti to the Ghost Dance of the Sioux, a ritual and ambiguous communication form that was "a calculated means of psychological survival in and imperialistic society." "Aerosol Kingdom," ii.

88 Coco 144, quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, *Style*, 24. Prophetic the Alphabetic, *ibid.*, 18.

89 Deathos, interview in *The Dark Site: Interviews with Worldwide Graffiti Artists, 1998-2002*. Available at <http://home.kabelfoon.nl/~gio/interview.html>; and Deal, interview; Vulcan, quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, *Style*, 26.

90 For example, see Kub, interview by Make. Available from [GuerillaOne](http://www.guerillaone.com/interviews_10_01/kub.htm) at [www.guerillaone.com/interviews\\_10\\_01/kub.htm](http://www.guerillaone.com/interviews_10_01/kub.htm); Ski 168, quoted in Schmidlapp and Phase 2, *Style*, 29.

91 Atome, interview by Susan Farrell, 1997. Available from Art Crimes at [www.graffiti.org/atome](http://www.graffiti.org/atome).

92 Raven, quoted in Upski, *Bomb the Suburbs*, 148.

93 Lachmann, "Graffiti as Career," 244-5.

94 Rose, Black Noise, 22.

95 Ferrell, Crimes of Style, 6.

96 Brim, quoted in Henry Chalfant and James Prigoff, *Spraycan Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 17.; Lady Pink, quoted in Miller, *Aerosol Kingdom*, xii; Zephyr, letter to editor, *Village Voice*, November 26-December 2, 1980, quoted in Austin, *Taking the Train*, 182. Ace, quoted in Rahn, *Painting Without Permission*, 172.

97 Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 39.

98 See Christine E. Sleeter and Carl A. Grant, *Making Choices for Multicultural Education: Five Approaches to Race, Class, and Gender*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 1999) for a discussion of the different approaches to multicultural education. Of the five types of multicultural education that Sleeter and Grant identify, only one is truly transformative.

99 Peter McLaren, *Life in Schools: An Introduction to Critical Pedagogy in the Foundations of Education*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1998), 256.

100 Delpit, *Teaching Other People's Children*, 45.

101 David Keiser, "Battlin' Nihilism at an Urban High School: Pedagogy, Perseverance, and Hope." In Karen A. McClafferty, Carlos Alberto Torres, and Theodore R. Mitchell, eds., *Challenges in Urban Education: Sociological Perspectives for the Next Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 290. Also see Linda Quilliam, "Teaching Outside the Box: Innovative Strategies to Teach the Hip Hop Generation" in Gladys C. Heard, ed., *Empowering the Hip Hop Nation: The Arts and Social Justice* (Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing, 2000), 95-102.

102 Daim, Interview.

103 McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 164.

104 Prime and Sae 6 quoted in McDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture*, 166, 172.

105 Dan Hoyle, "Old School, New Courses: University of Hip Hop redefines academia in southwest Chicago," *NU Comment*, 25 February 25, 2002. Available at [www.nucomment.com](http://www.nucomment.com)

106 Urban Arts Academy. Available at [www.urbanartsacademy.com](http://www.urbanartsacademy.com)

107 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York & London: Routledge, 1994), 13-22.

108 Higher Gliffs: "Mural Art to Reach Urban Youth." Available at [www.members.aol.com/HigherGliffs](http://www.members.aol.com/HigherGliffs)

109 Mario Gonzalez, Jr., Interview by Richard S. Christen, 26 December, 2001.

110 Rha Goddess, quoted in Wimsatt, *No More Prisons*, 118.

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doing dissections, etc. Urban Science Education for the Hip-hop Generation. Christopher Emdin Teachers College, Columbia University. Sense publishers rotterdam/boston/taipei. As a teacher educator largely in the Deweyan tradition, I have thought of education as an expansion and deepening of educative experiences, those which feed into and make understandable the doings and undergoings that mark the processes of becoming. Becoming, or coming into consciousness, is the enactment of the ability to think about and reflect on oneself.

Contemporary graffiti style has been heavily influenced by hip hop culture [23] and the myriad international styles derived from Philadelphia and New York City Subway graffiti, however, there are many other traditions of notable graffiti in the twentieth century. Graffiti have long appeared on building walls, in latrines, railroad boxcars, subways, and bridges.Â Marc Ecko, an urban clothing designer, has been an advocate of graffiti as an art form during this period, stating that "Graffiti is without question the most powerful art movement in recent history and has been a driving inspiration throughout my career." [35]. Henry Chalfant is one of the foremost advocates of modern graffiti, having produced the documentary film *Style Wars* and co-authored the books *Subway Art* and *Spray Can Art*.

provided disadvantaged urban teens "the only significant vehicle to represent their 'existence.'" [cite journal | last =Christen | first =Richard | authorlink = | coauthors = | title =Hip Hop Learning: Graffiti as an Educator of Urban Teenagers | journal =Educational Foundations | volume = | issue = | pages = | date =Fall 2003 | url =http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\_qa3971/is\_200310/ai\_n9330100/pg\_4 | doi = | id = | accesdate =. 2007-09-21 ].

Phase participated in the legendary hip-hop shows organized by Kool Lady Blue during the summer of 1982 at the Roxy nightclub in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan. Phase 2 did take on an official role in another early hip-hop film when he worked as a graffiti consultant on the 1984 movie "Beat Phase participated in the legendary hip-hop shows organized by Kool Lady Blue during the summer of 1982 at the Roxy nightclub in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan. These shows brought together the top DJ's, MC's, breakers, and aerosol artist from the South Bronx and introduced hip-hop music and culture to the downtown punk and new wave scenes. Phase 2 designed the flyers for these events and often did aerosol pieces live on stage.[11] He was also part of the first "international" hip-hop tour when stars from the Roxy performances toured in England and France in November...

"Hip Hop Learning: Graffiti as an Educator of Urban Teenagers". Educational Foundations. Retrieved 2007-09-21. Hip Hop Learning : Graffiti as an Educator of Urban Teenagers by. Richard S. Christen. 2016. Graffiti writing is as ancient as human communication, but in the United States, it gained widespread attention only with its proliferation in urban neighborhoods in the late 1960's and 1970's. (More). View PDF. Abstract Jonathan Kozol's visit to Portland, Oregon, in April 2005 included a dialogue with 55 urban middle and high school students about inequities in American schools. Students left this (More). View via Publisher. Cite. Save. Boundaries between Liberal and Technical Learning: Images of Seventeenth-Century English Writing Masters.