ILLICIT LITERACY AND LEGITIMATE LEARNING:
EXAMINING THE SITUATED LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF GRAFFITI
WRITERS IN A SMALL, NORTHERN CALIFORNIA TOWN

by

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ABSTRACT

ILLICIT LITERACY AND LEGITIMATE LEARNING: EXAMINING THE SITUATED LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF GRAFFITI WRITERS IN A SMALL, NORTHERN CALIFORNIA TOWN

Kenneth William Weiderman

This thesis examines the informal learning experiences of proficient graffiti writers living in a rural northern California community. It examines the learning pathways graffiti writers follow as they progress from a basic understanding of graffiti practices to proficiency at the craft. It utilizes a phenomenological, qualitative research approach guided by a New Literacy Studies framework. Semi-structured interviews were carried out in order to gather data from five active and expert writers. The interviews allowed the writers to describe what initially drew them to graffiti, what motivated them to continue practicing graffiti in the face of cultural barriers, and the learning strategies they engaged in to develop their graffiti writing skills. Most graffiti writers participated in social groups that grounded their practice. The writers’ artistic roots, their countercultural outlooks, and their desire to have the identity of graffiti writers allowed them to attain proficiency through such means as analytical practice, participation in crews, and the use of sketch books. Barriers to proficiency included growing up in rural locales, lack of access to other proficient writers, and graffiti’s illegal status. By understanding the informal learning experiences of graffiti writers, educators and policy makers can better understand the socially-negotiated learning strategies of graffiti writers as well as other out-of-school educational endeavors.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Graffiti is a phenomenon as ancient as human civilization. Even before the invention of writing human beings were giving meanings to spaces through the deliberate public placement of marks. This archetypal desire has not waned and the technology with which to produce public marks has come a long way from the stylized drawings of animals in primordial caves. Advances in spray paint and large-tip markers have now enabled three generations of young people throughout the world to openly proclaim their existence through what has become known as graffiti. Typically these proclamations run counter to the prevailing laws of the localities in which they are produced, and the ensuing struggle over who can or cannot make public marks has overshadowed the tremendous talent and tenacity that some graffiti writers possess. While it is true that some public marks are of higher or lower quality, the existence of poor quality graffiti is not an excuse to ignore the vast array of spectacular talent that can be seen in graffiti pieces.

In recent months, some high-profile graffiti art exhibits have opened up a public dialogue about graffiti’s ability to positively contribute to public spaces. At the same time, these progressive discussions have also allowed for those who oppose graffiti to lend their voice to a larger audience. The result has been a clash of ideas
that seem to argue past each other rather than work together to find an appropriate way to deal with this growing trend. In 2011 the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art hosted a major exhibition of graffiti’s historical roots and contemporary stars. That same year Los Angeles also removed 35.4 million square feet of graffiti (Nagourney, 2011). Art exhibitions and civic responses to graffiti can provide a big-picture to view this marginalized literacy practice, but can also obscure the thousands of anonymous youth who daily create graffiti and the educational efforts young boys and girls engage in as they seek to develop proficiency at the craft.

Few communication practices publically display their practitioners’ development as prolifically as graffiti. Most poor-quality expressions, whether poetry, prose, paintings, or pottery, are rarely given a public venue. The fact that graffiti of all skill levels is so widely visible serves to discredit the literacy practice in its entirety. As such, graffiti gets very little praise. Instead, the dialogue about graffiti is not a positive one, and it is normally regarded as useless vandalism. The writers who produce it are labeled criminals. This study is my attempt to honor those individuals who have risked so much to tirelessly forge their proficiency with graffiti. Through an investigation of five writers’ informal learning techniques, I seek to find out how someone went from knowing nothing about graffiti to becoming a master at it.
The viewpoints offered by the writers can provide a window into the self-motivated, out of school learning activities that youth engage in on a daily basis. Learning is a social enterprise. The self-organizing efforts of young graffiti writers expose this even more so than learning in a classroom setting. Social groups organized to perpetuate graffiti and train young writers into the literacy practice, known as crews, utilize an apprenticeship model of learning that distributes knowledge in very different ways than formal education. An investigation into this highly effective pedagogy can achieve two goals. Primarily, it serves to legitimize graffiti as a literacy practice worth valuing; ideologically transforming what is currently seen as criminal activity into a regarded craft. Second, understanding how graffiti writers learn to paint graffiti can inform formal educational practices. Learners who struggle in school yet succeed in such a technically difficult endeavor should be able to master a variety of subjects. In this view, what is graffiti offering to some youth that school is not?

The research for this thesis consisted of five semi-structured interviews of successful graffiti writers who live and paint graffiti in a small, northern California town. The writers were chosen for their proficiency in painting graffiti pieces, the most difficult form of the practice. As masters of the craft, they were uniquely suited to explain in their own terms how they began, and how they arrived at their current proficiency. The central question for the research was: In the absence of a formal
education system for graffiti, what processes of informal learning and sense-making enable writers to successfully acquire this marginalized literacy practice?

Operational Definitions

As with any specialized practice, there exists a vocabulary specific to graffiti that describes the many features of the genre. In order to have a common understanding of the most important terms, I feel it necessary to describe how these words are used in the literacy practice of graffiti. I also feel that drawing boundaries around certain terms is necessary to separate out graffiti from senseless destruction of property. For the purposes of this thesis, the terms graffiti, vandalism, tag, throwup, piece, vernacular literacy practice, and academic literacy practice will be defined.

Graffiti.

Graffiti is a term rooted in Italian, meaning “to scratch” or “to scrawl.” For many, this automatically implies a negative connotation. As such, it is a loaded word that has become even more complicated due to the many different forms of public mark making that exist today, much of which is erroneously called graffiti. Within this thesis graffiti is defined as stylized writing of one’s name or crew name placed in a public location. The names are often decorated with bright colors, outlines, or characters, but the letters are the main focal point. Graffiti can be produced with a variety of products, the extent of which would be too exhaustive to list here.
Vandalism.

As mentioned above, the high volume of poor-quality graffiti that exists in many localities can distort people’s opinion about graffiti as a whole. Therefore, I feel it is important to distinguish between vandalism and graffiti. Vandalism is separate from graffiti in that it is not exclusive to public placements of stylized letters. Vandalism, for the purposes of this thesis, is any act which seeks to deface, destroy, or harm a public surface solely in the spirit of defilement. Some writers may defile a surface with poor quality tags or pieces, but I see it is an issue of intent. If the intent is senseless property destruction and not related to identity and stylized letters, then I consider it vandalism.

Tag.

Tags are a form of graffiti that consists of a stylized name written in a linear text. It can be considered a writer’s logo or signature. Tags can be painted, drawn with markers, or scratched into surfaces. They are the most basic form of graffiti, and are usually the starting point for most writers as they begin to learn letter structure.

Throwup.

Throwups are quickly-done graffiti pieces that usually consist of one or two colors. Throwups are larger than tags, and are generally drawn in bubble letters. They tend to have a solid color fill inside the letters, and a contrasting outline around the letters. Throwups allow writers to leave a large mark in very little time, enabling
them to paint on very high-profile placements with less risk. The speed with which
throwups are created also allows writers to increase their body of work within a
geographical location.

Piece.

Short for “masterpiece,” a piece is the pinnacle of a graffiti writer’s talent.
Pieces are often complicated, stylized versions of the writer’s name or crew. They
involve many layers of multi-colored paint, and can take anywhere from several
hours to several days to accomplish. Because pieces are the most technically
sophisticated graffiti marks, I consider them validation that a writer has succeeded in
learning the literacy practice of graffiti. Thus, all of the writers interviewed for this
thesis are proficient piecers.

Vernacular literacy practice.

A vernacular literacy practice is one grounded in casual, everyday usage.
Vernacular literacy practices are not regulated by any formal institution or agency,
and are developed through the daily social interactions between individuals. Often,
they are humorous, playful, or intentionally developed in opposition to formalized
literacy practices. Texting and graffiti are both examples of vernacular literacy
practices. I often use the term marginalized instead of vernacular to emphasize the
role of power relations in our society that serve to benefit selected literacy practices
at the expense of others. Graffiti, then, is both vernacular and marginalized.
Academic literacy practice.

Academic literacy practices are those which have been institutionalized by dominant forms of power in society. Education and religion are both examples of dominant institutions that create and perpetuate highly regulated literacy practices. These practices are standardized across many different communities, and are usually more highly regarded than vernacular literacy practices. In formal education, academic literacy involves reading chapter books and text books, writing expository text, writing essays, and answering questions with full sentences, to name a few. Academic literacy practices do not allow for deviations and have strict guidelines for use and production of text.

In addition to the terms above, there is an extensive vocabulary used by graffiti writers to describe their practice. An annotated glossary of these terms can be found in Appendix A.

Overview of Thesis

The intent of this thesis is to establish an understanding of a person’s educational journey when acquiring the marginalized literacy practice of graffiti. I have sought to understand what initially inspired the participants’ curiosity in graffiti and what motivated them to continue learning in the face of considerable cultural barriers. I have also defined some of the learning strategies that the writers used as they went from knowing nothing about graffiti to becoming masters at it. The remaining chapters are organized as follows.
Chapter Two contains the Literature Review, which is an overview of published literature pertaining to literacy, graffiti, and learning. Considerable focus has been given to the construction and understanding of socially-based literacy theories, especially the New Literacy Studies. I have also focused some commentary on the difference between academic literacy practices and marginalized ones, as well as the difficulties in bringing marginalized literacies into formal academic settings. The Literature Review concludes with an explicit emphasis on graffiti.

Chapter Three, Methodology, is a detailed account of the procedures I engaged in as I conducted the research. There is an account of the theoretical framework behind my intent, the development of the interview schedule, as well as the process I used for coding and analyzing the interview transcript data.

Chapter Four, Results, presents the narratives offered by my participants. I have organized the writers’ responses into four sections. First, I describe an overview of a writer’s development, and the variations that can occur for different individuals. Second, I offer the writers’ initial influences that attracted them to graffiti. The third section portrays the writers’ motivation to continue writing graffiti in the face of considerable cultural vilification, and the final section describes the learning strategies utilized by the writers. Chapter Five consists of the analysis of those results.
The study concludes in Chapter six, where I offer my own thoughts on the study, describe the limitations of the research, and give recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Establishing Dominant and Marginalized Literacies

Since the invention of writing, human beings have increasingly relied upon the technology of letters and words to store and communicate knowledge (Havelock, 1986). With the invention of the printing press, written language became a permanent feature of humanity (McLuhan, 1962). More than ever before, these bound, mass-produced volumes allowed printed words to “transcend the transience of time” (Tusting, 2000, p. 41).

This new mode of communication, the printed word, was so effective at packaging and transmitting large volumes of information that it quickly became a staple of humanity, much like clothing or agriculture (McLuhan, 1962). As people became more and more familiar with this system of communication, the written word became equivalent to that of the spoken word (Havelock, 1986). Where orality once carried the sum total of human knowledge, a typographic set of symbols soon took over as humanity’s favored format for transmitting ideas (Havelock, 1986).

With letters and words, knowledge could be made tangible, separating what was known from the mind of those who knew it (Havelock, 1986). The permanence of the written word gave it an implied, yet false, sense of truth. The physicality of a
text contrasted with the fleeting nature of spoken language, and the apparent stability of the printed text imbued it with a sense of superiority (Havelock, 1986).

Humanity enthusiastically embraced the efficiency, uniformity, and repeatability of the word-as-object (McLuhan, 1962), and the connection between spoken language and printed words was soon taken for granted (Havelock, 1986). It was as if spoken language and written text had always existed together, yet “only a fraction of the history of literacy has been typographic” (McLuhan, 1962, p. 74).

Alphabetic technology was internalized so thoroughly and seamlessly that all other forms of communication began to wither in power and become marginalized (McLuhan, 1962). Icons, pictures, and symbols continued to be used in communication, but they did not hold the same amount of prestige as the written word (Kress, 2003; McLuhan, 1962). Through economic forces, the printing press standardized grammar, spelling, and vocabulary, and the written word became the dominant form for transmitting knowledge (Febvre & Martin, 1976). Those with a mastery of the written word had access to the creation – and control – of humanity’s wisdom.

Before the 20th Century’s explosion of digital technology, encoding or decoding words and letters on a printed page was the dominant form of literacy (Davies, 2003). The root word of literacy, littera, comes from the Latin word for letter (Davies, 2003). Defining literacy in terms of letters was appropriate for an era dependent upon an alphabetic form of communication (Davies, 2003). However,
electronic culture is now unraveling the power of print (Davies, 2003; McLuhan, 1962; Prensky, 2001, 2009). Literate ways of thinking, learning, and being in the world are mutating, and these transformations are being ushered in by the young who embrace new forms of literacy that devalue static or print-based forms of reading and writing in favor of dynamic, alternative methods for communicating (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanić, 2000; Davies, 2003; Gee, 2008a; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; McLuhan, 1964; Prensky, 2009).

In today’s digital era, literacy is defined as “socially recognized ways of generating, communicating, and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses (or as members of Discourses)” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 64).

Discourses are “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as [characterizing] particular identities (or ‘types of people’) by specific groups” (Gee, 2008a, p. 3). To put it simply, Discourses are “ways of being in the world” (Gee, 2008a, p. 3); a form of identification to a cultural group whose social language is particular to, and recognized by, the group itself. Our social environment is not easily delineated (Barton & Hamilton, 2005). We are members of many different communities and the boundaries between these communities are fluid, with some communities affecting others in competing or supporting ways (Barton & Hamilton, 2005).
Studying Discourses allows researchers to frame the underlying connections between literacy, culture, identity, and power (Gee, 2008a).

Discourses (spelled with a capital D) are different from discourses. The former can be characterized as social practices, while the latter are the languages (written, oral, or otherwise) central to those Discourses (Gee, 2008a). A Discourse can be thought of as a kind of identity kit with complete instructions on how to act, talk, write, behave, and dress in order to take on a particular social role that others will recognize, and that help define that social role for the one acting it out (Gee, 2008a). The separate actions of behaving, talking, writing, and so on, are discourses. These smaller discourses make up the identity kit of the larger Discourse (Gee, 2008a). The smaller components that make up a larger Discourse can be compared to the literacies a person needs mastery of to be successful in a particular Discourse.

Certain types of people get along with each other through commonly held beliefs and actions which would not immediately make sense outside of their personalized, unique Discourse (Gee, 2008a). They may be bikers drinking at a bar, teens tweeting on the internet, or academics at a university, but in each case, they are members of different Discourses. Behaviors and language appropriate to one social group’s Discourse (teens giggling, chatting excitedly, and staring at cell phones) not only fail to make sense in contexts outside of the Discourse, they could potentially be unsafe (teens giggling, chatting excitedly, and staring into cell phones at a biker bar).
Furthermore, as they move through the day, people will contribute to and communicate with members of many different Discourses (Gee, 2008a); indeed people belong to multiple Discourse groups and participate in them during the course of the day (e.g. the university academic who is also a biker).

Although these varied roles have a variety of features, Discourse theory mainly examines the specific social language associated with each role (Gee, 2008a). The next section will focus on the social aspect of literacy and the ways in which Discourses can encourage and perpetuate both dominant and marginalized literacies.

**Literacy, Discourses, and marginalization.**

Discourses are socially based and socially created (Gee, 2008a). Human communication is built entirely around the transmission of ideas, beliefs, and feelings from one person, or groups of people, to others. Exploring the socially situated nature of human communication is the key to understanding communication within Discourses (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Street, 1984, 1993a; Tusting, 2000).

Many social groups commonly take for granted their primary set of beliefs and that these constitute what may be called normal or correct ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving in a specific Discourse (Gee, 2008a). This tendency for Discourses to be hidden under layers of belief and action that may represent inconsistent and incompatible values often creates conflicts among different Discourses (Gee, 2008a). Even though people belong to many and varied Discourses
as they walk through their daily lives, bi-conceptualism – the brain’s ability to live in discord with different thought structures and patterns – allows them to maintain distinct and unique ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving in the world, depending upon the individuals with whom they are (or are not) interacting at each moment (Gee, 2008a; Lakoff, 2008).

However, people are hurt or marginalized every day through the power structures enacted between different Discourses’ language and ideology (Gee, 2008a). When certain groups feel that their Discourse is the only true, virtuous, and correct Discourse, it can create power conflicts and a sense of authority (Gee, 2008a). Examples of this abound in human history – South Africa’s former apartheid system of government is one of them (Breier, Taetsane, & Sait, 1996). Taxi drivers in South Africa who informally learned to speak and read English (and therefore are not considered literate due to their lack of standardized literacy), are consistently aware of their marginalized position, and indeed it sometimes puts them in dangerous contexts (Breier et al., 1996). Many of the taxi drivers, under financial stress and familial obligations, fail to secure the necessary paperwork needed to operate legally which places them in very tense conditions. If they were to make a mistake, they would “always be in the wrong,” according to one taxi driver (Breier et al., 1996, p. 217). In this case, even a small infraction would cause the taxi driver to be locked up in judicial system that locates them in the lowest rungs of power (Breier et al., 1996). The official Discourse of South Africa’s apartheid era driving laws
prevents this social group from accessing the necessary means with which they can operate successfully, contributing to their marginalized cultural status (Breier et. al., 1996).

If one Discourse retains the ability to hold power over others, the entire span of potential Discourses needs a fresh and thorough examination (Gee, 2008a). In the example above, the taxi drivers’ lack of state-recognized literacy puts them in harm’s way (and unable to successfully participate in the state’s driver certification Discourse), even though they may be fully able to carry out their job safely and competently (Breier et al., 1996). Examining Discourses in this manner may not cause everyone to agree on one approach, but may encourage people to clearly state their principles in areas where they feel their implicit theories are the only right way to view the world (Gee, 2008a).

Although each social group (or Discourse) may not be aware of their collective cultural model that defines normal or common sense behavior, this underlying, implicit theory is present in each statement or action taken by members of a social group (Gee, 2008a). As a whole, a group’s implicit theories help define, for them, what is meaningful and true while other Discourses may see things differently (Gee, 2008a).

Meaningful (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) content can defined as information that gains value when it fits into and modifies people’s existing body of knowledge (Kress, 2003). Members of Discourses are considered literate when they generate,
communicate, and negotiate meaningful content in “socially recognized ways,” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 64). People exist in a world that is entirely bound up in the social groups which characterize that world (Gee, 2008a). Therefore, an understanding of meaningful content cannot be separated from the social groups, or Discourses, which form the shifting, underlying theories from which people make sense of the world around them (Barton et al., 2000).

From this point of view, it would be possible then to be literate in one Discourse, yet illiterate in another (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Pardoe, 2000; Street, 1993c). The following section will examine how, through dominant and marginalized literacies, people can be defined as literate or illiterate based upon their association with and mastery of their respective literacies, and how their membership in different Discourses affects how they may be labeled.

**Identifying Dominant and Marginalized Literacies**

The previous section explained how literacy practices have the potential to become dominant while others are marginalized. Literacy practices were also shown to affect the successes of those who do or do not have proficiency within a certain literacy practice. Discourse theory was brought up as a model describing unique ways of being in the world, built in part around the literacies that an individual uses to be an active member of a Discourse. Literacies were defined as “socially recognized ways of generating, communicating, and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses...
Discourses provide access and context to the recognized ways in which a person generates, communicates, or negotiates the content particular social groups find meaningful (Gee, 2008a; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). This section will focus on those recognized ways and establish how ways of generating, communicating, or negotiating meaning in a message are dependent upon the social groups generating or negotiating that message.

**Literacy practices.**

The concept of literacy practices is critical to understanding how social groups use literacy in recognized ways (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). The term practice is widely used when referring to literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Gee, 2008a; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Ivanic, Fowler, Edwards, Mannion, & Smith, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; 2005; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1993a). Against a view of literacy as simply a cognitive tool created by the mind, recognizing literacy practices validates the socially constructed, variable, and contextually based nature of literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Scribner & Cole, 1981).

A practice arises out of social patterns, so it is important to define the idea of practice in social terms before applying it to literacy (Scribner & Cole, 1981). A social practice can be defined as:
A recurrent, goal directed sequence of activities using a particular technology and particular systems of knowledge… It always refers to socially developed and patterned ways of using technology and knowledge to accomplish tasks… Tasks that individuals engage in constitute a social practice when they are directed to socially recognized goals and make use of a shared technology system. (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236)

When applying knowledge to accomplish goals with the use of technology (which in this case can mean a variety of tools or techniques), an individual will use a “coordinated set of actions,” also known as skills (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236). Skills, then, are an integral part of any practice, which also consists of two other components: technology and knowledge (Scribner & Cole, 1981).

All practices, therefore, involve interdependent tasks that share common tools, understandings, and skill-sets (Scribner & Cole, 1981). Theories based upon social practice interconnect these three components as dynamic and mutually evolving, changing together as people alter their ideas about what is possible using technology, knowledge, and skills (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). In other words, practices are not stable entities but continually change over time (Maybin, 2000; Tusting, 2000). People apply their knowledge and skills, employing whatever technology is available to change commonly held ways of doing something which in turn develops new knowledge and skills, leading to new technologies, and so on (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Social practices always use socially recognized or
patterned ways of adapting knowledge and technology to accomplish tasks, and those practices are continually evolving as people combine their knowledge and skills in new ways (Scribner & Cole, 1981)

When the concept of a social practice is applied to literacy, it is termed a literacy practice and can be defined as “a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it” (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236). Viewed this way, literacy is no longer seen as simply the ability to read and write in alphabetic script. Rather, it becomes a socially recognized way of applying encoded and decoded knowledge in precise purposes and for particular contexts of use (Scribner & Cole, 1981). Focusing on literacy practices also reorients the focus away from viewing literacy as a technology in and of itself, with its own inherent benefits or consequences (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). Literacy practices, therefore, “exist in the relations between people, within groups and communities, rather than as a set of properties residing in individuals” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 7)

The tools and techniques (technologies) that a social group uses and the nature of their use will define the kinds of skills related to a particular literacy (Scribner & Cole, 1981). For example, when people are steeped in digital technologies, the skills they develop will differ radically from people who are using their encoding and decoding skills in more analog ways (Prensky, 2001). Even though it may use a similar symbol system, typing a message into a cell phone
contrasts markedly, and in many different ways, from writing a letter to a friend with paper and pencil (Crystal, 2008). They both vary widely in terms of the technologies used (pencil, paper, keypad, screen); the knowledge employed (spelling conventions, formatting, grammar); and the skills required (physical dexterity, the ability to pick 26 letters out of 9 keys).

While the connections among technology, knowledge, and skills are critical to a complete understanding of literacy practices and their place in social groups (or Discourses), more recent accounts of literacy practices have tended to focus on the social recognition patterns involved in producing or understanding meaningful content within unique situations (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

**Literacy practices, recognized ways, and meaning.**

Literacy is used in socially recognized and socially evolved ways (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). To carry meaningful content, messages need to be encoded in familiar and accepted forms and must be found in the specific, familiar patterns of behavior with which particular Discourses locate themselves (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Street, n.d.). These patterns of behavior, or practices, develop social models over time, giving some ideas, objects, texts or settings more meaning than others (Street, n.d.).

Literacy practices have also been described as “the social models of literacy that participants bring to bear upon…events and that give meaning to them” (Street, n.d., p. 5). This description of literacy practices supports those offered earlier by
reiterating the importance of social groups developing their own forms or models of literacy, yet goes a step further by explicitly stating that those social models allow people in the Discourse to attribute meaning to the content that is being communicated, negotiated, or generated (Street, n.d.).

Literacies are used to generate, negotiate, and communicate meanings in socially recognized ways, and it is the job of others to make meaning from those generated texts (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). However, meaning can only be carried if there is something to carry it – this is the content of the literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). If the receiver of a message is not a member of the Discourse, then the message is unlikely to make sense or have meaning. Indeed, meanings made by smaller groups may not be intelligible to more mainstream groups or to many people at all (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Therefore, regardless of its content, meaning is essentially filled in by socially regulated and patterned literacy practices (Gee, 2008a). Those cultural models, or Discourses, dictate what does or does not have meaning, as well as the way in which that meaning is represented (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Maybin, 2000).

If meaning is contingent upon the literacy practices that certain Discourses employ, and only members of the Discourse can properly negotiate the specific meaning of a message, then it is evident that literacy practices are responsible for ascribing meaning in significant ways (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). Meaning arises out of socially recognized forms of encoding, socially recognized uses of technology (in
its many and varied constructs), and socially shared knowledge of the process for decoding that meaning (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). In fact, outside of a social context, a text carries no autonomous meaning at all (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). The meaning is dependent upon how a specific Discourse interacts with a specific text in their socially specific ways (Street, n.d.).

Some meanings fail to achieve understanding due to their lack of shared, socially situated literacy practices and use of literacies that may or may not be marginalized (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Maybin, 2000; Pardoe, 2000). In the next section, this concept of dominant and marginalized literacies will be expanded upon using the idea of literacy events to illustrate how literacies can be singled out in people’s everyday activities, and how those events are determined to a large extent through broader social structures. These larger social institutions embrace some literacies at a detriment to others, thus causing some literacies to become marginalized while others remain dominant.

**Literacy Events and Dominant and Marginalized Literacies**

Using the concept of social practices to inform literacy leads to a theory of literacy practices defined as “a set of socially organized practices which make use of a symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it” (Scribner & Cole, 1981, p. 236). This original definition has been expanded to include people’s evolving, socially based reasons for attributing values, understandings, intentions, and meanings to literacy practices (Ivanic et al., 2004; Street, n.d.). Different
combinations of literacy practices contribute to different Discourses, providing access and context to the recognized ways in which a person generates, communicates, or negotiates the content particular social groups find meaningful (Gee, 2008a; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

Because practices exist through the interactions between people, and include such imperceptible constructs as attitudes, feelings, and social relationships, they are considered only partially observable (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1993a). In order to observe how literacy practices fit into larger social structures, specific literacy events must be isolated and studied separately from literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Maybin, 2000), so that the literacy practices informing them can be discerned.

**Literacy events.**

A literacy practice encompasses the wide variety of activities people do to contribute to a Discourse, yet isolating literacy in time and space allows researchers to study the parts that make up the whole (Ivanic et al., 2004). A literacy event, then, focuses on the actions or groups of actions performed by people as they participate in literacy practices (Heath, 1983). In a sense, you could photograph a literacy event but not a practice; a practice would be a collection of such events (Hamilton, 2000). Literacy events occur in a specific place around an encoded message (e.g. a piece of writing, a painting, a musical concerto, etc.) which mediates the participants’ interaction as they negotiate a shared understanding of that message’s meaning.
(Barton & Hamilton, 1998). In short, literacy events are “activities where literacy has a role” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 7). As it was noted before, outside of a social context, a text carries no autonomous meaning at all (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Therefore, literacy events are situated – inseparable from social contexts – since the meaning of a message is negotiated between people in a literacy event (Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

*Literacy events invoke broader social patterns.*

The situated nature of literacy events is crucial to recognizing the links between peoples’ socially formed understandings of themselves and others, and the ways they fit into the larger world around them (Maybin, 2000; Tusting, 2000). Literacy events are shaped by the reasons and goals that individual participants have at stake in them, imbuing the events with highly personal and useful outcomes (Maybin, 2000). These outcomes help shape who people are and how they relate to the larger institutions and obligations they are under (Maybin, 2000). Literacy events such as writing a school essay, filling in a form at the bank, or reading a cookbook call upon greater social and historical patterns of literacy practices, giving life to them, remarking on them, or even changing or undermining them in some way (Maybin, 2000). In other words, to use the language of the definitions offered above, when people participate in literacy events, they are drawing upon their socially recognized ways of generating, communicating, or negotiating meaningful content in order to create and make meaning from their activity (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).
As they participate, they use the knowledge, skills, and technologies consistent with their literacy practice to be successful members of their overarching Discourse (Gee, 2008a; Scribner & Cole, 1981).

Consequently, literacy events capture many forms of personal or social meaning, and when examined alongside literacy practices, provide a window into the interrelationships between individuals’ “activities, understandings, and identities, [the] social events and the interactions they involve, [and the] broader social and institutional structures” that surround them (Maybin, 2000, p. 198). As people interact within their literacy events and practices, they follow social conventions that are informed by local customs and have local consequences, yet the social conventions at play are shaped by the broader social institutions and power relationships underlying the events and practices (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Maybin, 2000). For example, in a small town, a loan officer and a client sit across from each other at a large desk, using computer finance programs to assist them in verbally negotiating a deal that is favorable to them both. The modestly dressed client sits uncomfortably in front of the large desk that belongs to the loan officer, who, dressed in a sharply cut suit and tie, works for a multinational corporation with responsibilities to government regulators as well as its shareholders (Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Maybin, 2000).

In this manner, a literacy event situated in a local setting is both reflecting and simultaneously contributing to the composition of more expansive social
institutions and structures (Maybin, 2000). As the loan officer and client participate in the Discourse of banking, they are working on and being worked on by larger institutional goals that have very real importance to the more personal goals both people have as they enter into the Discourse (Maybin, 2000). There are also very real power relationships at work in a literacy event (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Gee, 2008a; Heath, 1983; Ivanic et al., 2004; Maybin, 2000; Street, 2003; Street, 1993a) – ones made more clear in this example than they normally are in other events. As the loan officer and client negotiate their contract, their banking Discourse shows how literacy events provide an intersection where their dialogue translates local knowledge, (power) relationships, and bias into more comprehensive systems of meaning, application, and identity (Maybin, 2000).

*Social institutions perpetuate dominant and marginalized literacies.*

The interrelated meanings, social structures, and power relations which make up literacy practices and events form a complex web of configurations, informing people’s different discourses and everyday literacy activities (Maybin, 2000). Literacy practices are formed in large parts through social institutions and the power relationships they bring to bear upon the participants (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). The literacy events that take place within those practices are not inadvertent, they are a result of the unique configurations of the Discourse surrounding each literacy event (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Depending upon the particular Discourse, numerous institutions may exist to support and give structure to them, including
…family, religion, and education, which are all social institutions. Some of these institutions are more formally structured than others, with explicit rules for procedures, documentation and legal penalties for infringement, whilst others are regulated by the pressure of social conventions and attitudes. (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 12)

Social institutions may vary in their formality, but they nonetheless exert significant power over the literacy events people engage in on a daily basis (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Indeed, some institutions have created, structured, and perpetuated particular literacies, supporting the unique literacy practices favored by those institutions (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Furthermore, social institutions wield this power through their socially-generated procedures, conventions, and attitudes (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

Within powerful institutions, certain literacy practices are more prevalent than others, and this substantially impacts the types of literacy events participants engage in (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). As particular literacy practices are created, structured, and sustained through the support of social institutions, those literacies become more dominant than others through increased visibility and influence (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Certain literacies become more dominant, visible, and influential, while other literacies become less visible and less supported both by the social institutions and by people whose social relationships are formed through them.
It is no accident that, “socially powerful institutions, such as education, tend to support dominant literacy practices” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, p. 12).

Individuals are socialized into their literacy practices, and the literacy events they participate in are dependent upon the practices in which they are involved (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street, 1993a). These literacy events and practices are shaped by the broader social structures in which they take place (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Maybin, 2000). If those larger social institutions, of which education is one, tend to support only dominant literacy practices, then the access people have to the full spectrum of literacies may be limited in those institutions, causing some literacies to become marginalized in the process (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). The next section will concentrate on the dominant and marginalized literacies within education. It will elaborate the Discourses at work in formal education, demonstrate how some students are disadvantaged by their association with marginalized literacy practices outside of school, and identify problems with transferring literacy lessons learned in out of school contexts to the academic Discourse of school.

**Dominant Versus Marginalized Literacies in Education**

Literacy practices involve culturally recognizable patterns of behaviors, values, understandings, or intentions (Ivanic et al., 2004; Street, 1993b; Tusting, Ivanic, & Wilson, 2000). Literacy events arise from literacy practices, are mediated by the textual elements at use during the literacy event, and can be characterized as the actions that take place around literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998;
Heath, 1983). Both literacy events and literacy practices are socially constructed through people’s interactions with each other and through more overarching societal structures such as cultural traditions, governments, and educational systems (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000; Street, 1993a). Since literacy practices are socially based and collectively developed, the social institutions that people participate in have a large impact upon the variety of potential practices in which those people engage (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

Literacy practices occur in many domains of our lives, especially educational ones (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000). The relative dominance of some practices over others prevents certain literacy practices from being accessed and utilized in a formal educational setting (Ivanic et al., 2004). Formal education (also referred to as school), is a structured learning environment set up for the purpose of teaching knowledge, skills, or values. It has a specific Discourse, with its own particular set of values, understandings, and intentions (Trier, 2006). Those value systems at work within formal education are based in part upon social patterns that reflect the dominant paradigm of the culture, including literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Therefore, in an institution designed to reproduce dominant cultural literacy practices, it is common for marginalized practices to be left out of the dominant Discourse (Gee, 2008a).

Students carry out vibrant and multifaceted lives outside of school, participating in many social groups that communicate through literacy practices
unique to their Discourse (Camitta, 1993; Crystal, 2008; Heath, 1983; Lankshear &
Knobel, 2006; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Moje, 2000). Often, the rich varieties of
literacy practices employed by students outside of school are not utilized within
formal educational settings (J. Smith, 2005). Many students exposed to the dominant
forms of academic literacy at school find it difficult to realize that they are
participating in vernacular, literacy practices outside of school (Ivanic et al., 2004).
Vernacular literacies have been described as “varieties of literacy shaped by
expressive conventions directly influenced by the social and cultural configurations”
within particular social groups (Camitta, 1993, p. 229). When distinguishing the
dominant form of literacy present in schools from the marginalized forms commonly
overlooked by educators, the term vernacular helps to describe literacies that
conform to social life and culture that students participate in, in contrast to the
standards of educational institutions (Camitta, 1993).

Indeed, many critics of modern schooling take issue with the singular,
academically-focused literacy practice most commonly taught in school (Camitta,
1993; Cervetti, Damico, & Pearson, 2006; Heath, 1983; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006;
Maybin, 2007; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005; Pardoe, 2000; Street, 1997). As particular
literacy practices are created, structured, and sustained through the support of social
institutions like education, those literacies dominate others through increased
visibility and influence (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). If education tends to support
only dominant literacy practices, students’ exposure to marginalized literacies is
decreased. As this occurs, the access people have to the full spectrum of literacies is limited, and some literacies become marginalized in the process (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

The disconnect between students’ every-day, wide-ranging, vernacular literacy practices out of school and the academically-oriented literacy practices at school can be partially attributed to the autonomous view of literacy that runs counter to a socially centered approach (Street, 1993c).

The autonomous model of literacy:

When literacy educators and policy makers remove the socially situated aspects of literacy to define it as a distinct set of cognitive skills, it is termed the autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984). The autonomous model views literacy as a “technology of the mind” – something located within each person that simply needs activating (Street, n.d., p. 1). This deeply-rooted model places written text as all-important, isolating meaning in the written word itself instead of the context around the word(s) (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). The autonomous model is embedded in a belief that literacy is a technology of the mind—that anyone is capable of achieving it. The autonomous model defines literacy strictly as the ability to encode or decode letters and words and devalues the role of social forces in providing and informing such ability (Street, 1993a).

In the autonomous model, literacy practices are ignored, and literacy itself is imbued with inherent qualities (Street, 1984). To be literate, to use letters and words
successfully (as in a literacy practice), allows the user to access particular privileges that would be impossible otherwise (Street, n.d.). The autonomous model transforms literacy into an independent entity, an object that can be used as a commodity to be pushed onto those in need of it (Street, n.d.). As a socially independent technology existing in the mind of those who use it, people who fail to acquire this model of literacy are seen as illiterate, setting up a great divide between those who are literate and those who are not (Pardoe, 2000; Street, 1993a).

However, “what is taken in the autonomous model to be qualities inherent to literacy are in fact conventions of literate practice in particular societies” (Street, 1984, p. 4). This singular application of one model of literacy ignores the powerful, invisible social systems in which the autonomous model originated and imposes assumptions derived from a dominant cultural practice onto the idea of literacy as a whole (Street, 2003; Street, 1993a). These dominant cultural practices are ubiquitous in education. Education supports and perpetuates them so much that identifying marginalized literacy practices can be difficult (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000).

The hazards of the autonomous model come from its seemingly apparent neutrality since everyone supposedly needs and benefits from this type of literacy education (Street, n.d.). However, if one refuses to ignore the socially constructed nature of literacy practices it becomes clear that the qualities considered to be inherent in the autonomous model of literacy are actually reflections of a particular
social group’s conventional use of literacy (Street, 1984). In a world of multiple, socially situated literacies, it is time to explicitly investigate biases and ideological contexts when considering literacy and education (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2008a; Street, 1984, 1993a). The failure to do so privileges one group’s ideals and power over another’s (Street, 1984).

*The ideological model of literacy.*

As an alternative to the autonomous model, the ideological model of literacy directly accounts for the social, cultural, and power structures in our society (Street, 1984). Simply put, the ideological approach takes a more sensitive stance toward literacy practices and the ways in which they tend to vary across cultures and contexts (Street, n.d.). Proponents of the ideological model refuse to ignore the role of social context from conceptions of literacy practices. Instead of literacy as a stand-alone entity, they study the social frameworks surrounding literacy (Street, 1993a).

An ideological model of literacy rejects the notion that literacy is a neutral and discrete set of technical skills and views literacy first and foremost as a social practice (Street, n.d.). Literacy is always a social act: its goal is communication between people or between groups of people within a social context (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2008a; Street, 1993a).

If literacy is rooted in social practices, the context of those social practices will determine how one learns a new literacy; it will be dependent upon the unique
particulars of the social practice where the learning takes place (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Street, n.d.). Literacy is also a process of assigning and interpreting meaning to messages, and the ideological model of literacy “assumes that the meaning of [a message] depends upon the social institutions in which it is embedded” (Street, 1984, p. 8). The meanings of messages are bound to be contested when viewing a literacy event from outside the social practice in which it is embedded. The result may be a completely different interpretation (Gee, 2008a; Street, n.d.).

When the bias in an interpretation is made clear, an investigation of the instruction of a given literacy reveals bias to be present there as well (Street, 1993a). An autonomous approach conceals the social context and power relations from which a particular literacy is developed and transmitted by placing the source of that literacy within someone’s head, not in the context around them (Street, 1993c). It is therefore better to be up front and admit ideological foundations (as the ideological model does) and open these foundations up to transparency, scrutiny, and challenge. Doing so may prevent intended or unintended privileges for those with more dominant ideologies (Street, 1993a).

In education, the ideological model helps to expose power relations. It clearly demonstrates that literacy practices have the ability to reproduce or challenge existing power structures (Street, n.d.). Teaching relies heavily upon social structures and stratification which translate into social practices that either have or lack power (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Street, 1984). The effect of this relationship on
new learners, those with the least power, influences the literacy being learned, as well as their ideas about that literacy and their ability to acquire it (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Street, n.d.).

Both models are found in education.

The autonomous model and the ideological model are not opposing points on a continuum, but different approaches to literacy. Instead of demonizing one model at the expense of the other, characterizing and contesting the autonomous and ideological models of literacy allows researchers to engage in a dialogue about different approaches to literacy education. The two models provide avenues to openly explore the implicit fundamental beliefs within different models of literacy and encourage more cross-cultural approaches (Street, 1984). Indeed, the ideological model’s emphasis on explicitly stating the ideology and politics involved in a literacy program includes the autonomous model as one plausible interpretation of literacy, instead of directly polarizing it (Street, 1993c). Recent developments in educational dialogue and the Discourse surrounding literacy education use these two models as a starting point for digging even deeper into literacy practices and events.

The New Literacy Studies

Rather than identifying literacy as a set of cognitive skills, New Literacy Studies researchers use the ideological model of literacy as a framework for inquiries into literacy events and practices (Street, 1993a). Developed by a number of researchers over the past 20 years, the New Literacy Studies offers an alternative,
socially situated and socially constructed view of literacy; identifying literacies as multiple, emergent, and situated in unique social contexts (Barton et al., 2000; Gee, 2008a; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005; Street, 1993c). New Literacy Studies researchers make connections between social theories and empirical data to explore what it means to see literacy as a social practice and to expand upon an understanding of literacy in general (Barton et al., 2000).

Viewing literacy as a social practice is fundamental to the New Literacy Studies approach (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). An individual’s understanding of literacy in general arises out of internal processes that create awareness and make sense of literacy. These processes are determined in part through the social institutions and structures surrounding that individual (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Literacy practices are best understood as existing between people in the relationships that groups and communities foster. Thus, the New Literacy Study’s social theory of literacy derives from and extends the ideological model of literacy discussed above (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

These cultural patterns of utilizing literacy are important, but it has been demonstrated that practices contain unobservable elements (Street, 1993a). Therefore most New Literacy Studies researchers focus their investigations on literacy events and their socially situated nature in an effort to better understand events as well as practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).
By concentrating on the things people do with literacy instead of literacy itself, New Literacy Studies proponents open up areas for studying literacy in many varied forms, including the everyday literacy events overlooked by past literacy researchers (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, 2000). Activities such as writing a note to a friend, using street signs during travel, and completing a time card at work all fall into the category of literacy in everyday life (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Less attention is given to these informal uses of literacy than the more studied and more formal literacies involved in negotiating educational books and other published texts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). While these events all undeniably involve the use of literacy, it is used in a different way in each event and for a different purpose (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). New Literacy Studies researchers have not only made use of this expanded definition of literacy, they have created a significant body of research that cites literacy events and practices as occurring outside of formally recognized institutions such as government and education (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

Finally, a New Literacy Studies approach opens up one more important area for literacy research. A literacy event usually involves a mixture of communication methods – for example, cooking with a friend requires not only speaking and reading, but numerical and time elements as well (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Examining this range of communication tools in conjunction with an understanding that literacy is used in different ways in different contexts exposes the idea of different literacies (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Negotiating different symbolic
systems such as letters or pictures gives rise to the notion of various literacies, such as alphabetic literacy and visual literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Utilizing particular configurations of various literacies for certain purposes (such as cooking) can be compared to the idea of different Discourses brought up earlier (Gee, 2008a). Like the many smaller discourses that inform and contribute to a Discourse, people use a variety of literacies in coherent configurations as they engage in literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2008a).

The transition from a literacy approach defined autonomously to an ideologically framed approach such as New Literacy Studies can be described and expanded upon using an electronic metaphor. A computer—isolated, powerful information processing based upon form and structure, not meaning—embodies the old approach. Information goes in and comes out, with no outside forces working on it (Gee, 2000). For socially-based theories, networks are a more appropriate comparison: “knowledge and meaning are seen as emerging from social practices or activities in which people, environment, tools, technologies, objects, words, acts, and symbols are all linked to (‘networked’ with) each other and dynamically interact with and on each other” (Gee, 2000, p. 184).

Literacy instruction is central to education (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). Approaching literacy education from a New Literacy Studies’ perspective allows educators to draw upon and utilize the socially situated nature of students’ learning
as they generate, communicate, or negotiate unfamiliar literacy events and practices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005)

**Benefits of a New Literacy Studies approach to education.**

At its core, New Literacy Studies places the socially situated nature of language and learning as essential to a person’s literacy development (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2008a; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Ivanic et al., 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Street, 1997). Education rarely takes place in isolation; it is a process of communication between people or between groups of people in which new ideas gradually develop into lasting knowledge (Gee, 2008a; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Therefore, this approach can inform teaching and learning by first and foremost grounding it in a social context (Street, 1984). However, New Literacy Studies also helps educators identify the power relations at work in teaching and learning, build upon the dynamic change that occurs in education, and identify both dominant and marginalized literacies as each having a meaningful part in the lives of learners (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Pardoe, 2000; Trier, 2006).

Analyzing the social context of literacy has significantly expanded researchers’ conceptions of the varied forms and meanings that literacy embodies (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). Indeed, “social context organizes literacy, rather than the other way around” (Brandt & Clinton, 2002, p. 340). Different individuals bring different perspectives to bear upon their understanding of texts in their many and varied forms (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). The relationships that people form with each
other (or that are already established) as they work together to encode or decode a text help or hinder the process of making meaning (Brandt & Clinton, 2002). In education, meaning is built up through the process of learning, and meaning is an individual’s unique way of making sense of the world (Kress, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

“Knowledge is not extended from those who consider that they know to those who consider that they do not know; knowledge is built up in the relations between human beings,” (Freire, 1974, p. 99). It is only through a process of mutual and respectful understanding that learning occurs, and to be successful, both teacher and learner must participate in that process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Unsurprisingly, if the social relationship between a student and teacher is strained, it will present considerable challenges for the teacher to create any real content-related meaning, and the student may find it difficult to derive a clear understanding of the teacher’s goals (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

By identifying the power relationships at work in literacy events and practices, New Literacy Studies researchers have molded literacy into a resource for people; learners become empowered through explicit and critical acknowledgement of the power dynamics present in education (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). The use of Discourse analysis (a main component of the New Literacy Studies framework) helps to clarify the ways in which power can function within a Discourse to marginalize people and prevent them from accessing the benefits that come from
being a successful member of a Discourse (Trier, 2006). For example, teachers may use their status as leaders of educational Discourses to pick on specific students who either a) have not yet mastered the discourse, or b) are not the teachers’ favor and therefore at a disadvantage in the power relationships at work in the classroom (Trier, 2006). Using the language of Discourse analysis assists in describing these power struggles more clearly, emphasizing the role that dominant literacies can play in keeping people powerless (Trier, 2006). A New Literacy Studies approach explicitly examines these roles of power in the classroom (as well as in society), and uses literacy to empower students’ knowledge of themselves, their capabilities, and the social structures that affect their understandings and possibilities (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005).

Empowering learners can take many forms, and a New Literacy Studies approach empowers learners in a socially-relevant way by situating literacy and literacy education in a dynamic social context (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Social contexts are always changing, continually adapting to the energy and interests of the participants (Tusting, 2000). One form of empowerment comes when change is viewed by the members of a practice as advancing that practice into new and better ways of being and doing in the world (Gee, 2008a; Tusting, 2000). Suddenly, differences that could have been a liability in classrooms of the past (i.e., cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, or ideological differences) become something to celebrate
since they add to the diversity of ideas with which a practice may be infused (Gee, 2000).

Thus, another benefit of using a New Literacy Studies’ approach to education is that it accounts for and allows for change over time (Tusting, 2000). A community of practice like education is never static; it is always undergoing change (Barton & Hamilton, 2000, 2005; Tusting, 2000). The social nature of a practice drives change through the continual adoption of new ideas, new technologies, and new members into that practice (Gee, 2000; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). While these changes may be stressful or unwanted by members proficient in the current phase of the literacy practice, the inevitability of change provides a dynamic tilt to what was once thought of as an autonomous and unchanging phenomenon (Gee, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tusting, 2000).

Placing a value on change and consequently on the agents of that change gives an incredible amount of power to newcomers in a literacy practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). By acknowledging their ability to drive change within an established community—simply through diverse, new, or out-of-context ways in which the newcomers see or think about the established literacy practice, or through deliberate actions once they are familiar with the practice—their status is elevated from that of curious onlookers to active participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This ability for newcomers to become valued, active, agents of change within a literacy
practice simply by participation within the literacy practice further reinforces the
notion of learning through participation in social contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Of course the change valued so highly by New Literacy Studies practitioners
can bring about conflicts between those familiar with a Discourse and those new to it
(Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tusting, 2000). In order to gain proficiency, new-comers
need to comprehend, participate, and join existing communities of practice (Lave &
Wenger, 1991). However, as they actively participate, they begin to have their own
ideas and their own identity within the established community (Lave & Wenger,
1991). As the newcomers gradually increase their proficiency in the literacy
practice, they begin to negotiate their own stake in the future of the practice,
potentially altering it in ways unfavorable to others (Lave & Wenger, 1991).
Paradoxically, it is through the collaboration of everyone working together that this
conflict is resolved:

    Shared participation is the stage on which the old and the new, the known and
the unknown, the established and the hopeful, act out their differences and
discover their commonalities, manifest their fear of one another, and come to
terms with their need for one another. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 116)

In an educational Discourse, the classroom becomes the stage, the teacher represents
the established interests, and the students are the hopeful participants. From a New
Literacy Studies perspective, all three can work together to drive change through the
continual adoption of new ideas, new technologies, and new members into the practice (Gee, 2008a; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Within a group of people working together, the presence of a shared purpose can mask the variation of each participant’s unique arrangement of skills, interests, and experiences, including experiences with dominant and marginalized literacies (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In addition to socially situating education, identifying the power relationships at work in literacy practices, and characterizing change as an asset, a New Literacy Studies perspective on education can also help educators see the value of dominant and marginalized literacies as equally meaningful in the lives of learners (McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Moje, 2002; Pardoe, 2000).

New Literacy Studies do not separate out marginalized and dominant literacy practices as being uniquely unrelated to each other (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Brandt & Clinton, 2002; Street, 1993c). Indeed, students may be extracting skills, examples, or advice from a dominant practice to inform their marginalized practice, or their particular literacy practices may be a hybrid of dominant and marginalized literacies (Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Maybin, 2007; Pardoe, 2000). Even though such hybridized use implies that the boundaries between practices are fuzzy and indistinct – and they normally are – this also means that those border regions are meaningful places where literacy skills and abilities may be combined in new ways and for new purposes (Barton & Hamilton, 2005).
Transforming literacy resources from one mode to another, or borrowing from one literacy practice to benefit another, are essential in today’s multimodal world (Kress, 2003). A communication mode is the vehicle with which a message is transmitted (Kress, 2003). In the past, words were the mode of choice for most messages, but recent technological advances are making it easier to communicate in many different modes or even multiple modes at once (Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Put another way, new technologies are revolutionizing the material elements of literacy (Barton & Hamilton, 2005).

Today’s students are surrounded by a cacophony of communication modes, and they are increasingly taking what they need from one mode in the service of another (Kress, 2003). It is not enough to see written text as the singular resource which students can draw from for inspiration and creativity – indeed, “language alone cannot give us access to the meaning of the multimodally constituted message; language and literacy now have to be seen as partial bearers of meaning only” (Kress, 2003, p. 35). Socially situating literacy practices through a New Literacy Studies lens assists researchers and educators in detecting the total sum of literacy events and practices within a Discourse (Ivanic et al., 2004).

Expanding upon a social foundation of literacy can begin to incorporate more concretely the multimodal nature of students’ contemporary lives (Ivanic et al., 2004; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). The notion of text as a page of letters signifying permanent and straightforward meaning is outdated, and a new
understanding of text is needed, especially regarding the education of youth today (Kress, 2003).

Outside of school, students negotiate texts using a wide variety of literacy practices, many of which are quite meaningful to students (Pardoe, 2000). Within an educational setting though, the autonomous model of literacy which ignores the world outside is all too often the dominant frame of reference. This leaves vernacular or marginalized literacies out of the picture (Pardoe, 2000). Devaluing students’ out-of-school literacy practices can have disastrous consequences and potentially alienate students or prevent educators from seeing how students’ familiarity with marginalized literacies can help inform their acquisition of dominant literacy practices (Pardoe, 2000).

Placing education squarely and unambiguously within a social context may be the New Literacy Studies’ most significant contribution to literacy education, but it is not the only one. New Literacy Studies have also been helpful in identifying and discussing power roles, characterizing change as an asset, and valuing the influence of all literacy practices within education. The next section will focus on students’ use of literacy in and outside of school, the ways in which those literacies affect student’s sense of identity, and the successful and unsuccessful interactions that happen when marginalized literacies are brought into the classroom.
Marginalized Literacies at School

Learning is socially situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991; F. Smith, 1998). It cannot be removed from the social context in which it occurs (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Learning is a social practice, and the social context that encompasses learning informs the learner about the values, attitudes, and skills associated with what is being learned (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Those cultural models involved in imbuing a social practice with meaning are known as Discourses, which are “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as [characterizing] particular identities (or ‘types of people’) by specific groups” (Gee, 2008a, p. 3). People participate in many different Discourses throughout their lives and may take part in different Discourses within a single day (Gee, 2008a). Those Discourses that are more common, that are brought to life when more people engage with them in their everyday lives, tend to influence people in greater ways than Discourses that are less common (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2008a).

Discourses are made up of the many, smaller discourses that can be thought of as the languages (written, oral, or other literacies) that are central to Discourses (Gee, 2008a). Since Discourses are like a kind of identity kit, the complete identity is the Discourse while the separate actions of behaving, talking, writing, and so on are the literacies that make up that larger Discourse (Gee, 2008a). Literacies have been defined as “socially recognized ways of generating, communicating, and
negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses (or as members of Discourses)” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006, p. 64).

Literacies, like learning, are socially situated. They can involve practices (the socially recognized or patterned ways of using literacies to accomplish tasks) or events (those activities that people actually do with literacy) (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983). The situated nature of literacy practices influences their relative dominance or marginalization within a particular culture, and limits the kinds of literacy events in which a person can participate (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Social institutions play a large role in creating and perpetuating the relative dominance or marginalization of various literacy practices by reflecting and simultaneously contributing to the composition of more expansive social systems (Maybin, 2000). Hence, a social institution like education holds great power over literacy practices and can deeply affect the literacy practices that are learned or the literacy events that take place within school walls (Trier, 2006). The relative dominance of some practices over others prevents certain literacy practices from being accessed and utilized in a formal educational setting (Ivanic et al., 2004).

Situated learning.

If literacies involve generating, communicating, and negotiating meaningful content—the verifiable behaviors of any effective learning environment—then the connection between a learning environment and literacy practice becomes clear
(Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). The New Literacy Studies views education from outside the traditional transmission model – a model characterized by a teacher transmitting information to passive and willing students, who retain it and repeat it when needed (Tishman, Jay, & Perkins, 1992). If learning is a social enterprise, refocusing our attention away from the teacher-as-master approach makes it clear that mastery no longer resides in the teacher but in the community of practice of which the teacher is a part (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The learning resources of the community then begin to take on a larger meaning as the act of teaching is replaced with a group interaction among those resources, including those resources the students bring with them to the classroom (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

To become a full member of a community of practice, a learner or newcomer needs access to a “wide range of ongoing activity, old timers [experienced practitioners], and other members of the community; and to information, resources, and opportunities for participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 101). Overt instruction cannot carry the full load of knowledge required to master a new literacy practice, and therefore newcomers need to be scaffolded in joint practice with experienced practitioners through an immersion in that practice (Gee, 2000). Skills unique to the practice may not be directly explicable with words alone, but may be conveyed through a process of socialization (Gee, 2000).

In a situated learning environment, newcomers are given full access to a literacy practice and gradually become experienced practitioners as they learn the
various distinct ways in which the new literacy practice functions (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This happens through legitimate opportunities to try out the new content in context, with broad support from those familiar with the practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Therefore, one is socialized into learning a new literacy, and one cannot master it without this social setting in which to perform (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Periodic tests of skill are rendered superfluous in this context, since these tests divorce practice from authentic settings (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within this apprentice-like learning environment, newcomers perform the skills they are learning in context, connecting the performance of the skill to the management of the total situation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Understanding is gradually formed through a growing involvement in the literacy practice. While the newcomers may not always be completely immersed in this practice, their partial participation enables them to progressively master more complex subtleties of the learned literacy (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

By reorienting a view of education away from the transmission of a set canon of knowledge from those who know to those who do not know, the larger range of actors involved in true participatory education is brought into focus (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Within a community of practice, there will always be experts and beginners. However, this dichotomy ignores the range of participants who are not yet masters, but have acquired enough mastery to which the label newcomer is inappropriate (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Acknowledging this wider range of abilities
within the community of practice as a whole allows for a communication web of true involvement, supplanting the established pedagogy of education as a one-way street (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this vein, the learning can go both ways: through careful observation of the qualities each student brings to the classroom, and a corresponding plan to make full use of those qualities, the teacher becomes the taught (Ayers, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

*Learning, literacy, and identity.*

As learners move into full participation, they become a different kind of person (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Likewise, they do not gain the ability to master new skills and understandings in isolation – their actions take place in and are given meaning by the social relationships concurrent with those actions (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As newcomers gradually increase their participation, awareness, and mastery of the new literacy practice, they transform their personalities within the relationships at work in the shared learning experience: “[t]o ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53).

If learning does not have a connection to the learner’s identity, there is no initial attachment of goals or direction with the learning environment (Gee, 2008b). By combining identity work and learning together, a learner will have a more defined road map to follow and be able to choose appropriate learning goals that make sense within the context of participation in a new literacy practice (Gee,
Having an identity connection will also allow the learner to put the newly learned material to use in a situated way (Gee, 2008b). Instead of being unable to apply isolated facts, the learner, by actively constructing an identity, will have an immediate, clear venue for combining new knowledge and action (Gee, 2008b).

Learners can participate in formal education or learn new literacies outside of school with (or through) friends, but in either case, they are taking part in an educational Discourse (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Participation in a Discourse means actively building and supporting identities (Gee, 2008a). Since Discourses are related to the ways in which people understand, interpret, explore, or project themselves within the larger world, their relation to identity is inescapable (Gee, 2008a). The ways in which individuals participate within a Discourse has consequences for their identity (for themselves, as well as other’s perception of them), since the act of participating means they are bringing part of themselves to the interaction (Ivanic et al., 2004). As participants interact, literacies are used to construct and carry out different identities within different Discourses (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005).

Literacies differ in and out of school, and school tends to represent a narrow band of possible literacy practices for students (Faulkner, 2005). As such, students’ association with marginalized literacy practices could become a potential liability at school, especially if they are unfamiliar with the dominant literacy practices found there (Heath, 1983; Pardoe, 2000). Unlike situated learning, most schools place
heavy emphasis on tests, characterized especially by standardized tests, to measure the ability – or lack thereof – of an individual’s expertise in the dominant model (Pardoe, 2000). A failing score in these tests assumes an inadequacy of knowledge and devalues that individual’s vernacular literacy practices (not tested in school) as representing a failed or inferior attempt to access the dominant literacy practice (Pardoe, 2000; Street, 1997).

From this standpoint, education can be seen as replacing people’s existing repertoire of (marginalized) literacy practices with the dominant model, instead of adding to or building from the marginalized practices which may be more familiar to them (Gee, 2008b; Pardoe, 2000). This could be at the expense of the students’ identity, which has been shown to be directly tied to the marginalized literacy practice that education seeks to replace (Gee, 2008a; Pardoe, 2000). To learn a new literacy, people have to lose a part of themselves, since any type of learning changes who they are and how they look at and interact with the world (Gee, 2008a; Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, when literacies are so closely tied to identity, undue suffering could take place when people are told that their literacy is insufficient and needs replacing, versus an approach that acknowledges their identity and uses their marginalized literacy as a place to start learning more about the world (Pardoe, 2000; Street, 1997).
The problems with making use of marginalized literacies in education.

Adolescents, youths aged 12 to 17, actively create their place and identities in the world through various, sophisticated literacy practices (Bruna, 2007; Camitta, 1993; Heath, 1983; Ito et al., 2010; Knobel, 2001; Knobel & Lankshear, 2001; Moje, 2002; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Weinstein, 2002; Williams, 2008). Those literacy practices normally take place in a variety of settings, and school is only one of many (McCarthey & Moje, 2002; Moje, 2002). Indeed, due to their placement between the very separate worlds of children and adults, adolescents navigate between more contexts and settings than any other age group (Moje, 2002). As they travel from one context to the next, they actively make meaning in their daily lives through the many texts and literacy practices they encounter (Moje, 2002). The meanings and lessons gleaned through literacy practices in and out of school help adolescents build their identities and provide them with cues to follow when deciding how to present themselves in particular contexts (McCarthey & Moje, 2002).

Representing one’s self-identity involves strategic choices about what parts of oneself are presented, and different people represent themselves in different ways in different contexts (McCarthey & Moje, 2002). Because of this, adolescents might appear as one type of person in an educational Discourse, but look and act like an entirely different person outside of school (McCarthey & Moje, 2002). For example, students who placed so low on standardized tests that they were categorized as so-called at risk demonstrated that they considered themselves readers in out-of-school
activities that were self-selected and relevant to their everyday literacy practices (Alvermann et al., 2007). When given a broad definition of what counts as literacy, (e.g., magazines, comics, TV, video games, music CDs, graffiti, e-mail, and other Internet-mediated texts), youths who self-identified as uninterested in reading reported reading over a half-hour a day (Alvermann et al., 2007). Clearly these adolescents were actively taking part in literacy practices outside of school. However, at school the marginalized practices they were familiar with were disconnected from the more formal literacy practices of education (Alvermann et al., 2007; J. Smith, 2005).

As indicated, adolescents’ literacy practices utilize different modes – many of them digital in nature (Crystal, 2008; Hsu & Wang, 2010; Ito et al., 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2001; Kress, 2003; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Prensky, 2001, 2009; Williams, 2008). The online, interactive component of many digital literacy practices not only allows youth to play around with different identity constructions, it also potentially allows others to give immediate feedback about a person’s personal representation, similar to the face-to-face interactions occurring in social contexts such as school (Williams, 2008). Unlike school however, adolescents who participate in a variety of digital literacy practices are taking on identity constructions that are far more complex than those encountered in previous generations (Williams, 2008). Through reading, writing, and creating images, young people seeking to coordinate their virtual self-
representation in a culturally appropriate way “must engage in complex rhetorical choices, often many times a day, about how to portray [their] identity to a real audience” (Williams, 2008, p. 683). As they visit diverse web sites and interact with others online, adolescents use trial and error and observation to discover the socially-constructed conventions appropriate to each context, negotiating complicated literacy practices educators would love for them to display at school (Ito et al., 2010; Williams, 2008). Transferring these digital literacy lessons to the classroom is not as easy as educators would like, since students may not be able to explain their actions in an out-of-school Discourse through the academic vocabulary required to be successful in an educational Discourse (Ivanic et al., 2004; J. Smith, 2005; Williams, 2008).

Even if a student is highly literate and capable of success in a Discourse out of school, literacies do not cross cultures and contexts easily (Ivanic et al., 2004). What counts as literacy in one Discourse may be quite ineffectual in another (Moje, 2002). School-based literacy practices differ from those out-of-school practices by being more product oriented and skills based (Faulkner, 2005). In contrast to the activities that schools commonly require of students, non-school problem solving contexts do not denote the end point of an activity (Darvin, 2006). As students continually negotiate their ongoing lives outside of school, their chances of success in school dwindle if they see little point to the insular academic literacy practices that dominate the curriculum (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002).
At school, students who may be fully capable of mastering educational
literacies sometimes make a choice between being socially successful and
academically successful (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). While reading outside of school
(on web pages, magazines, popular novels, and written notes) is normal for most
students, reading at school is considered a social faux pas because, in the words of
one student, “Smart people are not popular” (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002, p. 62). A
reason for this unfortunate condition stems from the fact that much of the academic
work of school is disconnected from the students’ social interests and lived
experiences (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). If building an academic literacy practice at
school has little meaning to the students, it creates a divide between what schools see
as successful and the students’ ideas of success (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Hence,
little time or effort will be expended on work seen as meaningless, even if the skills
drawn upon for academic work parallel those found in students’ lives outside of
school (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002).

Students whose strengths are found in oral, visual, or creative outlets find
themselves at odds in a school that values written words over speech, words more
than pictures, and accuracy more than meaning (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). What may
be an asset at home then becomes a liability at school, so that strengths in areas
outside of the written word do not help students master the powerful, singular,
academic Discourse of education (Gee, 2008a; Heath, 1983; Skilton-Sylvester,
2002). Indeed,
the great waste in the school comes from [an] inability to utilize the experiences [one] gets outside of the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while on the other hand, [one] is unable to apply in daily life what [one] is learning in school. (Dewey, 1899, p. 46)

This problem has deep historical roots, roots that keep growing as the major social system of education continues to replicate its own dominant literacy practices at the expense of more marginalized ones (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Maybin, 2000).

At the same time, it is difficult to dispute the value of school to assist students’ acquisition of literacy skills which enable them to be more active participants in dominant economic and social activities (Moje, 2002). Access to dominant literacy skills provides the means to compete with those in power and can be a tool for the critique of power structures present in social contexts (Barton et al., 2000; Moje, 2002; Street, 1993a). However, teachers can become too narrowly focused on providing access to the dominant literacy practices they feel will bring students economic or political success in life (Weinstein, 2002). This tendency ignores the fact that students are continually engaged in and honing those literacy practices they find relevant within their own lives, literacy practices that help define who they are and what they do best (Weinstein, 2002).

Even though young people are actively participating in literacy practices, something every literacy teacher wants them to do, the illegitimate connotation of some adolescents’ out-of-school literacy practices prevents teachers from seeing the
value it has for students’ lives and learning, further marginalizing non-dominant literacy practices (Weinstein, 2002). In other words, while “teachers may see themselves as responsible for broadening the range of discourse communities in which students are equipped to participate, they must not claim sole right to identify which ones are worth participating in” (Weinstein, 2002, p. 32). When a curriculum is justified as preparing students for a dominant social literacy practice, the question must be asked, “Dominant for whom?” (Weinstein, 2002, p. 32). If planning is not carried out carefully, a school faculty’s ignorance of adolescents’ out-of-school practices may shape policies of control in literacy and language teaching that further entrench the divide between dominant and marginalized literacy practices and alienate students who identify more with the latter (McCarthey & Moje, 2002).

New Literacy Studies researchers seek to explore the hidden and recognizable links between so-called successful and unsuccessful literacy practices (Pardoe, 2000). Adolescents may draw upon dominant models of literacy to inform their practice of marginalized literacies, and the reverse may be true as well: they may use what they have learned outside of school for classroom-based purposes (Barton & Hamilton, 2005; Maybin, 2007; Pardoe, 2000). Teachers need to begin to honor those parts of students’ identities which are built up through literacy practices outside of school and should plan to take advantage of how those marginalized literacy practices influence students’ literacy at school (Ivanic et al., 2004; Maybin, 2007). More focused research on adolescents’ literate lives outside of school is
needed so that wise decisions can be made in order to inform successful teaching (Moje, 2002).

Bridging the Gap Between Academic and Vernacular Literacy Practices

In researching out-of-school literacies, one of the main goals for New Literacy Studies researchers is to separate out the cognitive growth that happens at school (including but not limited to literate growth) from the effects of literacy in general (Hull & Schultz, 2002). Cognitive development can be falsely attributed to success in academic literacy Discourses (Scribner & Cole, 1981). Therefore, New Literacy Studies researchers are documenting literacy practices that occur out of school to demonstrate the great variety of literacy practices people participate in, and how those practices are informed through social means (Hull & Schultz, 2002). For example, Ito et al. (2010) have identified many different literacies being used by teens on social media sites, and other researchers have explored tagging as a literacy practice among youth (MacGillavray & Curwen, 2007).

Another goal of research on out-of-school literacy is to account for the disparity between students’ in-school failure and their out-of-school successes (Hull & Schultz, 2002). It is possible for studies of out-of-school learning environments to inform, inspire, or stimulate new directions for reforming curricula and classrooms (Hull & Schultz, 2002). However, it will not always be easy for students to identify that they are participating in literacy outside of school (Ivanic et al., 2004). This can cause considerable challenges if teachers are intent upon utilizing students’ out-of-
school literacy practices for in-school means (J. Smith, 2005; Williams, 2008). Not only is it difficult for students to see the value of attaining academic literacy practices (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002), but using students’ out-of-school Discourses for academic growth can be problematic for a variety of reasons (Pahl & Rowsell, 2005; Williams, 2008)

Adolescents partake in a rich variety of literacy practices outside of school (Aguilar, 2000; Alvermann et al., 2007; Bruna, 2007; Camitta, 1993; Hsu & Wang, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007; Weinstein, 2002), but these do not always get applied in a formal educational setting (J. Smith, 2005). Bridging the gap between adolescents’ everyday literacies and their educational counterparts will take considerable work from both teachers and students to create an awareness of literate practices in the minds of youth (Ivanic et al., 2004). Although limited constructions of literacy at school marginalize adolescents, these adolescents are not doing enough to expand their own notions of literacy (Faulkner, 2005).

One reason young people might not recognize their participation in literacy practices outside of school is the situated nature of literacy itself (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). “Learning often occurs in contexts in which the goal of social action might be something other than learning, so literacy in social contexts…is almost always practiced in the service of some other goal” (Ivanic et al., 2004, p. 8). Adolescents may be gaining the admiration of their peers through composing rap lyrics, painting a graffiti piece, competing in an athletic event, or simply
coordinating a plan for Friday night, but in each case they are participating in a
Discourse and using the socially appropriate literacies needed to do so (Barton &
Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2008a).

Getting adolescents to recognize the various literacies they participate in
during their everyday activities is critical to connecting the learning that is happening
out of school with that which educators seek to attain in school (Ivanic et al., 2004).
One route to creating this awareness is to identify the border regions where students
intermix their literacy resources to create new, hybrid literacy practices (Barton &
Hamilton, 2005; Ito et al., 2010). Some researchers have shown that there is no true
distinction between literacy practices in school and those outside of school (Maybin,
2007; J. Smith, 2005). One literacy event may be infused with experiences from
both in and out of school life, by personal interests or those of friends, as well as the
reading and writing done in class (Camitta, 1993; Maybin, 2007; Weinstein, 2002).
Writing lyrics to a rap song may be frowned upon when it is time to do other class
work, or celebrated as a contribution to a school literacy magazine – not to mention
the respect it may earn in social groups outside of school (Weinstein, 2002).

Accordingly, students’ literacy practices at school are peppered with
fragments of their literacy practices outside of school, and vice versa (Maybin,
2007). If students could understand how they are using dominant literacy practices
to inform their vernacular literacies, educators may be able to assist them in
recognizing that they do indeed practice literacies outside the school grounds (Ivanic
et al., 2004). Once that recognition has occurred, it may be possible to connect the learning experiences happening in marginalized literacy practices to the more formal literacy practices of school (Maybin, 2007).

Adolescents do not stop learning when they leave the school grounds; indeed participation in a non-academic Discourse can have educational benefits, even when adolescents have no educational intentions (Ivanic et al., 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Drawing upon literacy research in out-of-school contexts has broad possibilities for informing literacy learning at school (Maybin, 2007; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005; Pardoe, 2000). A failure to connect the literacies in students’ out-of-school lives with those they use in school may lead even the most successful students to frustration and resistance to formal education (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). The following section will critically examine one out-of-school practice – graffiti. It will ground graffiti in a historical context, explore the ways in which writers become involved in graffiti, and establish graffiti’s status as a literacy practice worth researching.

**Graffiti: A Marginalized Literacy Outside of School**

Humans have communicated on vertical surfaces for thousands of years (Benefiel, 2010; Martinez, 2009). Cave paintings are thought to be the earliest record of humans’ writing and drawing upon walls (Martinez, 2009). In ancient Rome, inhabitants of Pompeii used texts and drawings scratched into walls as a way to send messages, play word games, or compose poetry (Benefiel, 2010). These
messages marked where people spent time and serve as a record of social interactions (Benefiel, 2010). Graffiti artists, or writers, point to these archaic communication forms as proof that human beings are naturally drawn to writing on walls, grounding their contemporary activities in a solid historical base (Martinez, 2009). More recently, scholars have also linked graffiti with the monikers left by train-riding hobos in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Gastman, Rowland, & Sattler, 2006), as well as the territorial markings of gangs from the early twentieth century onward (Moje, 2000).

_A brief history of contemporary graffiti._

The roots of modern graffiti can be traced back to the late 1960’s, when Cornbread and Cool Earl enjoyed local fame for blanketing their Philadelphia neighborhoods with their signatures (D. Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2006; Martinez, 2009; Silver & Chalfant, 1983). As the movement spread to New York, Taki 183 took up the pen and made an even bigger splash when an interview (“Taki 183 Spawns Pen Pals,” July 21, 1971) was published in the New York Times (D. Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2006; Martinez, 2009). Almost immediately, kids all over New York began adding their signatures to the urban landscape, and a movement was born (Martinez, 2009; Silver & Chalfant, 1983). Beginning as a neighborhood-level enterprise, the practice quickly spread throughout the city as newer writers sought to cover as much ground as possible (Christen, 2003).
As signatures proliferated everywhere, simply getting one’s name up wasn’t as special anymore, and in the late 1970’s writers began taking more daring acts to make their signatures bigger, more visible, and unique (Christen, 2003; Silver & Chalfant, 1983). Improvements in spray can technology and wide-tip markers allowed graffiti writers to experiment with larger bubble letters and small drawings next to their names (Christen, 2003). These large-scale, complex letters allowed writers to enhance their name by adding colors and pattern inside the letters (Martinez, 2009). Novelty, creativity, and color melded together into a writer’s style, which quickly became the principal source of status among writers (Christen, 2003). Writers began calling their larger works masterpieces, or pieces for short (Martinez, 2009). Beyond the act of painting one’s name as much as possible, the technical, artistic skill involved in the creation of pieces became the primary vehicle for a writer’s respect (Christen, 2003; Silver & Chalfant, 1983).

Concurrent with the development of graffiti, a new musical style matured in the mid-seventies in Brooklyn and the Bronx. DJ’s developed new sounds with records and turntables, break dancers spun new moves on the dance floor, and rappers sang colorful, syncopated lyrics (Christen, 2003; Silver & Chalfant, 1983). Graffiti artists were asked to decorate the block parties where these activities occurred, and some participated in the rap, dance, or DJ performances (Christen, 2003). Inevitably, graffiti became linked with what has become known as Hip Hop (Christen, 2003). Hip Hop cultural lore mixes all four of these elements.
(breakdancing, DJing, rapping, and graffiti) together, but many writers argue that graffiti originated on its own, separate from the musical components (D. Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2006; Wells, n.d.). However, it is still useful to use the term Hip Hop graffiti in order to distinguish it from the multitude of other, manly urban, illicit decorations put up by gangs, teens, and street artists (Christen, 2003).

From 1980 to 1984, graffiti became a media sensation, fueled by a burgeoning fine art desire for the craft, as well as broader national awareness of the new cultural activities emanating from the ghetto neighborhoods of Brooklyn and the Bronx (Silver & Chalfant, 1983; Witten & White, 2001). This new media coverage performed the publicity role that train cars had played earlier by exposing graffiti to a world-wide audience (Witten & White, 2001).

*The official response to graffiti.*

Graffiti writers often place their works in public without permission, continually confronting the authority of who controls public spaces (Pennycook, 2010). Many laws with harsh punishments have been written specifically for graffiti, making it undoubtedly illegal (California Penal Code § 594, 2010). Some critics have charged that the so-called war on graffiti in some cities has contributed to the militarization of daily life for some urban residents (Iveson, 2010).

Rather than being a threat in-and-of itself, graffiti represents a direct challenge to civil authority, and some see it as contributing to a negative image of the urban environment (Pennycook, 2010). Indeed, a well-established school of
thought called the Broken Windows Theory seeks to establish a connection between graffiti, disorder, and urban problems (Keizer, Linderberg, & Steg, 2008). Researchers have found that graffiti strewn alleyways and mailboxes invited other minor infractions of social codes (Keizer et al., 2008). A setting with disorder can prompt disorderly conduct and petty criminal behavior, but there is no indication of what malady may arise from unwarranted existing social conditions (Keizer et al., 2008).

This correlation between graffiti and disorder invites reflection about “whether it is the graffiti [pieces] themselves that are the problem, or the practice of graffiti writing” (Pennycook, 2010, p. 59). As opposed to billboards and commercial signs which represent the more dominant modes of public discourse, graffiti’s anti-establishment nature helps contribute to the public’s resistance of the practice (Aguilar, 2000). Graffiti writers who place their messages and pieces in public rarely seek financial compensation from their work and in some cases actively fight the prevalent culture of commercialism (Aguilar, 2000).

By exploiting the vulnerabilities of the urban environment, writers circumvent established pathways for contributing to the public discourse (Iveson, 2010). Therefore, making graffiti illegal isn’t just about controlling the visual landscape, it is also an attempt regulate literacy practices (Pennycook, 2010). If the mode of production, the literacy practice itself, is made illegal by a dominant cultural
hegemony, the content or meanings inherent in graffiti can be dismissed outright (Aguilar, 2000).

In this way, a literacy can empower and simultaneously disempower those who participate in it (Weinstein, 2002). Many writers earn great prestige and admiration by their peers and sometimes the larger public (Weinstein, 2002), and some even use their graffiti skills for success in the world of fine art (Martinez, 2009). While a commercially successful graffiti writer can earn real power – the power to follow one’s dream, influence others, or make money for example – in the dominant Discourse of community laws and norms, being a graffiti writer most often means losing power when “the very skills which earn respect and recognition among other [writers] can get someone arrested…by police who represent a society which sees such acts as criminal” (Weinstein, 2002, p. 33).

A writer’s journey: The development of graffiti literacy.

The conception of graffiti writers as violent gang members and youths hell-bent on causing trouble has been largely discredited (Bruna, 2007; Halsey & Young, 2006; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007; Rahn, 2002; Weinstein, 2002). The destructive or transgressive qualities of the literacy may attract a few youth, but most are drawn to the aesthetic appeal of graffiti (Halsey & Young, 2006). Participating in graffiti culture also allows access to social and peer groups that young people might not otherwise be privy to (Halsey & Young, 2006; Jacobson, 2000). Other factors motivating youth to begin writing graffiti include pride, publicity, and
recognition by their peers (Halsey & Young, 2006). This is not to say that graffiti writers don’t enjoy the illegal nature of their practice but that their primary reasons for participation may lie elsewhere (Halsey & Young, 2006).

Many writers come from marginalized populations that don’t necessarily get a voice in the larger cultural discourses occurring in society (Bruna, 2007; Moje, 2000; Russell, 2008; Weinstein, 2002). Therefore, being able to use graffiti to contribute to society is highly desirable to youth who feel that they are otherwise silenced through social, physical, or cultural oppression (Aguilar, 2000; Russell, 2008; Weinstein, 2002). For example, graffiti helps to establish an “unauthorized definition of place” by enabling marginalized populations to lay claim to a physical location through illegitimate means (Aguilar, 2000, p. 32). When they do not have the resources to legally apply their claims to a particular location, doing so illegally can produce positive outcomes (personally and socially) for a writer (Russell, 2008). Participation in non-standard activities such as graffiti brings power and prestige in the alternative discourse communities within which writers associate (Weinstein, 2002).

Directly related to this sense of power, voice, and agency is a writer’s efforts to establish an identity by participating in graffiti culture (Aguilar, 2000; Bruna, 2007; Jacobson, 2000; Moje, 2000). In the words of Swedish writer Just One, “Self-declaration and self-expression are linked to each other” (Jacobson, 2000, p. 32). Beyond claiming locations for their own, many writers simply want the popularity
and fame that come from being a successful graffiti writer (Jacobson, 2000; Silver & Chalfant, 1983). Personal identity is wrapped up in the choices writers makes about their work (Rahn, 2002). Indeed, the style and placement of a graffiti piece demonstrates important characteristics of the individual creator (Christen, 2003; Pennycook, 2010).

The location of graffiti is also important to the development of a particular identity (Christen, 2003; Pennycook, 2010; Russell, 2008). A stylized signature on a wall declares an ongoing presence in a certain area even when the writer is physically absent (Weinstein, 2002). The fact that crossing out or covering over a writer’s mark is the same as physically or verbally assaulting that writer demonstrates a strong linkage between text and identity (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007).

Many writers gain respect, recognition, and a positive self-image when members of their Discourse acknowledge their skills (Jacobson, 2000; Rahn, 2002; Weinstein, 2002). For most writers, the reaction of the public is a side benefit of writing; what they seek most is the recognition and approval of other writers (Christen, 2003; Jacobson, 2000). Graffiti writing “provides a structure of traditional skills, mentors, and codes,” generating an apprenticeship learning environment similar to medieval guilds (Rahn, 2002, p. 191). As writers seek out other Discourse members, they organize into crews for the purposes of supporting and perpetuating the creation of graffiti (Christen, 2003; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007).
Affiliation with crews is a natural progression in the development of graffiti literacy (Christen, 2003; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). Crews assist writers in valuing both themselves and the community, blunting the hard edge of individuality that comes with tagging (Wimsatt, 1994). By preparing writers to perform larger, high visibility public works, crews replicate the structure of formal education (Wimsatt, 1994). In a crew, members support one another by exchanging ideas, collaborating on larger works, discussing aesthetic standards, reinforcing codes of conduct, and assessing innovations (Christen, 2003). Crews also help push writers to higher levels of creativity when writers battle for respect and struggle to advance within the crew’s hierarchy (Christen, 2003).

Crews can be essential to young writers’ deeper understanding of the world of graffiti (Cortese, 2001). According to writer Lady Pink, writers “learn the ropes” from their crew, from applicable knowledge to graffiti-specific skills and techniques like

how to use spray paint, how to break into the [train] yards, how to steal paint, how to evade police, how to run tracks, you know, how to do characters and how to do nice lettering, all sorts of things, even the social skills that will get your ass not beat up. (Cortese, 2001, paragraph 37)

Those writers who don’t have a crew or mentor are at a distinct disadvantage, having to learn “the hard way, by trial and error” (Cortese, 2001, paragraph 37).
In the apprenticeship model of graffiti crews, new writers take on smaller roles with the supervision of experienced writers (Aguilar, 2000; Christen, 2003). For example, some will paint characters next to their mentor’s pieces as a way to get experience without making a mistake on a large wall (Christen, 2003). As writers improve, they might start filling in outlines or painting backgrounds in preparation for the finer detail work (Aguilar, 2000; Christen, 2003).

Being in a graffiti crew has even been shown to replace the stress of potential gang involvement (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). A respected writer will not be harassed by gangs, especially if that writer is part of a crew (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). Additionally, since crews are not interested in claiming territory (their purpose is to put up as much graffiti as possible) they will write all over a geographic area regardless of gang territorial lines (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). Thus, the literacy practice of graffiti provides for a common genre of discourse that supersedes the division represented by socioeconomic or ethnic neighborhoods (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007).

For many writers, graffiti is a lifestyle, and many writers feel that the best way to improve one’s graffiti skills is to follow that lifestyle exclusively (Jacobson, 2000). The very best writers will focus so intently on their practice that they don’t stop to think about the other possibilities that exist for them (Jacobson, 2000). Once they get hooked on the rush of illegal graffiti placements it is difficult for them to
stop – they see the work of other writers and have the constant urge to compete (Jacobson, 2000).

Writers will work on their pieces tirelessly, designing a piece for hours and weeks before putting it up in paint (Jacobson, 2000). Although graffiti has its own set of aesthetic conventions, writers work hard to break into a style they can call their own (Christen, 2003; Jacobson, 2000). As they find a style, they can begin to express themselves in a way that suits them; a personal goal of graffiti writers is to attain a letter style that is instantly recognizable (Jacobson, 2000). For writers, their style can always improve if they continually work on it (Jacobson, 2000). Occasionally, a writer will switch up styles or names to keep their work fresh, but consistent practice is needed to hone an effective and unique style (Jacobson, 2000).

_Graffiti as a marginalized literacy practice._

The concept of literacy practices provides a useful tool to expand the definition of literacy for language uses other than those involved in negotiating educational books and other published texts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Research focusing on literacy practices locates literacy away from a set of properties existing in the minds of individuals, and toward an understanding that literacy takes place in the relations between people and within social groups and communities (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Street, 1984). Recognizing literacy practices validates the socially constructed, variable, and contextually based nature of literacy (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Scribner & Cole, 1981). New Literacy Studies is the name commonly
associated with research on literacy practices and literacy events (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

At its core, New Literacy Studies maintains that the socially situated nature of language and learning is essential to a person’s literacy development (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 2008a; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Ivanic et al., 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Street, 1997). An individual’s understanding of literacy arises out of a personal desire for proficiency that create an initial awareness and make sense of a literacy, determined in part through the social institutions and groups surrounding that individual (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Graffiti writers develop their literacy skills in the actions they take as members of crews, observation of other writers’ work, as well as through sustained personal practice (Jacobson, 2000; Silver & Chalfant, 1983). The situated nature of adolescents’ graffiti learning makes the literacy aspect of this practice less visible (Barton & Hamilton, 2000).

Because graffiti learning takes place outside of educational institutions it is disregarded and marginalized as a literacy practice (Weinstein, 2002). The relative dominance of some forms of literacy over others prevents them from being recognized or utilized by those in power, especially formal institutions such as governments and education (Maybin, 2000; Trier, 2006). A lack of official recognition, as well as the situated nature of graffiti literacy and learning, can even prevent graffiti writers from identifying the literacy aspects of their public Discourse
Adolescents are continually engaged in and honing those literacy practices that dominate their own communities (Weinstein, 2002), and literacies in social contexts are usually performed in the service of an authentic goal (Ivanic et al., 2004).

Graffiti is a discourse community involving all the elements of a formal Discourse: identity, social rules and roles, behavior and dress codes, displays of membership, and reciprocal messages flowing back and forth between participants in the community (Weinstein, 2002). Graffiti, like all Discourses, is not a complete, static entity; it is up to the interpretation and subjective viewpoints of the social groups who create, use, or come into contact with it (Pennycook, 2010). Graffiti is a practice with local styles and perceptions, but one that is informed through global trends and broader issues as well (Pennycook, 2010; Brandt & Clinton, 2002).

Literacies, like learning, are socially situated, and can involve practices (the socially recognized or patterned ways of using literacies to accomplish tasks) and events (those activities that people actually do with literacy) (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983). The graffiti piece then, is the literacy event. The literacy practice consists of the careful selection of a name, hours of practice, specific placement sites for precise purposes, and the desire to connect with peers for social recognition and participation in a social group (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Scribner & Cole, 1981).
Graffiti in the lives of youth: Identity and education.

Literacies are dictated by communities of practice, and are bounded by the degree that a community shares a common understanding of that practice (Aguilar, 2000). Graffiti successfully passes along embedded messages to a target audience that shares in the construction and interpretation of the symbol system utilized in the generation of that message (Bruna, 2007). The messages in graffiti can include group affiliation, territorial boundaries, and the establishment of identity (Aguilar, 2000). Beyond a cultivation of identity, graffiti writers also write for pleasure – for the simple fact that they like the act of writing on a wall in a public space (Halsey & Young, 2006; Wolfe, 1998).

Graffiti gives youth control over a communication form – a way to speak to each other that is not regulated, recognized, or read by those in power (Christen, 2003). Indeed, many writers would prefer that no one else understand it and be able to read it (Christen, 2003). Graffiti and other marginalized literacies assist youth in developing and actively creating a “cultural fluency” (Burns, 2008, p. 253). Not only can graffiti be an act of resistance, graffiti literacy allows youth to proactively create both individual and group identities (Burns, 2008). Graffiti functions differently for different groups of readers, who can be arranged into a continuum of insiders and outsiders (Aguilar, 2000). An insider will be able to contribute much more to a graffiti Discourse than an outsider, and this proficiency confirms the writer’s identity as a graffiti writer and group member (Aguilar, 2000).
Rather than being seen as exclusively destructive, graffiti has also been shown to have affective elements as well (Halsey & Young, 2006). Acknowledging these affective qualities allows researchers to see how graffiti writing enables writers to be part of a larger movement, contributing to their sense of belonging (Halsey & Young, 2006). In other words, “To side with affect is to admit that graffiti connects bodies known and unknown through the proliferation of images” (Halsey & Young, 2006, p. 278).

The most meaningful connections for graffiti writers are those they share with their graffiti crew (Christen, 2003). In order to become proficient in any literacy, a novice needs access to and associations with experts in their chosen endeavor (Lave & Wenger, 1991; F. Smith, 1998). This association can be likened to an apprenticeship model (Rahn, 2002), and people who have been apprenticed into a literacy will display competency in that literacy (Aguilar, 2000). Generation after generation of graffiti writers use graffiti in ways defined as appropriate by the local Discourse (Aguilar, 2000). The pervasive, systematic, and consistent use of graffiti by youth demonstrates successful graffiti crew pedagogies at work (Aguilar, 2000).

As style and group membership begin to dominate a graffiti writer’s approach to writing, graffiti crews are where a writer turns to discuss aesthetic standards, consult on issues of design, and assess innovations (Christen, 2003). One of the standard methods of graffiti crew pedagogy is the use of black books, sometimes called piece books or sketch books (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). Consistent with
Lave and Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory, writers’ use of piece books allows younger, more experienced artists to learn from those whom they admire. Piece books are passed around at school or in private and held in high regard by their owners as well as handlers (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). The owner of the piece book will fill it with their own tags and pieces, and when the book is handed off to another writer, that writer will sign it as well (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). Through this process the graffiti community gets immediate feedback on their work, honors their peers, and passes on new styles and innovations (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007).

An example of the depth of learning that occurs through writers’ and crews’ use of piece books is the development of style (Christen, 2003; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007; Martinez, 2009). A writers’ style is an essential part of graffiti, and the primary vehicle for respect among a graffiti community (Christen, 2003). Beyond crafting their letters in unique ways, writers rely on other elements of style to enhance their letters. The specific combination of these elements allows writers to create pieces that define their identity as a writer (Martinez, 2009).

Some of the elements include, but are not limited to, overlaps, which allow letters to cover one another at specific points, usually at the top or bottom of a letter (Martinez, 2009). Serifs are known as the feet of a writer’s letters and have the same purpose of traditional type font serifs but with more variety in their directions and shapes (Martinez, 2009). Extensions happen when a writer stretches one part of the
letter out, and are some of the most essential components of style. They usually emerge off a serif and add mass and decoration to letters (Martinez, 2009). Connections pass between, under, or over letters, and add a level of complexity and flow to a word (Martinez, 2009). Bits are broken-off pieces of letters, emerging from serifs, extensions, or flourishes (Martinez, 2009). Finally, breaking points can be situated within the body of the letter and look like the writer has sliced up parts of the letter and shifted it out of place (Martinez, 2009). Arrows, three-dimensional effects, and shadows allow a writer to add further complexity and originality to their work (Martinez, 2009).

When conceptualizing and sketching their words, writers also look for balance and flow (Martinez, 2009). Balance is the continuity of style within all of the letters and a sense that the viewer’s eye will move freely around the word without halting in one spot (Martinez, 2009). Flow is the movement and direction of a piece; the letters as well as the whole word should have flow (Martinez, 2009). All of these techniques, conventions, and more are learned through direct experience with graffiti crews and creating graffiti in a public context (Rahn, 2002).

Learning in crews can be less obvious as well (Christen, 2003). For example, rules and conventions are established through crews, and these rules are collectively negotiated and consistently challenged by other crews who may have different rule systems and structures (Christen, 2003; Weinstein, 2002). Biting, or borrowing another writer’s style without permission, is an example of a rule system in place for
most crews (Christen, 2003). Generally considered an offense, some crews may approve of biting if the writer is young and inexperienced or if the writer pays homage to the original writer whose work was bitten (Christen, 2003). The full intricacies of the rule systems around biting are negotiated among members of a crew, who build and enforce their own rules and lay the boundaries of what is or is not acceptable (Christen, 2003).

Another example of a collectively negotiated rule within graffiti literacy is the notion of claiming (Weinstein, 2002). When a writer leaves a distinct mark on a wall or public structure, it represents the person or their crew, making them and their affiliations known; “one can represent one’s neighborhood, one’s school, one’s ethnic group, as well as one’s crew” (Weinstein, 2002, p. 29). Since these representations literally stand in for an absent writers’ presence, defacing another person or crew’s tag can have serious consequences (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007; Weinstein, 2002). Writing over another artist’s work or writing insulting remarks next to their piece is seen, for writers, to be identical to insulting the writer in person (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). Identity and text are so related that harassing a writer’s tag or piece is no different than harassing them in person, which can lead to inter-group conflict and significant misunderstandings (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). This interplay is understood by all of the participants in a graffiti crew, who have learned the rules from the older writers around them (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007).
The development of a graffiti aesthetic.

As writers actively practice graffiti literacy, they learn much more than the style and conventions of the Discourse (Halsey & Young, 2006). Through participation in crews, their own personal explorations with graffiti, and graffiti-based publications, writers develop an aesthetic that allows them to determine the intricacies and deeper meanings of their craft (Christen, 2003; Halsey & Young, 2006; MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). For example, graffiti writers have been shown to have substantially nuanced perceptions toward the evaluation of graffiti pieces. Both in their own works as well as the works of others, writers evaluate the skill, intent, and aesthetic qualities in order to determine the artistic value of a graffiti piece (Halsy & Young, 2006).

Writers also develop a different gaze of the urban landscape around them; one that looks at space not as it is currently, but how it could look when altered (Martinez, 2009). While most urban residents ignore the visual clutter, signage, and architecture around them, writers see limitless possibilities for future work in the blank spaces of the city (Halsey & Young, 2006). The addition of their pieces to the surroundings is not perceived by writers as destructive or distracting. “Rather, such activity adds to, and induces a performance from, otherwise lifeless spaces” (Halsey & Young, 2006, p. 288). The practice of graffiti literacy is not separate from the environment in which it occurs; indeed it helps give the space meaning to the people interacting within it (Pennycook, 2010).
To say that graffiti art is simply art placed in the street or other public spaces is to simplify the literacy too much (Riggle, 2010). Graffiti uses the street environment as an artistic resource, and graffiti artists are adept at reading the voluminous materials at their disposal in the urban environment and deciding which elements will make the most impact with their style and their audience (Riggle, 2010). In using the street, or objects found in the streets, as a material, the artist is intentionally embracing the potentiality that their painted message will be ephemeral; that their work will take on a life of its own as the urban community interacts with it in unpredictable ways (Riggle, 2010).

Within a graffiti aesthetic, the landscape itself becomes a kind of text, available for interpretation from a variety of readers who bring their own understandings of the landscape to their individual meanings (Phillips, 2009). As writers apply their pieces to this landscape-text, they attempt to add another layer of meaning to the surface of the environment (Phillips, 2009). In other words, the space has a subjective meaning depending upon who is using it and to what ends they are using it for (Pennycook, 2010). Graffiti writers have their own motivations for contributing their texts to the spaces around them, and these differ from other urban messages which seek commercial gains or official functions (Phillips, 2009). “In all these cases literacy is made available as a means of social exchange, writers demonstrate their awareness of their reader but reject the traditionally private nature of their message in favor of public writing” (Wolfe, 1998, p. 18).
Unlike many transgressive acts graffiti is not solely about destruction, but rather plays a larger role in exposing power distributions and analyzing public/private issues (Christen, 2003). Through their unsanctioned use of public space, graffiti writers create a dialogue on many levels, from inter-group communication to the overarching public debate over the use of public space. Crews and mentorships enable situated learning, but unlike conventional schooling, graffiti teaches writers to understand their part in civic power struggles and how to create alternative narratives (Christen, 2003). By acting out these narratives publically writers learn, to some extent, how to transform their lives as well as their community (Christen, 2003). In a particular location, the interactions of all the literacy practices and events, from writing on a wall to discussing it and creating laws about it, help to define what that space is (Pennycook, 2010). Graffiti writers take an active role in this definitional process, as they contribute their marginalized voices to a public Discourse in personally relevant and meaningful ways (Christen, 2003).

Conclusion

This literature review examined the ways in which literacy practices are socially constructed, how some literacy practices become dominant or marginalized in a particular society, as well as the problems educators face when attempting to make use of marginalized literacies in formal education. The review also identified what academic research has revealed about the complex social phenomenon known as graffiti.
Research on literacy has traditionally limited the definition of literacy to a technology of the mind that is independent of the social circumstances involved in literacy practices. The New Literacy Studies was brought up as an alternative model with which to view literacy, and helps to isolate literacy practices within the relationships between individuals and the socially negotiated ways in which literacy is constructed. The New Literacy Studies focuses on the context where literacy occurs, exposes power relations at work within literacy practices, and identifies the activities people do with literacy. Graffiti can be seen as a legitimate literacy practice from a New Literacy Studies viewpoint—one with its own socially negotiated meanings and conventions. A major goal of this thesis was to apply this sociolinguistic standpoint to the social Discourse of graffiti. Viewing the socially negotiated development of graffiti through a literacy lens broadens our understanding of literacy and learning, as well as the uses of marginalized literacies in education.

The following chapter is an explanation of the underlying methodology that I utilized while conducting the research and analysis involved in studying graffiti writers’ development in their marginalized literacy practice.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

When reviewing the relevant literature for my thesis topic, I continually encountered researchers seeking to expand the definition of literacy beyond the traditional educational model. Most people still believe that literacy is a technology of the mind, attained by anyone who simply has the capacity to activate it. I was heartened to read that there are many educators and researchers who feel that a socially-based theory of literacy paints a much more complex picture, one dependent upon context, on power relations, and the relationships people develop around literacy practices. As an Art teacher, I commonly saw a variety of communication methods at work in my students. More often than not though, only the traditional modes of reading and writing were honored at school, preventing many of my students from achieving educational success outside of my classroom.

My interest in expanding my understanding of literacy came from five years of working as an Art teacher at a small, rural middle school. As I got to know the population, I began to see that my students appeared to excel in their ability to encode and decode different forms of communication. Reading and writing predominated, but some students were particularly adept at reading social situations, developing unique artistic styles, or performing complex skateboard maneuvers, just to name a few. Some students were able to utilize their linguistic literacy skills for
success in other classes but struggled in my class with expressing their thoughts and ideas in visual modes. Other students excelled in Art but languished in classes requiring traditional forms of reading and writing.

I felt that the conventional definition of literacy was limiting educators’ understanding of the many ways in which students communicate successfully with peers and adults in non-educational settings. Students who were successful artists or proficient at text-messaging most often did not learn those skills at school. This brought up two questions for me. If they were not learning these skills at school, where were they being learned? Also, how could educators take advantage of these informal educational venues?

During my years of teaching Art, I was also participating in an underground, so-called alternative art scene. This experience exposed me to graffiti art and graffiti writers, and I was immediately impressed by the talent, tenacity, and dedication of these artists. Graffiti is an art movement that has been vilified in American culture, evinced by the heavy punishments handed down for any writer unlucky enough to be caught creating their art. However, I could sense that graffiti was also misunderstood and that beneath the spray paint there existed an intricate social web of communication – one so compelling that graffiti writers were willing to take great risks to participate.

I began to learn more about graffiti so I could use it in my art program. Specifically, I focused on the type of graffiti known as pieces. These large murals
are typically seen as the pinnacle of graffiti art, requiring extreme dedication to learn. Characterized by four- or five-letter words written in colorful, six-foot high letters, they represent an individual’s graffiti name or crew (see Appendix A for an abridged glossary of graffiti terms). Many types of graffiti exist, but throughout this paper I’m focusing exclusively on graffiti artists who write pieces.

As my understanding of graffiti developed, not only did I fall more deeply in love with the literacy practice, I also began to more clearly see its complexities and nuances. I noticed that pieces were a vibrant cross-over between traditional reading and writing methods and other more expressive forms of communication. Pieces utilize letters and words, clearly requiring at least a minimal knowledge of alphabetic literacy. Graffiti also has a strong communication aspect, although this communication requires specialized knowledge and is usually specific to certain social groups. In addition, graffiti has a strong individualistic nature as seen in the uniquely artistic interpretations of letters. However, these interpretations are bound by unwritten conventions developed through a socially-negotiated experience with graffiti culture.

Like the skateboarding students I had, I knew that graffiti writers were not taught how to write graffiti in school but still demonstrated impressive talent when creating their pieces. I also noticed that graffiti was popular and exciting to adolescents. I wanted to find out more about the lure of this anti-establishment art form.
I began my formal studies about graffiti by first researching alternative views on learning and literacy. These theories did not necessarily discredit or contradict traditional notions of these topics but expanded the definition of literacy to include communication forms like graffiti. I also began looking at the academic literature on graffiti and noticed that very little of it addressed the writers’ progression of skill development. When a writer’s education was addressed, it tended to be an anecdotal account meant to deepen the reader’s understanding of the context for writing. Few researchers were applying ideas of literacy to graffiti as well, although some were making a connection to the communicative elements involved in graffiti writing.

*Development of Interview Schedule*

In an attempt to get the most complete description of graffiti writers’ learning progression I felt that it would be necessary to conduct interviews with individual writers. Doing so would allow them to tell me, in their own words, the pathways they took to becoming proficient in this marginalized literacy practice. However, the interviews needed to be focused and productive; not simply a conversation about why graffiti writers write but an investigation into the dynamics of their development (see Appendix B for the complete interview schedule). The fact that graffiti is illegal and largely self-taught means that writers rarely divulge their tactics in print, not to mention academic literature. Therefore, many of my questions sought why and how writers broke into this insular culture, and what they did with their new-found information once there.
As I began thinking about the questions I would ask my participants, I turned to one of the few texts that focused on graffiti writers’ education. In her book *Painting without permission: hip-hop graffiti subculture*, Janice Rahn (2002) interviewed many graffiti artists about why they got into graffiti writing. I was particularly struck by Rahn’s use of themes to draw commonalities between the various interviews she conducted. Rahn used many themes in her text. Two of them, influences and motivations, seemed appropriate to my study. Additionally, I chose to include my own theme about the learning strategies used by my participants.

Although the graffiti aesthetic is sometimes co-opted for marketing purposes (especially in hip-hop culture), graffiti is not commonly advertised and promoted to young people as a creative, communicative outlet. Additionally, unlike school subjects such as math or English, graffiti is rarely made compulsory in traditional education. As such, a proficient writer had to be initially influenced in a way that made graffiti writing alluring. This attraction had to be strong enough to cause a desire to participate in graffiti culture, and I wanted to find out what originally lured my participants to begin writing. I developed ten questions that would seek the sources of this influence which focused on friends, family, media, school, and seeing graffiti on the street. Usually the question, “What influenced you to begin writing graffiti?” was sufficient, and my participants answered nearly all the questions without further prompts.
As with any highly skilled art form, once writers have been influenced to begin writing they must continue to actively write in order to develop proficiency in the literacy practice. Again, this development rarely occurs in traditional schools so writers must find some extrinsic or intrinsic motivation to hone their graffiti skills without the assistance of conventional educators. Writers’ motivations must also be powerful enough to resist the intense social pressure that seeks to vilify graffiti writing. For example, within my motivation theme I sought to find the answer to, “What motivated you to continue developing as a graffiti writer when there were so many reasons to stop writing?” My preliminary research indicated that participating in the culture of graffiti was deeply important to writers’ interests, so I developed ten motivation-themed questions focusing on the writers’ involvement in graffiti communities. Since many graffiti writers also identify with counter-cultural movements and ideologies, I also created three questions to explore the philosophical reasons why writers were motivated to continue practicing their craft. For many of the writers that I interviewed, the theme of motivation was the most difficult for them to articulate.

My third set of questions linked the inspirational and motivational aspects of graffiti writers’ development to their specific actions performed in pursuit of proficiency. I called these actions learning strategies. When designing the questions about learning strategies, I wanted my participants to describe the specific behaviors they utilized in their attempts to become better graffiti writers. Through personal
experience in developing artistic proficiency, I knew that a significant amount of practice would be necessary to attain requisite graffiti writing skills. Repetition and training were also common strategies identified during my research. However, any literacy practice has unique approaches used by practitioners to learn the particular methods employed in a successful literacy event. Graffiti is no exception. Accordingly, my questions focused on distinctive graffiti strategies I encountered in the relevant literature, such as black books (also called sketch books), mentors, writers’ benches, demonstrations (experienced in real time or watched on a video), critiquing and feedback from experienced peers, and biting (stealing) other writers’ styles. In my interview schedule, thirteen questions were focused exclusively on learning strategies. Since my participants’ learning strategies were usually conducted as specific events or repetitions of specific events they found this set of questions relatively straightforward and easy to answer.

Overall, the interview schedule consisted of forty seven following the three themes described above. About one-third of those questions had follow-up questions. The actual number of questions asked during each interview varied in accordance with the participants’ responses and the thoroughness of their answers. In some cases the conversation went in an unplanned direction and I asked questions that were not anticipated and did not appear on the interview schedule.

Validation of the interview schedule was conducted during a preliminary study which involved the use of a quantitative survey distributed over various graffiti
message boards. Responses to the quantitative survey were analyzed to determine the effectiveness of each question, its relation to one of the three themes, as well as the relationship of each question to the realistic development of authentic graffiti writers. The interview schedule was submitted to an Institutional Review Board where it was approved along with research limitations that are discussed in more detail in the Conclusion chapter.

Participants

Through preliminary research and a review of relevant literature, I found that graffiti writers are hesitant to speak to people outside of their tight-knit communities. I also learned through various sources that graffiti writers fall into a continuum of skills, with writers who make pieces being the most skilled. Since my research was seeking the development of graffiti writers’ literacy skills, isolating this highly proficient population seemed appropriate to the study. Together, my own limiting criteria and graffiti writers’ protective seclusion created a challenging task of identifying and selecting participants for interviews. Thus, I recruited my participants through convenience sampling as described below. A total of five participants were interviewed for this thesis. All of them were male, and their ages ranged from eighteen to thirty-eight years of age.

As an active contributor to the local so-called alternative art scene, I was familiar with a handful of graffiti writers whom I deemed proficient in this marginalized literacy practice. Two of my participants came directly from these
connections, and agreed to be interviewed after a personal request. One participant was also a talented local artist who granted an interview after being contacted by my first participant. My fourth participant was a former student who was relatively open about his involvement with graffiti and agreed almost immediately to a request for an interview. Finally, my fifth participant was discovered through family connections.

The participants’ occupations were as follows: two were full-time students, two were full-time artists, and one is an educator.

Graffiti writers commonly paint names that are self-selected and the writers involved in this study are no different. Each of the five writers I interviewed have at least one such chosen name, but for purposes of confidentiality I could not use their actual graffiti names. Instead, I asked them to choose a different name. The names presented in this thesis, then, are ones the writers picked in order to represent themselves in a confidential manner. To honor the writers’ identities encapsulated within their name, and to separate out the names of graffiti writers from non-writers, I am presenting their names in CAPITAL LETTERS. By utilizing capital letters exclusively when presenting their names, I am continuing an academic convention which previous researchers have established (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2006; Rahn, 2002). In addition, graffiti writers ordinarily use only capital letters to write their names, and I felt it only appropriate that their names be written in such a manner here.
Participant biographies.

To better acquaint the reader with the writers who appear in this thesis, I would like to present short biographies of each participant. These biographies are intentionally vague in order to preserve the participants’ confidentiality. They are listed in alphabetical order by the participants’ chosen thesis name.

CAPTAIN PRACTICE is an only child from a small town near California’s Sierra Nevada range. He has had a life-long attraction to art in its many varied forms. After some time in community college in the Bay Area and Philadelphia, he moved to Humboldt County to attend Humboldt State University. While at the university he became a distinguished artist, showing his art locally in solo and group shows every month. He now resides in the Bay Area and works for an alternative art group, traveling the country promoting their software.

GOMEZ grew up along the I-5 corridor in Northern California near the Oregon border. As a young man he was heavily involved in skateboarding and was a self-identified artist. In the early nineties he moved to Santa Rosa, where he met a graffiti writer and dove headlong into the local graffiti scene. He graduated from Humboldt State University, where he became a mentor to NOIR and participated in a graffiti crew with CAPTAIN PRACTICE. GOMEZ now resides in Northern California with his partner and their children. He is a full time artist.

KID4 was born and raised in Humboldt County in a happy middle-class family. From a young age he was interested in plants, sculpting, drawing and
trespassing. He is now attending a university in Southern California where he was exposed to an active street art scene. KID4 began to document the graffiti around him, and participating in the graffiti culture of his town is now a primary focus. After graduating from a university he is interested in running a food bus.

MUFASA is a freshman at Humboldt State University majoring in Art. He is originally from Los Angeles, and began his interest in graffiti while in elementary school. He is also interested in tattooing, counter cultural media, and community organizing. He has participated in several graffiti crews and is now a contributor to the Humboldt County graffiti scene.

NOIR was raised in a rural Northern California county. His first exposure to graffiti came from skateboarding and hip hop culture. When he moved to Humboldt County to attend Humboldt State University, he met GOMEZ, who helped mentor his budding curiosity in graffiti. He is currently living in Humboldt County, participating in underground art movements, showing work publically, and educating young minds.

Procedure

My research comprised of semi-structured interviews that lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes. Each interview was conducted in a space that was comfortable for the participant, convenient for the researcher, and quiet enough to be recorded for transcribing later. Interview locations included the participants’ homes, my school office, and my own home. Participants were informed ahead of time
about the three themes that would direct our discussion, and before I began the
interviews I repeated these three themes to ensure their understanding. To prevent
leading the participants into their answers, I did not share the interview schedule
with them ahead of time. As the interview unfolded I allowed the participants to
guide the discussion using my questions to help keep the interview on topic. All five
interviews followed the three themes in order, starting with the participants’
influences, moving into their motivations, and ending with their specific learning
strategies. At the conclusion of each theme I made sure to ask the participants if they
had any other comments to add, since I did not want to assume that my questions
covered all aspects of each theme for each participant.

Coding and Analysis of The Data

All of the interviews were recorded so that I could be free to focus
exclusively on the flow of the conversation. Once recorded, the interviews were
transcribed in their entirety. A copy of each transcript was sent to the respective
participants to ensure that they felt it an accurate depiction of the conversation. Once
approval of the transcript was granted by the participant, I moved on to coding them.

A program titled Atlas.ti (version 4.0) was used to code and analyze the
transcripts according to my three themes as well as other topics that consistently
emerged across all five interviews. I worked on each interview in the order they
were gathered, and after I finished coding the final interview I went back to the first
four to re-code using newer codes that had emerged since my first run through.
As I coded, I stayed away from generalities that characterized my three themes. In other words, while I kept my three themes of influences, motivation, and learning strategies in mind, I did not use those as exclusive codes. Instead, I let the transcripts tell me what was important and sought out connection points between my themes and the topics of the interviews. Eventually, once coding was complete, I began compiling groups of codes that seemed to fit into one or more of the themes. The chosen codes were picked for three reasons. Primarily, I used codes that were the most frequent throughout each interview. I also picked some codes due to their close relationship to one of my three themes. Lastly, some codes were chosen in a more intuitive manner because they simply stood out from all the others in unique ways.

The use of coding software greatly increased the number of codes I could keep track of, and allowed me to assign multiple codes to the same passage or to overlapping passages. In total, thirty-four codes were assigned to the transcripts. A few codes had only one or two references. The codes used for my analysis tended to have more references across all five transcripts. For example, the code for “insider group” occurred thirty-three times throughout all five interviews.

The following is a table describing the codes that were eventually used in my Results and Analysis chapters. The codes are named in column one, they are described in column two, and the number of times they were referenced in the transcripts is listed in column three.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number of references across all five transcripts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Artistic Inclination</td>
<td>Having a pre-disposition to artistic thinking that allowed the participant to see graffiti as an expression and not as vandalism</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing Graffiti</td>
<td>The experiences where each participant witnessed graffiti on the street in front of them.</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Countercultural Influences</td>
<td>Statements that indicated a frame of mind which set the participant against popular culture and favored anti-establishment ideologies.</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting to Figure It Out</td>
<td>The desire to see past the spray paint and come to a deeper understanding of graffiti. Also, the need of the participant to be able to create successful graffiti.</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insider Group</td>
<td>A desire to find a community of like-minded individuals who could share the participants’ passion for graffiti and perhaps teach them more about the literacy practice.</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fame</td>
<td>Statements that indicated the participant was seeking recognition either from his graffiti crew or the general public.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paying Attention</td>
<td>Having a general awareness of the messages inherent in graffiti, the elements that separated good and bad quality writing, and a propensity to draw influences from a variety of sources</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practice</td>
<td>Statements where participants explicitly mentioned practice as a learning strategy</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crew</td>
<td>Passages that described participation in a crew, a desire to be in a crew, or the learning that occurred within a crew.</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After identifying the codes I used for my results and analysis, I then proceeded to group them according to theme. The following table lists which codes were used for each theme.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Codes used for the theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivations</td>
<td>• Artistic Inclination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Seeing Graffiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Countercultural Influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influences</td>
<td>• Countercultural Influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Wanting to Figure it Out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Insider Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Fame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Strategies</td>
<td>• Paying Attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Crew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mentor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Biting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sketch Book</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Reference Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>References to having a mentor or being a mentor, as well as what that mentor provided in terms of skill development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biting</td>
<td>Explicit use of the term to indicate the stealing of another’s letters for use in learning graffiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Types of comments that the writers received about their work. It could be constructive, critical or cruel. Feedback could happen face to face, or be written on a wall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sketch Book</td>
<td>Statements where participants mentioned the use of sketch books as a learning strategy.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After grouping the codes by theme, I then sought to arrange the participants’ quotations in a way that enabled a smooth narrative yet allowed for each participant to have a unique voice. The results, being specific to the writers and not generalizable to a larger graffiti population, needed to be representative of the writers’ diverse points of view. I feel that presenting conflicting data was just as important as discussing areas of agreement. I also wanted the reader to be able to move through each theme in succession, so I held off discussing the linkages between each theme until the Conclusion chapter.

Conclusion

The interviews I conducted with each participant uncovered a great deal about the individual development of graffiti writers’ proficiency. The next chapter will provide an overview of the major themes described above and the overarching concepts and strategies used by graffiti writers in their skill development.
CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The primary objective of this research has been to investigate the progression of graffiti writers’ skill development as they participate in the marginalized literacy practice of graffiti. Unlike compulsory schooling which uses a formal system of meaning-making and learning to force certain literacies upon youth, the development of a graffiti writer is a voluntary endeavor. Being proficient in graffiti is not mandatory or required in the culture of rural northern California; in fact it can often be a liability. Therefore, I wanted to find out how each writer went from knowing nothing about graffiti to being competent participants in the local scene. What influenced them to get started and why? Once they had an interest what motivated them to continue to practice graffiti when there were so many cultural factors that told them not to? I also sought to discover, in their own words, the learning strategies that writers used to develop their skills and increase their competency.

With this rationale, I gathered data from five local graffiti writers through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. The interviews revealed intimate accounts of each writer’s personal journey and generated a tremendous amount of text to support their narratives. Some writers, especially the older ones, were much more articulate about their influences, motivations, and learning strategies. All of the writers were extremely receptive to a researcher who wanted to listen to their story.
The interviews were a validation of the writers’ membership in an exclusive and insular Discourse—one that is both technically challenging yet commonly vilified by the dominant culture. To interview them meant that I recognized their graffiti behavior as meaningful and important to their own identities as well as the collective nature of public communications and literacies. The voices of all five writers will be utilized in this section, although some writers are quoted more frequently because of their eloquence or their effective descriptions of graffiti development.

It is important to note that the quotations in this section were necessarily edited to draw out the most characteristic distinctions between each stage in the participants’ growth as graffiti writers. The participants did not draw definite boundaries around the different stages they encountered during the progression of their skills. Each writer began with an event or observation that influenced them to pursue greater proficiency, and some aspects of graffiti that most influenced the writers were also motivational for them as well. As they progressed in their skills, their influences and motivations naturally blended to allow a seamless pathway of improvement. While I have tried to use interview data to capture the complete sequence of a graffiti writer’s development, in the process of doing so I have had to insert artificial boundaries within this continuum to break up each phase into pertinent segments.

A final remark must be made about the language that appears in the various quotations used in this chapter. All of the writers used words that would commonly
be referred to as inappropriate for an academic paper. When choosing which quotations to use, I neglected judging the writers’ argot and focused instead on those passages that most meaningfully illustrated the stated objectives of this thesis. As such, many of the more illustrative quotations contain language that some may find objectionable. I have chosen to leave this patois intact to best represent the authentic voices of the writers. Editing their remarks would steal the individuality and distinct personalities which naturally occur through the writers’ use of spoken words. In the Discourse of graffiti, such language is appropriate and wholly condoned.

The results are presented in this chapter by first laying a foundational overview of the progression each writer travels through on his way to becoming proficient in the literacy of graffiti. This progression is then broken down into the themes that I feel best describe this process in detail. The first theme explores the specific influences that originally drew my participants to graffiti. The second theme portrays the motivational factors that pushed each writer to continue pursuing graffiti proficiency in the face of many cultural barriers. The last theme focuses on the learning strategies employed by my participants as they became more involved and sought to gain proficiency in the Discourse of graffiti.

*The Progression of a Writer*

Among all five participants in my research group, the choice to begin graffiti writing was just that: a choice. At no point was graffiti a mandatory activity imposed upon them; certain events transpired that led each writer to make a personal
decision that graffiti was an activity they needed to explore. As with many marginalized literacy practices, the initial spark of interest was distinctive for each writer. The events that inspired each writer are unique, and their progression from novices to amateurs to experts follows a similar path. Even so, the interview data indicate that each writer proceeded through a similar series of stages in their quest to gain proficiency.

Graffiti writers begin writing at different ages.

The path to graffiti literacy is a continuum from inability to proficiency and unlike grade levels in formal education definite boundaries for each stage of growth are absent. Additionally, as the writers in my study progressed through each stage, there were no common criteria for them to meet which indicated the end of one stage and the beginning of another. Two of the themes that I described in the introduction of this chapter (influences and motivations) are an attempt to define the early stages of a writer’s development, but they are by no means a complete picture of the process as a whole. Writers begin at different times in their life, go through different stages of development, and stay in each stage for a different amount of time.

MUFASA, an 18 year-old writer originally from Los Angeles, grew up in a home where his parents worked much of the time. As an adolescent with free time who was located in a geographical hot-spot for graffiti, MUFASA began writing at an early age. He said he began writing through
...kids on the block that I used to hang out with, I guess, when I was in grade school. So, I got interested through this one kid, and then he showed me this graffiti movie and I was like, “I want to do that!” It was just like eye candy. And I just started practicing. And I just like, little by little, I just practiced a little bit every day. In like class or on the bus or when I was at home or something. But I mean it was like something to do when I had nothing to do. Just like, as a kid... I was in LA so both my parents would work and I’d be at home most of the time alone. So I’d just draw and stuff.

MUFASA’s urban location and social circumstances allowed him to be exposed to graffiti at an early age. In his neighborhood, graffiti was prevalent and graffiti writers were available for him to learn from. MUFASA’s grade-school beginnings contrast sharply in this context when compared to the other writers I interviewed who grew up in rural locals.

Graffiti is an urban phenomenon that has spread across the globe at a rapid pace. In the United States, forms of graffiti can be found in nearly every community. Those communities furthest from densely populated cities may have traces of graffiti, but the writers in my study who came from these rural settings were not heavily exposed to graffiti like MUFASA, and therefore began writing later in life. CAPTAIN PRACTICE, a writer who grew up in California’s Lake Tahoe region, relied upon secondary media sources and trips to the San Francisco Bay Area for his early exposures to graffiti:
We were hearing about graffiti, but being from the cuts [the countryside] we didn’t know it. You know it was white town. With some Hispanic culture. And not, like no African American culture or experience at all. And a slight Asian culture. So, we were pretty fuckin’ white-bread. But it wasn’t a racist culture up there. You know, so, we were into seeing this other art and being stoked on it! And it’s kind of the cusp of when internet started coming around. In about 7th, 8th grade I started seeing the graffiti [in Oakland] when I’d visit. And then seeing it on the internet and liked being able to follow it just a little bit at a time. Like on graffiti.org and whatnot. I kind of found that in an organic manner and started following it a little bit.

Although his budding interest in graffiti had begun, he had no one to turn to for advice and expertise, so his skill development stalled. As he puts it, “Through high school I was really interested in it but [had] no one to teach me how to do it. And I just kind of fumbled through it.” It wasn’t until he moved to a larger city that CAPTAIN PRACTICE was able to find a community where his initial interest in graffiti could blossom into expertise.

NOIR shared CAPTAIN PRACTICE’s rural upbringing. He recalled being frustrated by the lack of a graffiti scene in his community:

It wasn’t until I moved up, here and went to HSU where I met some real graffiti artists from the city that I could, you know that could teach me more about the culture behind it, and what it takes to become a graffiti writer, and
like all of those rules and everything. It’s like down where I’m from down in the country we didn’t understand everything behind graffiti or how you even learn or—There was no one to be inspired by. It wasn’t in the streets around us.

NOIR, KID4, CAPTAIN PRACTICE, and GOMEZ were all raised in separate rural locations, and all four writers began seriously participating in graffiti culture after high school when they moved to larger cities. MUFASA was the only writer fortunate enough to be surrounded by graffiti culture from an early age, and so began writing before leaving elementary school.

Due to cultural and geographical factors, all five graffiti writers I interviewed began writing at different ages. Indeed, GOMEZ, who began seriously writing graffiti at age 18, highlighted this fact and considered it normal for the scene he was in. Speaking of his graffiti crew, GOMEZ said there was a spread of ages and just a spread of family income. Spread of where they lived in the town. Who they hung out with… there might be a rich kid and then a kid who was not rich…There was an age difference of probably three to four years. Some kids were still in high school, some were a little older. The delay GOMEZ encountered between his first experiences with graffiti and his eventual involvement in the practice was a shared feature for the writers who came from rural locations. The result was that graffiti crews commonly had a range of age levels, and that the age levels did not necessarily correspond to ability.
Graffiti writers attain proficiency at different rates.

Regardless of the writers’ age as they began practicing graffiti, certain factors caused some writers to progress more rapidly than others. Competition, resources, locations for writing, and mentors (or lack of mentors) were all elements in the speed of the writers’ skill development. Since each writer experienced a different mixture of cultural elements, each writer developed at their own pace.

When a writer begins participating in the literacy practice of graffiti, he or she is called a “toy.” Being a toy is a necessary stage in the development of a graffiti writer, similar to being an apprentice before advancing into a master. Unlike being an apprentice though, there is no pride in being a toy. Writers want to move past the toy stage as quickly as possible. In the Discourse of graffiti, there is no set definition of what makes someone a toy or not, and many times such labels are socially negotiated. GOMEZ explains it this way:

It’s more important for me that I label [whether or not I’m a toy]. …If someone calls me a toy and I’m looking at their style and I’m like, “Dude your style is not… You can’t say that about me. Either we’re level or like…” That even could be fist fighting. It’s more important to me if I’m like “Dude I’m toy, I need to go practice.” But then again there’s homeys that if they said something like that to me I’d be like, I’d really take that shit to heart and be like, “OK, I need to go practice this.” So I guess it kind of depends on how I respect someone that said anything about being toy.
For GOMEZ and others, drawing that distinction between being a toy or not is a very personal experience. Most writers would prefer to make that call themselves or have a respected writer judge their skill level, but the very public nature of this literacy practice means all observers are allowed to have their say.

All the writers I interviewed stated that they do not consider themselves a toy, but each writer also indicated how interdependent this label is upon the local graffiti scene, the competition in that scene, and how the label is socially constructed. KID4, the newest writer among my participants, was cautious when stating he was not a toy, but was quick to state that someone else may call him that.

I don’t really like to think of myself as a toy anymore but I’m sure some other people probably do. To me my work is like, lower-mid range of what I’ve seen, what’s around me. I mean I feel like I’ve come a long way… And I think, you know, in my opinion I’m not a toy anymore but in other people’s eyes I certainly could be.

A more confident writer would solidly state their position as a master, but as GOMEZ and KID4 point out, that label is certainly in the eyes of the beholder.

Every writer stressed that he was not a toy but that other writers, for various reasons, would not hesitate to call them a toy. The competitive and highly public nature of graffiti was experienced differently by the writers I interviewed. Some of the writers were more sensitive to, or dependent on, other’s opinions of their work while some ignored the judgment of outsiders. Even so, their individual perceptions
of their own ability were dependent upon the socially constructed conventions of graffiti. CAPTAIN PRACTICE put it this way:

I mean, when I was doing graffiti a lot I didn’t think I was a toy, even when I didn’t know a style. Just because I was developing really quickly and I knew I was gaining ground and if you’re gaining ground you’re becoming less of a toy with every step. There’s always going to be people that are better than you and hopefully you can aspire to be better. And hopefully you’re making the smart enough choices to not go over people that are better than you and to try and go over pieces that are better than you. Just for that ranking. Trying to rank in technique.

CAPTAIN PRACTICE was aware of the collectively established ranking system for writers in his area, and this awareness allowed him to feel more secure in his abilities as he developed his skills. He felt that his progression occurred more rapidly because he was following what he perceived to be the rules of graffiti within his social group.

The time it takes to progress from knowing nothing about graffiti to being respected as a writer is different for each person. For example, NOIR began practicing graffiti in earnest after moving to Humboldt County to attend university. He describes the process of moving through the ranks and eventually leaving the toy stage:
Toys often get crossed out just because they’re toys. Like, even if I don’t have beef with you and you did a really toy piece I’m just going to cross you out anyhow… And so a toy – they get crushed all the time because everybody’s, you know, anybody that’s a graffiti writer is better than a toy cuz a toy’s just a beginner. And, so once people stop going over your pieces so often, or stop just scribbling. People sometimes will just write “TOY” on your piece because you suck. Or just put a line through it. And they give you no respect. But then once people start leaving your stuff alone and talking about you, then um, then you can – you know you know the rules and you can move through your piece really quickly and you’re not messing up and your line quality’s good, and interesting fills. Then you kind of evolve from being a toy.

When asked how long it took NOIR to get to that point, he replied, “It was well over a year before – it was maybe two years before I felt like… Two years of lots of practicing before I felt like I wasn’t a toy anymore.”

By contrast, after moving to college, GOMEZ began participating right away with a crew that was highly competitive. He practiced relentlessly and followed more experienced writers on bombing (graffiti painting) missions to see how they painted. His crew would not allow him to paint until his skills were approved by the best writers in the crew, “Because it would make them look bad if you were doin’
something bad. And that was a no no.” As a result, he progressed very quickly and was permitted to do his first piece after only two months of participation in his crew. Not feeling like a toy was like doing a piece that everyone in my crew was like, “That’s dope.” You know that was like the time where – “Cool.” Like the confidence. Like when you get your self-confidence into it, that’s when you don’t feel like a toy. But there’s still, I look at some writers and I’m like “Holy shit.” The fool is so fuckin far advanced that no matter what I thought I’m a toy. I’m just a dumb pretentious mother fucker because I could never even think of that let alone how they even made it happen. So, yeah, I still feel like a toy. I guess it just depends on what I’m comparing myself to. In such a highly competitive environment being validated by respected members of his crew gave GOMEZ confidence that he was not a toy. However, he still reiterated the fact that the term is flexible, its boundaries ever changing.

All of the writers I interviewed progressed through the toy stage in their own way and for their own reasons. Some took longer than others to mature into writers, but even when they felt confident in their graffiti skills the competitive nature of graffiti kept them wondering if there was someone out there better than they were. The following section will examine the initial sparks that lead each participant to begin the arduous path toward becoming a graffiti writer. When the writers knew nothing about graffiti, what was it that called out to them? What caused them to make the choice to undertake this marginalized literacy practice?
At The Beginning: A Writer’s Influences

Moving through the world during their daily lives, the writers whom I interviewed came into contact with graffiti in a variety of different ways. Before they made the choice to write graffiti they knew it existed but their knowledge ended there. However, something drove them to pursue a deeper understanding of graffiti. Behind the painted walls there lay an allure that drove them to find out more and to eventually become proficient themselves. Each writer understandably had their own unique experiences that led to this point, yet similar experiences were shared among all of the participants in this study.

This section will focus on three factors revealed during the interviews that influenced the writers’ decision to begin writing. First, each writer showed a propensity toward appreciating and in some cases actively participating in some form of artistic expression. Second, all five writers spoke of the influences they took from seeing graffiti in an assortment of different media. Finally, threads of antiestablishment or counter-cultural outlooks were woven throughout every writers’ budding interest in this marginalized literacy practice.

Artistic inclinations.

All of the writers I interviewed stated that they were already interested in art before they began writing. This pre-graffiti attitude enabled an open mindset toward graffiti as an art first and foremost. NOIR probably said it best when he stated, “Why wouldn’t I try this? I’m already drawing pictures!”
When the writers saw graffiti, it was something that spoke to them on many different levels; one of those levels had a lot to do with the technical and artistic skills the writers displayed in their pieces. GOMEZ put it this way:

I was already an artist. I was into art, so I was like, “Damn, whatever those guys are doing is exciting.” I think that’s really what attracted me to it at first.

Having already self-identified as an artist, GOMEZ saw the creativity involved in graffiti and felt that he could add to the existing discourse that surrounded him. The time commitment required to become proficient in graffiti didn’t bother him. In fact, it was something he cherished—he had already developed the mindset of an artist, someone who invests hours, days, or years in perfecting their craft. In this way, it wasn’t just the community, the risk, or the fame that drew GOMEZ to graffiti, it was also the art of it.

You get addicted to a hobby that jazzes you the most. Also, I don’t know.

It’s a – from not only just using spray paint and shit but just being able to kick it at your house and draw. If you’re into drawing shit you could spend hours every day drawing graffiti. And that’s fun if you’re into it. Then you’re like, “Shit!”

NOIR was another writer who echoed GOMEZ’s attraction and appeal of drawing and practicing graffiti. For NOIR, the artistic qualities of creating graffiti
included spending time with friends and being social. It was something he looked forward to and enjoyed doing.

You know, like being a graffiti artist or a graffiti writer, you’re in to art in a sense. So it’s fun to hang out with your friends, drink beer, and draw. That’s fun. That’s appealing to you. Versus some people need to go out to the bars, have a good time, go dancing, or like go see a movie. Where it could be fun just to hang out with your friends and draw in each other’s sketchbooks and drink beer and listen to music. So that definitely helps - the whole social aspect.

For NOIR and GOMEZ, participating in graffiti culture meant much more than putting spray paint on a wall. Along with the creative aspect of practicing their skills it was enticing to have a dialogue with their peers and find something constructive to do with their time.

MUFASA also enjoyed the creative time that came from practicing graffiti, but since he began writing much earlier than the other writers I interviewed, his early attempts helped kill time while his parents were away at work. He also described his initial perceptions of graffiti in terms of fine art. He felt that graffiti had the same intensity of a painting that, I don’t know, say like Van Gogh or Picasso would have. And nowadays artists would like - someone is at that caliber with spray paint. Pretty much you can take it to that level and like, it’s pretty much the well-rounded medium that I prefer.
When asked why the medium was one that he preferred, he again used artistic terms to describe his attraction:

…it’s so easy to layer and go over and blend beautifully. Cuz the pigment - and it’s just like, air pigment. And that just creates like - you have so much room for error. And just like so much room to learn and create new techniques out of nowhere.

A few of the writers I interviewed also had artistic inclinations that came from being raised in artistic households. CAPTAIN PRACTICE was the writer who most embodied this early influence that enabled him to appreciate the form of the letters themselves. From his parents, he learned the importance of hard work and repetition. He also learned how letters could be expressive in their own right. He said,

I think one of the biggest things was I grew up an only child in a household where my mom was a calligrapher and a glass engraver, [a] graphic designer when they used Benday dots and lecher-set lines. She did all of her own hand writing. She’d do business cards. She engraved glass and did calligraphy on glassware. And she taught me calligraphy pretty early on. She tried to teach me how to have a nice formal handwriting. But it didn’t really work. But I knew to be aware of handwriting. My dad was a builder so he was always very tight and stringent about the stuff that he would build. So I kind of came up in an artistic, expressive household.
For CAPTAIN PRACTICE, looking at the world through the eyes of an artist came naturally. Seeing the beauty and creativity in letter forms was not difficult for him. In fact, it was something his mother had prepared him for – albeit for a different purpose:

…my mom had taught me Old English [lettering]. And through Old English I started to really see the connection to the Vato gangster graffiti, and I love that just in pure form. But I didn’t—of course I didn’t understand its intention, nor did I understand the background, historical reference. All I saw was the letter forms and how similar they were to mine.

For the writers involved in this study, graffiti was seen as much more than just writing on the wall. It was something they could relate to others with, spend time on, and appreciate. The art of graffiti was a compelling influence that grabbed their attention and held it. GOMEZ even expressed how he still sees graffiti as an artistic process – one that he continues to refine and improve upon:

Now I’m more on a—letters are more important to me than pretty much anything. And how to like also flip em, so they have more what’s called “adding funk” or whatever to the letter. That’s more important to me now than getting it where someone would—a message other than it’s just really for me. I’ll probably get more from it than anyone. I’ll take a picture and I’ll be like, “Awww yeah, that shit was cool, fuck. I like that shit that was cool.” [I’ll look at it] for hours. I really will! [His partner chimes in, “He just sits
there and stares at it.”] But you know I’m looking at it like, “Oh, could I have done that cooler?” Or, “Oh, I did that cool.”

Seeing graffiti: an optical influence.

By the time my participants were able to appreciate the artistic qualities of graffiti, it was already a pervasive cultural phenomenon. While four out of five of the writers I interviewed were from rural locations, they still had plenty of opportunities to witness graffiti in a variety of different media. From the urban settings they visited to the clothing they wore to the album covers of the music they listened to, graffiti visuals infiltrated their lives and captivated their curiosity. Indeed, seeing graffiti was the most common influence among all five participants.

KID4’s first experience with graffiti came during his senior year in high school. He ventured into a local hot spot for writers and found what he saw to be confusing and daunting, but its forceful imagery and technical virtuosity were compelling nonetheless.

I was really inspired by all the work. It just blew me away down there. I really was inspired by the fact that it’s just completely self-motivated. Like not for profit yet it was still so much money and time put into this. And I was like, “Why? Why? That’s so weird.” …It just blew me away. I didn’t even know where to begin. I couldn’t even understand their procedure or anything. And then, when I went to [college in Southern California], it’s like tagging is huge down there. There’s tags on every street sign and sidewalk.
… I was like, “Wow this is really cool!” I started noticing the same name in different areas. …[I]t was something that I saw all around me all the time and I just really wanted to be a part of it.

KID4 was fascinated and charmed by what he described as the “mystery” of the writers’ identity and why they were spending so much time and energy on something that had no apparent purpose. It wasn’t until he found a scene that he felt comfortable contributing to that he decided to begin experimenting with graffiti himself.

Similarly, MUFASA was influenced by his immediate surroundings, but the heavy concentration of writers in his local area gave him a more immediate channel to express his interest. He was not as hesitant to begin as KID4. MUFASA said:

I grew up in LA so, like, I was surrounded by graffiti. It was everywhere. And like when I was growing up the most prominent crews in LA were probably like MSK and CBS and like LTS and KOG. But I’d always like see a piece that they did and be like, “Damn they went up that rooftop,” or “They climbed up that billboard,” or you know like, “That’s insane! I wish I could do that.” And I could! And that’s how easy it is. Cuz like multi-billion dollar companies post their billboards on freeways and the cities and main streets. When someone like me or you can like buy some paint for like five dollars and go up there and do whatever they wanted.
CAPTAIN PRACTICE, NOIR, and GOMEZ were not so fortunate to have an immediate venue for witnessing graffiti on the street. “Of course it was nowhere to be seen where I grew up,” said CAPTAIN PRACTICE, although he could have been speaking for the other writers who were also raised in the countryside. For these rural writers, seeing graffiti on the street occurred when they traveled to urban locations like San Francisco. CAPTAIN PRACTICE’s first encounters came while he was still in elementary school, visiting his grandparents in the Bay Area. “Riding the BART, riding the busses, and seeing it. And it just blew me away that people would express themselves by writing on things.” As he grew older and began to spend more time in San Francisco by himself, he sought out peers who could direct him to important graffiti locations.

I met up with some kids that grew up in the city. And they were really into graffiti and they knew graffiti and I didn’t know shit about graffiti. But they would be like, “OK, let’s go down...” It was right after the San Francisco earthquake in ’89. Like this was like ’93. So they had torn out all the buildings, all the big buildings in San Francisco, and there was like missing teeth in San Francisco where the buildings were. And so the sub floors of these buildings were below street level. And we would climb down and see all this fresh gorgeous graffiti. It was the heyday! …I was fuckin blown away by the graffiti! [said with tremendous emphasis] And totally started picking up letter forms and being really stoked on it. And I can’t really think
about like what was the inspiration other than the fact that I was looking for
what my experience was at my age range.

For CAPTAIN PRACTICE and the other writers who came from small towns,
literally standing in front of graffiti pieces and seeing their dynamic, colorful letters
was an extremely powerful influence in their desire to begin writing.

GOMEZ shared the enthusiasm that CAPTAIN PRACTICE had when seeing
graffiti in San Francisco as an adolescent. GOMEZ would travel to the city with his
mom to go shopping and attend cultural events, and he fondly remembers his first
experience seeing graffiti on the street:

I would see graffiti and I was always like, “Damn, that is cool.” And
I was into hip hop you know, so I’d seen it on rap albums or you know, in the
background of things, and it was always like, “That is fuckin’ cool, whatever
that is is cool.” And then when I would see it in the city it would just blow
my mind. Like, damn, there’s kids that are going out on the freeway and
fuckin painting! So it was just like, I don’t know, I didn’t understand it other
than that. I didn’t understand anything else about it except that it was pretty
fuckin cool that kids went out and did that shit.

While GOMEZ had seen images of graffiti on hip hop albums and in hip hop
movies, witnessing it up close and personal was strongly influential. Even though he
didn’t understand the literacy practice at the time, simply seeing it in person spurred
him from being interested to wanting to participate.
NOIR was another writer who mentioned the influencing effects of hip hop music on his desire to begin writing:

Actually I’ve been thinking about that a lot, like what kind of influenced me to get into graffiti or why do I like that kind of artwork. …[T]he hip hop influence definitely is through the music and the movies that I would watch that like were about gangs in the city, like Boys in the Hood and stuff like that. And the music they played was hip hop music for those movies and that kind of music really excited me. And, graffiti is like the visual interpretation of hip hop. Some people that are into like hip hop and graffiti - that’s what they feel like, is it’s the visual interpretation of hip hop. And then like break dancing is supposed to - or graffiti letters are supposed to emulate break dancing moves. Like when people tweak their arms out, or do the wave or whatever, that’s kind of like the flow of graffiti letters as well.

NOIR’s artistic inclination allowed him to recognize the similarities between the aural, physical, and visual elements of hip hop. As an artist, he saw how the culture of hip hop was embedded in the graffiti that attracted him, and his desire to participate in hip hop culture was strongly associated with his desire to begin writing graffiti.

[I]t’s like hip hop music and the album covers. Like there would be - cuz I came from the country, so there wasn’t lots of graffiti in my neighborhood. But like the album covers were always awesome to me. There was graffiti on
a lot of album covers at the time, and seeing the graffiti in the background of the movies and stuff like that. And that made me want to do something like that. So I’d do it like on clothing at first, like just do my own graffiti letters on jean jackets or whatever.

Like GOMEZ, NOIR didn’t understand the intent behind the graffiti that he was seeing, but that didn’t stop him from trying it out. Even before he witnessed it in person, he began drawing his own letters so that he could feel like he was participating in the hip hop culture he saw represented in his favorite music and movies.

For the writers I interviewed, the graffiti they saw was truly exciting and inspirational. They wanted to emulate it and take part in the literacy practice, even if they didn’t fully comprehend what it was about. Graffiti was a positive element of the visual landscape they encountered while traveling in the city. It was a source of pleasure and entertainment – something they could look forward to. KID4 captured this sense of value that my participants saw in graffiti when he said,

It makes me feel glad. I like seeing graffiti everywhere. I wish it was covering every fence and sign and wall. It’s like just a whole - it’s like a code you know? Like, taking road trips. It just makes road trips way more interesting cuz there’s always something to read. You know, when you see someone’s tag that you never expected to be in a certain space. It’s such an interesting—just knowing there’s other people out there that get such
enjoyment off the same thing that I do. It’s really inspiring. And when I see someone that I—something that really looks really attractive to me or some tag that I recognize it really makes me want to go up and paint right next to it.

All of the writers in my study had seen graffiti in many different forms of media. Magazines, music, and movies played a big part in the writers’ early exposure to this literacy practice, but it wasn’t until they began seeing it in person that they were truly influenced to try their hand at it.

*Countercultural outlooks and their affect upon the writers’ influence.*

Graffiti is a literacy practice that commonly brings writers and governmental groups into direct conflict. Indeed, graffiti placed on public surfaces, even with something as ephemeral as chalk, has been outlawed in most municipalities. Writers face stiff fines and penalties, including jail time, if caught practicing that which they enjoy and identify with. Literacy practices always involve power relationships (Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic, 2000), and graffiti’s relationship with established powers is more clearly defined than most other literacy practices. Within the culture of graffiti, there are legal and legitimate pathways for writers but many writers also choose to paint in locations that are not sanctioned by authorities. In my research, I found a vein of antiestablishment attitudes that ran through the five writers I interviewed. Each one enjoyed creating what CAPTAIN PRACTICE called, “expression on the cusp of acceptability.” Although each writer has their own way
of framing the conflict that results from their literacy practice, this struggle is a major influence for some writers.

Among all of the writers I interviewed, KID4 was the most direct when speaking about his countercultural influences. He identifies with the illegality of it and sees graffiti as a way of connecting with his rebellious nature:

I’ve always been more into the more illegal side. It’s more fun for me to see someone’s tag on a street sign than it is to see someone’s work in a hidden—I mean it’s cool to see a secluded place but I really like the illegal nature of it because it’s more rebellion and art together. Which are two things I really like to think of myself as an artist and someone who’s against authority or something like that. So I guess those two factors made graffiti really something that interested me a lot.

KID4 went on to make a genuine connection between his actions and his beliefs:

I really like just being against, you know, like having some sort of—showing that I am against society or whatever. I used to shoplift a lot and I just really enjoy for some reason doing deviant things. You know, it’s the big part of the appeal for me was just knowing that it wasn’t allowed and if I was caught I would be in trouble. I don’t know, something about that just really inspired me.

KID4 strongly identified with the illegal nature of graffiti. For him, the literacy practice had a lot to do with exploring the intersection of power relationships
within society. He felt that he had a reason to rebel, and graffiti was a vehicle for his nonconformist beliefs.

NOIR was similar to KID4 in that he was the most articulate writer to speak out against the systemic vilification that graffiti writers face. A fiercely antiestablishment artist, NOIR participated in many activities that sought to undercut the authority of those who he felt didn’t have his best interests in mind. When queried about why he feels such animosity toward agents of social control, he expressed that the core of his beliefs stem from unjust actions on behalf of police toward skateboarders:

So I feel like for me it was hip hop music and skateboarding as well. And I feel like if you’re into skateboarding then you’re naturally into alternative culture, and [the cops] consider skateboarding vandalism as well. And I feel like, as a kid, cops or police were kind of who taught me to hate cops. And so like cops kind of taught me how to hate cops because of being into skateboarding. They would always harass you, and so even at a young age you grew up not respecting authority - not respecting cops. Because they would mess with me when I was just skateboarding and trying to do my own thing. And so I feel like they already kind of start putting you in a place to be kind of antiestablishment and to be more underground.

For NOIR, skateboarding was an experience that engendered disgust because of the way he was treated by police. As he matured, graffiti became his most
extreme venue for voicing his beliefs that creativity and expression should not be controlled.

I like the idea of just like, the anarchy aspect and just like, “fuck you” to the man. I’m doing something illegal right on the side of the street where you can see it and there’s nothing you can do about it!

NOIR was already attracted to forms of expression that openly violated dominant cultural laws and norms, and graffiti’s tendency toward illegality was an attractive influence for someone who wanted to unite his dissident outlook and his artistic talent.

GOMEZ, a former skater as well, validated NOIR’s statements about the link between skateboarding and graffiti. As he explained how “cool” graffiti looked to him as a kid, I asked him why it looked cool. He said,

I was a skater, so that kind of puts you on the fringe of the outlaw cuz you’re breaking the law a lot. And to me it just seemed exciting.

GOMEZ was drawn toward what he perceived to be the excitement of breaking the law and getting away with it. As I pressed further about whether or not his countercultural beliefs were truly an influence on his decision to begin writing, he continued:

I don’t know if I really knew there was a need for that, but I think that that was part of the attraction. And then once you’re in it, it’s kind of accepting. These people [in a graffiti crew] accept you for doing this. In a way, you
know? I probably would have still liked to do graffiti without [the
countercultural aspect], but it was part of it. It was like hanging out with the
crew or doing whatever. It was like, “that’s cool.”

Unlike NOIR, GOMEZ’s antiestablishment beliefs didn’t directly influence
his decision to begin writing graffiti, but he enjoyed the rebelliousness that came
with the territory. He went on to say,

I wouldn’t say it was consciously a part but I definitely, just looking at
myself and the history of myself, it was something that I was more attracted
to was like the counterculture.

While he may not have been able to articulate it as a young man with a budding
interest in graffiti, GOMEZ’s attraction to graffiti was partly due to its “outlaw”
nature. When he became a part of a graffiti crew and discovered that others shared
his outlook, GOMEZ was able to acknowledge the antiestablishment sentimentalities
within himself.

CAPTAIN PRACTICE, on the other hand, was conscious of his
countercultural beliefs, and as he got to know graffiti culture, he found that the
dissident attitude “fit right into…[his] social scene.” As a young man, he found the
illegality and risk exciting, even though his political views toward the literacy
practice may not have been fully formed. When speaking of his influences,
CAPTAIN PRACTICE was clear that he and his fellow writers had
this weird chemistry of “I could get caught doing this! Cuz I’m not doing it in a safe place. I’m doing it in a space that’s outside of the norm to get maybe noticed a little bit more.” And then just be part of that deviant culture that feels a little bit more fun and exciting than what your parents were doing and what your teachers are doing and what’s normal…And so you want to have that, that dialogue with people. It’s way more exciting than fucking going golfing, wearing a cashmere sweater and a fucking cardigan! Like, I was never into that!

CAPTAIN PRACTICE knew that he wanted to find a community of like-minded peers, and graffiti provided him an artistic group of people who felt the same way toward authority.

From the responses of my participants, it became apparent that the writers were drawn to the antiestablishment nature of graffiti. Some of them knew it from the very beginning and others came to terms with it through their ongoing experience with the literacy practice. While it was clearly an influence for some writers, MUFASA had other reasons for beginning to write graffiti, and called the countercultural aspect of graffiti “a luxury. It just comes with it.” The countercultural side of graffiti didn’t bother him or even excite him much, so it wasn’t central to his love of the craft. Other writers were extremely expressive about their desire to participate in graffiti for this reason, yet for MUFASA, it was not an influencing factor.
Each writer had to maintain his excitement about graffiti in order to find the wherewithal to continue writing. The following section reveals what motivated my participants to reach past their initial influences. In the face of so much public resistance against graffiti, what was it that motivated them to pursue this marginalized literacy practice?

**Taking the Next Steps: The Writers’ Motivation to Continue**

At some point in their lives, the writers involved in this study were exposed to graffiti in such a way that they were influenced to try it themselves. One writer, MUFASA, had close community connections with other writers and was able to find assistance in his quest for proficiency. The other four writers chose to practice alone or wait until they met the right people who could help them perfect their graffiti skills. In every case, my participants saw something in graffiti that caused them to push past the cultural resistance that marginalizes this literacy practice. In the face of legal penalties and social rejection, all five writers made a conscious decision to dedicate themselves to mastering the art of graffiti.

Among my five participants, three main factors emerged that motivated the writers to keep learning and pursue proficiency. NOIR and KID4 became so enamored with the countercultural possibilities that their initial influence motivated them to keep going even further. A desire to figure out the hidden secrets of graffiti was also a strong motivator that was revealed within the interviews; the writers’ influences piqued their curiosity to the point that they simply had to know graffiti
and graffiti culture on a personal level. Finally, all of the writers cited a strong interest in participating in the Discourse of graffiti. They wanted to become a part of the insider group of writers whom they admired. Nested within the attraction and culture of these insider groups several motivating factors were revealed. Many of the writers also stated that competition with other writers and feeling a sense of fame were central to their motivation to get better at writing.

*Counterculturalism as a motivator.*

For NOIR, what began as an influence has since become something to keep him motivated to continue writing graffiti. Through skateboarding and the process of writing graffiti illegally, he has developed a more nuanced relationship among his subversive feelings, the street-level nature of illegal graffiti placement, and the ever-present sense of being watched by law enforcement. Beyond simply expressing himself, graffiti has become a vehicle for demonstrating his unease with the ways in which he perceives our society limits people’s expression. He said,

> When I first did my first big graffiti piece like in an illegal place, as I was doing it I felt like cops should be coming any minute. “I’m doing something illegal, in public. There should be a cop like any minute, like coming around the corner.” Then nothing ever happened. Then it just like, something clicked in my head that we have this false sense of, I don’t know, protection or authority that’s all powerful and we have to do whatever they say or they’ll instantly like bust you. And I thought, “Well screw it! I’m doing it
right in their face and they can’t stop me. This is proof right here!” So that
was, that was fun. And that’s I think the connection to skateboarding. The
vandalism - cops fuck with you for skateboarding; always kick you out of
areas. But after a while of them doing that we’re like “fuck them. I’m just
going to go around the corner and come right back.” I hate cops. They’re
always messing with me. Yeah

NOIR told me that a large part of his desire to write graffiti comes from his
philosophy of “sticking it to the man.” He believes that graffiti should be legalized
and honored as a legitimate art form, and his determination to continue creating
graffiti arises partly from his political views.

For NOIR, what began as a reaction to unjust actions from the police became
one of his primary reasons for participating. NOIR’s countercultural influences
turned into his motivation to keep practicing and increasing his skills. Speaking
about the illegal nature of graffiti, KID4 also blurred the line between influence and
motivation when he said:

At the same time it scared me but it makes it more of a rush when
you’re actually painting or tagging something. Just knowing that it’s an
adrenaline rush knowing that someone could be coming to get you right now.
So yeah, at the same time that it kind of keeps me from getting really high-
profile spots, it’s also a big motivator for why I keep doing it.
Like NOIR, KID4’s rebellious nature is a good fit for graffiti. While he may not have the mature political views that drive NOIR’s writing, KID4 definitely shares his interest in breaking the law.

*Wanting to figure it out.*

Some people see graffiti as a public nuisance, something that disrespects public property and clutters up the visual landscape. For the participants in my study, graffiti called out to them. It was visually exciting and they could see a deeper meaning behind the paint. They were enamored by it – so much so that they decided to try their hand at making their own graffiti marks. All five writers in my study looked back fondly on their initial interest and the small steps they took to try and understand what graffiti was all about.

MUFASA stands out in this section as the only writer I interviewed who had the good fortune to be surrounded by other writers as his graffiti curiosity dawned. Additionally, being the youngest writer in the group, he had access to resources like magazines and internet sites that didn’t exist when the other writers began to take an interest in graffiti. He used these resources to his advantage, and described to me how he would

- just type in [a graffiti search] and … see it on [my] computer and learn from ‘em and check out different styles and see what other countries are up to.
MUFASA’s interest in graffiti also led him to try drawing it for the first time. Even when his drawings didn’t look good to him, he persisted and kept a positive attitude:

I mean like, well, to me like art is the mistakes that you keep. Or that you learn to keep. And like it’s just trial and error in a sense until you start learning how to sit down and actually read an art book and understand how to, like, conceive an image. And it’s just been interesting I guess, cuz I’m not really used to following the rules cuz graffiti has no rules. Well I mean it has rules but in a sense not really.

Eventually MUFASA felt comfortable enough to turn to his friends for advice. As he did so, he began to see his efforts take shape into something he could be proud of:

I would develop differently from like people that were of different calibers. Cuz like, people that were better than me I’d always try to like learn and like have them teach me kind of thing. And like try to understand like a certain formula I guess. Cuz to me when I’m drawing letters… at first I was just drawing letters, you know, like just drawing lines randomly. But as I got more into a more disciplined state I started to like try to formulate concepts and actual structures of the letters instead of just details. But, I mean when you get caught up in the details it’s just like too much. So I try to learn how to balance that.
During the time that MUFASA went through the process of figuring out graffiti, he took full advantage of the many resources at his disposal. The other writers I interviewed weren’t so lucky. They had to dig deep and keep trying to get better in the absence of friends, magazines, or the internet. As NOIR put it, “I didn’t have anyone to teach me or any like, outside influences in the street or anything.” As a beginner, he didn’t “understand graffiti culture all that much.” However, that didn’t stop NOIR and the other writers from “wanting to go put our little tag up everywhere.”

In their efforts to figure out graffiti, my participants went to the places where they saw it: the streets. They didn’t understand why other graffiti writers were choosing to spray paint on public walls, but they emulated their predecessors nonetheless. GOMEZ described it this way:

I mean there was times when we’d steal a can of spray paint and go walk around town and write fake names or whatever. But not anything established. Just something spur of the moment or something we saw like, “Free Africa” from Public Enemy or something. Like, “I don’t even know what that means but I’m writing it!”

CAPTAIN PRACTICE had a similar beginning. He and his friends were charmed by the graffiti they saw in the various media around them, as well as the pieces they saw as they visited larger cities. In an effort to learn more and create
something they thought might be graffiti, he also ventured into the public realm for practice:

I would do fuckin’ vandalism on the weirdest shit. You know? Like, we’d drive down to the bridges over the rivers and paint. You’d go buy 99-cent cans at Wal-Mart and then go paint. And we didn’t know anything about quality. You know, no one was teaching us how to do it. We didn’t have any mentors. It was just a few of us. Like kind of me in the lead.

The sheer excitement that CAPTAIN PRACTICE and GOMEZ felt when looking at graffiti motivated them to give it a try. Even when they didn’t know what they were doing, these early moments of practice formed a foundation for their future proficiency.

KID4 also had a desire to learn, yet he was isolated from other graffiti writers and didn’t know where to begin or how to practice. After his initial influence grew into a desire to write graffiti himself, KID4 began searching out other resources to learn from. Similar to MUFASA, KID4 tried out graffiti videos and websites, but found them unsatisfactory:

I’ve watched videos of people … but I never really - I don’t really have the patience to do step-by-step following someone else’s letters. I don’t know, I really - it’s kind of fun for me to just figure it out on my own. I feel like it’s a little slower. But yeah, I guess I’ve seen a lot of videos of people in action but I don’t take notes and try to follow what they do.
KID4’s independent nature prevented him from being able to simply copy the styles and processes of other writers he saw in videos or on the street. Still, he was determined to get better at graffiti, even if going alone meant taking longer to master the literacy practice. The following passage clearly illustrates how excited KID4 was about graffiti, and portrays the conscious choices he made to push past the barriers that stood the way of his mastery. This passage also highlights the way in which KID4 relies on the work of other writers to gauge his development:

Well, I guess [what motivated me was] just the idea of getting bigger and bigger. Because at first I just started out with a sharpie. You know, you can barely even see it. It looks like crap. And then you know I went to bigger markers. And then started getting into paint, um, spray paint tagging. And once it was to that level I made a throwie, a little throwie. And then I, you know, I was - always in my mind I wanted to get into the level of piecing cuz I really see that as the most attractive form of graffiti… I always wanted to get that skill but I never—I feel like I’ve been working at it indirectly…

But you know I’ve always—people who I admired really influenced me to want to get better, to get to their level. And its fun to see art that people have made, and I kind of like, I don’t know, judge myself against it. Like, “Oh, how does my art compare to this?” Just wanting to be one of those people that I really respect.
When I asked KID4 to summarize what truly motivated him to keep going with graffiti, the answer was simple; he wanted to get better.

I always want to get better and I feel like every couple months I can see that my style’s gotten better but it’s really not to a place where I’m confident in my skills yet. I’d really like to be - I feel like I’m a decent tagger now but I would really like to be a better piecer. It’s like a completely different realm. It’s like more, you know, multiple colors, 3D, you know, a lot more - just way more elaborate. It takes a lot more paint which is why I haven’t really - I’ve probably done like fifteen pieces but I’ve probably done hundreds or thousands of tags cuz it’s a lot more cheaper and faster. But I would like to be a better, you know, better piece and go bigger I guess.

Getting better at writing graffiti was a primary motivation for all of my writers, yet there was a paradoxical hurdle. How does one get better at a literacy practice with no established rules and no formal system for learning it? CAPTAIN PRACTICE made this clear when he told me that, “…through high school I was really interested in it by no one to teach me how to do it. And I just kind of fumbled through it.” CAPTAIN PRACTICE was looking for ways to improve his graffiti writing but this was difficult because,

I didn’t really have a lot of peers when I was first starting, so I didn’t have a designated style. I experimented with so many things from so many different
inspirations… and so my motivation became just drawing and putting all of those elements together.

For the writers in this study, the simple act of drawing and practicing was their first foray into the act of producing graffiti. Whether it was alone or with other friends who also wanted to figure it out, each writer was so enthralled with the idea of graffiti that they were determined to get better. Four out of five of the writers I interviewed noted that the absence of mentors or graffiti media left them with two options: to go at it alone or give up. Their desire to become involved with graffiti was so strong that they all chose to continue finding ways to get better. So, they pushed on with surprising dedication. CAPTAIN PRACTICE put it this way:

I was working at the golf course at the time so we would be sitting a lot. And like we would draw on score cards all the time. Day in and day out. We’d just be practicing our graffiti letters in sketchbooks and drawing on Styrofoam cups. And just like teaching ourselves through just whatever influence we could find.

Little by little, each writer began to see an improvement in their skills and started to understand the basics of letter forms and graffiti customs. KID4, who compared himself to other writers to see how he was doing, also compared his new work to the work he did as a beginner. “I look back on my old tags,” said KID4, “and just wish they weren’t there any more cuz they’re ugly to me [now].”
The writers’ self-study helped move them forward while they were still beginners until they were at the point of no return. Each writer was hooked as he saw the gradual advancement he was making toward proficiency in the marginalized literacy practice.

*The attraction of the insider group.*

Even though each writer was independently working towards proficiency through practice and personal study of various graffiti media, they longed to enter into the culture of graffiti. Intuitively, they understood that the only way to truly become an expert was to break into “the club,” as NOIR called it. “There’s always that outsider/insiderness to it to me,” confessed CAPTAIN PRACTICE. Indeed, access to an insider group of established graffiti writers proved beneficial for two main reasons. First, it provided camaraderie among writers with a common interest in graffiti and allowed them to create a shared culture of meanings and understandings. Second, being a member of the club provided access to graffiti experts from whom novice members could learn. This benefit will be discussed further in the next section on learning strategies. Third, competition among and within groups of graffiti writers drove my participants to try harder and practice more. Finally, the thrill of having other writers see their graffiti gave my participants fame. This addictive feedback loop strongly motivated them to continue writing.

Graffiti surrounds most people throughout their daily lives, but many choose to ignore the little scribbles here and there. The writers I interviewed look at the
world through a different set of eyes. They are constantly drawn to the public marks made by others, and they attempt to put the messages together in order to get a more coherent picture of the local graffiti scene. KID4 put it this way:

You know most signs are there to tell you to do something and graffiti really doesn’t have much of a point [to most people] so most people don’t pay attention to it. But when you start paying attention to it, it’s really, it’s almost like a secret that’s there for everyone but not everyone cares to look at it or understand it.

Despite the fact that much of their communication takes place on public surfaces, the average person tends to ignore the tags, throwies, and pieces that graffiti writers produce. CAPTAIN PRACTICE put it this way:

You know, there’s an inherent fuzzy line to fucking up a letter because if you take away the legibility of something that someone expects to be able to read, then they’re automatically going to perceive it as something they either shouldn’t be reading or it’s a secret and they’re not accepted into it.

For the writers, this level of secrecy is fine. They enjoy having what KID4 called a “code.” It creates an exclusive network of people who revel in knowing what the code is, who produced it, how to read it, and what it means. NOIR said, Well like it’s like a club, you know it’s like a club that not everyone—like a secret club that is underground that not everybody knows about. So you feel like you’re part of this society, this culture that not everybody knows about
and it’s underground so it’s kind of secretive. All that kind of stuff is cool and it’s interesting.

Many writers take great pride in being a part of graffiti culture. GOMEZ, the oldest writer I interviewed, was smug about the connections he had among the graffiti community when he began writing. Before the internet and pop culture produced a plethora of graffiti media, graffiti was strictly understood and perpetuated by those who had dedicated themselves to learning the craft. Participating in the Discourse of graffiti meant that one had invested the necessary time and effort that this demanding literacy practice requires. For example, NOIR had a strong desire to be a part of the insider group but it wasn’t until he went to college and met the right people that he was able to break into the scene. He had to prove himself competent in order to do so:

Once I got [to college] and started hanging out with other graffiti artists I just got more into practicing and I wanted the identity of being a graffiti artist. I wanted to be able to say I’m a graffiti artist and not just be full of shit. So I’d be hanging out with other guys and someone would walk up and [say] “Oh are you guys graffiti artists?” And then everyone—I was the only one who wasn’t able to say yes. “Yeah, we’re graffiti artists except for him. He’s not.” I…[was] just hanging out with graffiti artists and doing graffiti in my sketch book and stuff.
For NOIR it was important that he learn to paint graffiti on the street and not just in his sketchbook. Because of this, it took him a long time to feel like he could call himself a writer, especially when he compared himself to other local writers.

All of the writers I interviewed stated that the best way to learn how to create authentic graffiti was to meet up with other writers and share their knowledge.

“Well, that’s where the friends came in,” said MUFASA, “they would teach you.”

This need to find a social group was more than instructional in nature though. Passing down graffiti lore and instructing those new to the scene was an important aspect of the insider group, but writers also sought out others simply to share their love of the literacy practice. CAPTAIN PRACTICE enjoyed being a member of many different art scenes while he attended college, and he compared graffiti crews to other art groups that coalesce around a particular topic or medium:

…talking with graffiti writers is just like talking with watercolorists if you’re doing watercolors or oil painters if you’re doing oil, or figure artists if you’re doing figures. Dancers if you’re dancing. It’s just camaraderie - a way to touch base I guess.

GOMEZ also shared with me his double-edged desire to be a part of the graffiti community. I asked him if he chose to be a member of the club simply out of skill-building necessity, or if he truly wanted to be a part of the community of writers.
I definitely wanted to be a part of that community. And it was awesome, just a group of dudes who are into that so hard. It was just a rad - probably if you’re just into anything, if you’re into role playing dice or whatever. It’s like you meet someone and all of them are better than you. For me it was like I really wanted to be in that and I really wanted to get better and better.

The writers I interviewed view the social scene as essential for someone who wants to become the best writer they can be. Writers work together to motivate each other and the group enables younger, inexperienced writers to connect with masters who can show them the ins and outs of graffiti culture. When GOMEZ moved away from his small town to attend college, he wasn’t intending to become a graffiti writer but fate played him a hand he couldn’t refuse:

I probably never would have got any further than [a simple interest in graffiti], but in 1992 I moved to Santa Rosa to go to junior college and randomly my first night I was there I ran into a graffiti writer who was a skater and he saw my art and was like, “Dude, you should do graffiti, this would be perfect for you!” I did characters at that point and he kinda took me under his wing and I joined a crew. From then on it was non-stop.

GOMEZ credits that chance meeting with starting his writing career: “for me, it started in the crew that I got into.” Graffiti was something that was so enticing to GOMEZ that he was willing to put in long hours practicing to impress his peers. His
crew demanded high-quality work, and they would not let him paint until he had proven his commitment through non-stop practice.

I was into it enough where, fuck, I would sit there and tag on pieces of paper for five hours a day at nighttime. You know, that’s what I did. So yeah, it was a choice - something I wanted to do; I didn’t feel like I had to. I saw other writers come and go. You know, they’d start and then get better and then you quit or kinda get shut out. Eventually people aren’t gonna want to hang if you’re not doing any better. Everyone’s—the fabric that held everything together of the people that I hung out with was graffiti.

GOMEZ felt that meeting other writers and participating in a crew was essential to a writer’s development. Without that support and camaraderie he wouldn’t have made it in the highly competitive scene he began in. His story of collective learning is similar to three of my other participants. As it turns out, GOMEZ, MUFASA, NOIR, and CAPTAIN PRACTICE were fortunate to meet other graffiti writers in their area. KID4, the newest writer, has not had that kind of luck and his desire and struggle to find a graffiti crew are emblematic of the quest for entrance that each new writer undertakes.

KID4 began writing after being inspired by graffiti that he saw in a local hot spot. It was right after high school, and he asserted that he was captivated by “the idea of having someone see it and not know [who] it’s from. …Just like the mystery of ‘who did this?’” KID4 knew immediately that he “just wanted to be a part of it,”
but he was also aware that he’s “a pretty shy person.” Without a crew to learn from, KID4 relied upon his own motivation and various graffiti media to teach himself the ins and outs of graffiti writing. Graffiti’s lack of formal social procedures allowed him to participate freely, since he saw graffiti as providing “a place for you even if you’re not good. …You can participate even if you’re horrible.” As a result, KID4 is largely self-taught yet keenly aware of the communicative nature of his graffiti efforts. He knows that the writing he does will be seen by other writers, and relies heavily on graffiti’s public messages to gain a deeper understanding of the local writing culture.

It feels really cool to be part of this [scene]. It’s like a community but it’s like not really a community cuz no one really, a lot of people don’t know each other. Their identities are hidden basically by the fact that they make alternate names for themselves. So, I feel like I’m part of a community even though I don’t know the vast majority of the people who I’m interacting with.

KID4’s desire to participate was so strong that he was willing to find a way into the graffiti club even if it meant finding that way on his own. He admits that the solo route is “a little slower,” but he also feels like he has no choice. He’s learning what he can from the public dialogues that occur on the walls of his town, but he craves for the companionship of other writers.

I’m not really a big part of the graffiti community I would say. I don’t really know many other writers… I’ve always wanted to, you know, be friends
with other graffiti artists. Just because it’s something that I pay a lot of attention to and I think about a lot, so it’s really fun when I can meet up with someone else who knows what I’m talking about or understands the appeal.

CAPTAIN PRACTICE reflected the fact that, for graffiti writers, the act of learning graffiti is both an individual as well as a collective endeavor. “I think that it’s this esoteric thing where you feel really proud about the progress that you’re making and no one can really judge you,” he said, adding, “other than people in the scene.” Although KID4 relies on solely on other writers’ physical marks for communication, his attraction to and feeling of community with the local graffiti culture is similar to the other writers lucky enough to have crews.

GOMEZ agreed that many writers are motivated by the reactions they will get from others within the local graffiti scene:

Graffiti is really for other graffiti writers for the most part. You wouldn’t do it if there wasn’t someone else out there that understood what you were doing. Even if they were your worst enemy or whatever – your competition – it’s for them.

The impact of becoming a member of the insider group on my participants’ motivation cannot be overstated. As young writers looking for guidance, the graffiti scene had an allure of mystery and secrecy that was extremely attractive to someone wanting to figure out the complexities of this marginalized literacy practice. Once writers became active in the Discourse of graffiti and found a group they could
connect with, they were able to learn from more experienced writers. They were also able to find a venue to discuss their shared love of the art form.

Still, graffiti is a personal endeavor – writers must stick up for themselves and continuously prove their worth through public expressions demonstrating their technical skill. The competition to be the best writer within a crew or between crews can be overwhelming for some writers. However, a majority of the writers I interviewed saw it as a motivating factor in their development of graffiti skills.

*Competition as a Motivator.*

Graffiti writers who have put in the time and effort to master their craft are adept at recognizing the difference between strong graffiti pieces and the poor quality expressions that toys make. A primary motivation for the writers I interviewed was to impress other proficient writers in the graffiti scene. The public at large might not be able to appreciate the subtle differences between competencies, but that didn’t matter to the participants in my study. More than anything, they wanted to excite and astound their peers. The rivalry can be intense, and writers can be harsh toward those who haven’t yet become proficient at the literacy practice. GOMEZ put it this way:

…you don’t want your shit to be the weak one, you want it to be the one where people are all “fuck, this is awesome…” [makes an amazed-looking face]. And that’s almost more so for just graffiti writers, not just the public in general. Because I could see how if you didn’t have the idea [of what made
one piece better than another] it wouldn’t matter. Pretty colors would matter.

[The expression of technical skill] was specifically for other graffiti writers when they looked at it. Which most graffiti probably is.

All five participants in this study identified the competitive elements of graffiti writing. While only three out of five of my participants (NOIR, GOMEZ, & KID4) viewed it as a motivator, they all agreed that competition was another essential component to improving their skills. Again, GOMEZ was the most articulate writer when he explained why competition was so critical:

Competition is like the only thing that makes you go better and better. As hard as it is to be self-motivated I think competition is essential. You don’t get better unless you try to get better. If you have competition and you really want to beat that person you try harder…all the time, you know? It’s like, we learned that cuz we were in graffiti and it was like, “fuck man, I’m not gonna try any harder than this guy, and he’s trying hard, so…” I don’t know.

Competition is important. Probably just like in anything. Sports or whatever. Another writer, NOIR immediately made a connection between competition in the sport of skateboarding and its counterpart within graffiti:

Yeah I think that motivation - it is kind of like a competition. Like a skateboard competition or something. You do a bunch of tricks and you get second place. Whoever got first place can do more tricks than you, so you’re going to practice your tricks so that you can be best by next time.
NOIR went on to explain why competition is personally important to his motivation as a writer. When asked if he enjoyed the competitive elements of graffiti writing, he responded excitedly:

Yeah, it’s motivating and ego driven, like the competition. Like, more is better, whoever’s got the most is better! Whoever’s bigger, has the most, is the best. And so you see…someone else’s pieces and you’re like “Shit, that guy is better than me now cuz he’s everywhere. So now I gotta put up more pieces then him so I’ll be back on top."

Within many communities of graffiti writers, the writers with the best skills continually try and paint over writers of lower quality. While this can create conflicts (known as beef) between writers, or between groups of writers, it is part of the process of learning how a community of graffiti writers operates. By far, NOIR had the most motivation from competition, and he enthusiastically described how it helped him become a better graffiti writer. He told me that competition is…also how you learn. Like, someone will go over your piece, you gotta come right back, go back over their piece. And they go over your piece, you come right back and go over their piece. And so beef definitely gives you motivation cuz I’m not gonna let my piece be scribbled out for very long. I gotta fix that so no one can see someone dissin’ me. And so that beef kind of helps you become motivated. I mean like, “Screw it. Now I’m gonna go over every piece I see of his! Just everywhere I see that piece. Even if I’m
doing twice as much as I was last week cuz now I just hate this guy. I want to go over all of his pieces and destroy them all!”

While NOIR and GOMEZ relied on competition to motivate them to go bigger and better, I feel that it is important to note that not all graffiti writers feed off the beef. CAPTAIN PRACTICE and MUFASA both stressed that they prefer to stay out of the drama that can complicate graffiti scenes. For them, graffiti was more personal and not an opportunity to try and one-up another writer. CAPTAIN PRACTICE simply appreciated being able to add his own ideas to the public discussion. “I’d try to be really clever about it,” he told me, “so it would be like part of the graffiti conversation versus part of the obnoxious vandalism expression.”

MUFASA accepted competition as the reality of participating in graffiti, but he resisted the pressure to get involved in conflicts with other writers.

Yeah, like, it’s just the nature of graffiti. …if someone went over me I guess I wouldn’t really care cuz I could always paint again. It’s a cycle, but people get stubborn and bubble headed. You know, like, if I catch a tag and then you catch a tag next to me, it doesn’t really matter. Of if you cross me out I’ll just catch another tag over here. You know? Exactly. If you can’t laugh it off then what’s the point of doing graffiti?

Fame as a motivator.

In the Discourse of graffiti, the idea of fame is closely linked to competition. One of the reasons that writers are so competitive with each other is because they
want to be the writer with more pieces than any other writer. All of my participants expressed a desire to see their work up for as long as possible. After all, if a writer’s name gets covered up, then his effort to express himself is lost. “Placement is crucial,” KID4 related to me, “cuz if you get a spot on a highway thousands of people are gonna see it. If you get a spot in a back alley maybe…no one that cares will ever see it.”

Within graffiti culture, fame is the desire to be known; to be recognized. For the writers I interviewed, it was much more important to be famous amongst other writers than to be known by the public at large (it is worth pointing out however that my participants also expressed pleasure at hearing their graffiti name mentioned in public or enjoyed watching people check out their latest piece). The fame that came from graffiti writing was closely associated with how my participants gauged their own writing skills, and it gave them a feel for how their work was being perceived by others, especially writers they looked up to. MUFASA said that when he saw his work around town he’d always get excited and be like, “Oh yeah look, I did that!” But I mean, like before, when I was just getting into it it’d be all about “Oh yeah, the fame!” Trying to get up. Only the small community of people actually saw it and like knew who you were. And I guess that recognition of like, you exist. You’ve been somewhere that someone else has been. People start to notice and get recognition.
In his interview, MUFASA said that neither fame nor competition were central to his love for graffiti. However, he told me that when he was a beginner, the fame and recognition he received from other writers was critical to his motivation.

KID4 acknowledged that the insider-communication between graffiti writers is a big motivator for him. In this quote, he also demonstrates how the insider-group mentality lies at the core of both competition and fame:

Well, I think that if I didn’t see any graffiti around [town] I wouldn’t really be that inspired to write my own graffiti because I would feel like no one is really paying attention to it… It’s partially for my own enjoyment that I write, but it’s also because I know other graffiti artists and I guess other people in the community, but mostly graffiti artists will see it. And, you know, hopefully they’ll start to remember my name.

Like advertising for small businesses or large corporations, the only way a graffiti writer will be known around town is to have as many pieces up as possible. KID4 called it a game, saying, “graffiti is kind of a game in the way that you are trying to, you know, get your name out there more than other people or as much as you can.” CAPTAIN PRACTICE put it this way:

[M]y motivation just became like…to get noticed and to have our own free voice. And to have something to do with your bros that no one else really understood. You could get fame and you could be secret at the same time.
And, you could be noticed whenever you wanted to be noticed and quiet whenever you wanted to be quiet.

GOMEZ called the game addicting, saying, “it might be addicting to you to see [your work] out there or addicted to other people seeing [your work].” When I asked GOMEZ how it felt to see a piece he did out in public, he became extremely excited and animated. It was hard for him to put it into words:

Awesome. Shit man that was like fuckin, you know—I would get stoked! I would just be like, “Awwww shit yeah dude! That’s me!” And I’d be so—My friends would be like, “I just saw your tag on that spot” and it’d be like, “Fuck yeah, cuz I was out last night taggin!”

GOMEZ was hooked to the fame, and it gave him the confidence that he was improving, motivating him to produce more pieces and acquire more fame.

When I asked NOIR how he felt when the general public was looking at or commenting on work that he had made, he said it made him feel like, “a famous artist, even though they don’t know they’re talking about you.” He went on to comment on the way it felt when other writers in the scene gave him positive feedback on his graffiti:

I think it always boosts your ego. When someone says, “Hey I saw you up…on that one building” or whatever, I think it boosts your ego. Definitely ego driven. Like, you’re basically just trying to get famous by putting your
name everywhere you can so that everyone has to see it even if they don’t want to see it.

CHARLES PRACTICE echoed NOIR’s comment about people needing to see the work that he had made. “You’re not writing on…certain places so nobody sees it,” he told me. Instead,

every time you put up a piece you think that everyone in the world is gonna see it. And that’s your perception. It’s like, you’re getting up so every writer’s gonna know the feeling. You know, and that’s just the perception of every writer.

GOMEZ credited fame as the underlying reason for every writer’s motivation to write graffiti. For him, it explained some of the physical or criminal risks that people would take simply to write their name in a particular location. When I asked him about the importance of placement, this is how he responded:

It’s pretty important. I mean, see the thing about graffiti is, and it’s a weird thing, but probably the number one goal of graffiti is fame. …People who do fucking graffiti where they’re risking their life, not only for the law but that they could fall off something and die a fucking horrible fucking splatting death. Kids do that shit. They’ll stand on a ledge that’s six inches fucking wide, fifteen stories up or some shit you know, doing something that’s just like, “Jesus!” That’s—you really gotta believe what you’re doing and it’s not only the communication but it’s like, I’m here, I did it, and that people are
gonna see it! And I’m gonna get known for that. Otherwise I don’t even
know why you would do that.

GOMEZ continued his comments with an obvious respect to the dedication writers
give to their craft. He also noted that the lack of financial or other compensation is
striking considering how much they have on the line:

I mean there’s graffiti artists that have died doing their last piece where it’s
just like on some fuckin LA overpass and they climbed down an eighty
fuckin foot drop, and they dropped. You know? I don’t know. Why else,
it’s a weird. It’s weird. But it’s cool. It’s cool because I appreciate - there’s
not very many things where people really have enough passion to do
something that risks your life. And you’re not getting paid to do it; straight
up just doin it cuz you want to do it. That’s a weird thing. Graffiti’s one of
the only things that people do - I guess there’s like mountain climbing or you
know, like cliff climbing. There’s things that are dangerous and graffiti’s one
of them. And not for getting paid - for the love of doing it.

Once the graffiti bug had bitten them, all five of my participants were
committed to being the best writer they could possibly be. Each writer drew upon
the following aspects of graffiti that spoke to him the most: a desire to undercut
social restrictions on communication, wanting to figure out the secrets of graffiti,
being a part of the graffiti club, competing with others, and the quest for fame. Once
their minds were set on becoming master writers each writer took specific actions to
improve their skills, compelled by many different facets of graffiti that motivated them.

The next section will define and explain the steps each writer took to gain proficiency in graffiti literacy.

*Moving on Up: Learning Strategies*

Literacy is a social practice, patterned by social institutions and rooted in broader social goals. The marginalized literacy practice of graffiti is no exception. The writers I interviewed had a purpose for writing. They wanted fame. They wanted to be part of an insider group whose members held special secrets. They wanted to prove to themselves that they were capable of making graffiti pieces like those writers who inspired them. In order to achieve those goals, my participants had to embark upon a pathway which enabled them to become proficient with graffiti literacy. This section seeks to examine the learning strategies that each writer employed as they sought to increase their skills.

Unlike formal education there is no textbook for learning graffiti literacy. There were no mandatory lessons or compulsory homework assignments handed down to the writers. The five writers I interviewed had to figure out the game on their own. “You gotta study a lot,” said MUFASA, “it’s not like anything you can learn in a book directly, but it’s something you have to learn collectively.” Once they had some experience with it they were able to find others who could assist them on their quest for proficiency, but even with the help of others there was no single
pathway followed by every writer. Instead, the writers engaged in a variety of approaches to learn graffiti. Through my interview data I’ve identified two major strategies that my participants relied upon.

The primary learning strategy for graffiti writers is a dedication to practicing graffiti relentlessly. Within the major strategy of practicing, a minor strategy emerged: “biting” or stealing other’s work. Practicing graffiti provided the necessary repetition and time to improve their skills, and caused the writers to pay attention to the finer details of graffiti literacy, including the lessons they could learn from the graffiti around them and the copying of other writers’ styles.

Crews and mentors were another primary strategy for learning graffiti. Within this second major learning strategy, I’ve identified two minor strategies: sketchbooks and feedback. Crews and mentors allowed my participants to access to tips and tricks handed down by more experienced writers through the use of black books and critiques. Crews and mentors also gave them essential feedback on their work, allowing them to gauge their development and precipitate a speedier mastery of graffiti skills.

Practicing graffiti and paying attention.

Acquiring proficiency within a literacy practice does not happen easily. It takes an enormous amount of enthusiasm and commitment, especially for a marginalized literacy practice like graffiti. Writers who want to improve their skills must dedicate large amounts of time to quietly drawing page after page, letter after
letter, in order to get the feel for the process of creating a graffiti piece. “If it’s not practiced…[your expression] is not really attractive,” said KID4, “I mean I feel like I can tell when someone knows their tag in and out.” All five of my participants started with simple tags and repeated them extensively until they could write them almost unconsciously. As their understanding of letters and graffiti procedures matured, they began thinking with more complexity about letters and developing their own personal style to represent themselves.

When I asked CAPTAIN PRACTICE what he did to learn how to draw graffiti letters, his answer was as obvious as it was simple, “just practice, practice, practice, practice.” He continued, “Every time you do it you get better or you push the limits further and you crash. But you always pick up from those ashes and take it further.” KID4 reiterated CAPTAIN PRACTICE’s advice when he said:

I feel like practice is more than anything the most important thing. Just writing letters over and over and over and…they start to become more attractive and you start to see the flow. You start to even confuse people by getting complex. …Practice, I don’t know what else to say!

CAPTAIN PRACTICE even confessed that he wasn’t really into graffiti for the fame or the competition, but that his “motivation for doing it once I kinda started getting a handle on it was just the pure love of practice of something. You know, the repetition of form. Every time you do it you get better at it.” He recounted a story from his youth that illustrated just how much he enjoyed practicing his letters:
I remember being in elementary school and not even knowing how to find a graffiti name. And having the phonebook, a big thick phone book and having one of those really stinky green Magnum markers. And writing every name I could think of in the graffiti font that I knew on every single page of that phone book. You know, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pages. And just writing every name I could consider and stinking up bedroom so bad and my mom coming in and being like, “What are you doing?” [He said,] “I’m practicing mom!” She didn’t know anything about it, you know? So she was like, “What? Alright. You should do that outside.”

GOMEZ had a similar story. When describing to me how motivated he was to be a member of a graffiti crew, he spoke with excitement about the many nights he would spend at home perfecting his tag.

I mean where it’d be like, shit, I would buy a fuckin’ hundred stack or whatever, thousand stack of paper ream, you know, photo copy paper? And work on my tag for hours with a pen. Where I would put 500 tags on a little piece of fuckin’ paper. Over and over and over.

Practice was central to my participants’ progression from knowing nothing about graffiti to becoming proficient. Every graffiti writer, including those in my study, progressed at different rates, but a common feature from each interviewee was the desire to go public with their graffiti before they were ready.
NOIR advised that newcomers to graffiti start slowly, and his comments were supported by the other writers as well. They all felt it was obvious when a writer pushed their skills too quickly and created a piece before truly understanding the correct procedure for creating graffiti. GOMEZ told me, “You could tell a whack writer by how they tagged. Instantly. Like, a writer would know that that person has not been doing it long enough.” NOIR elaborated, saying,

I think that’s something that a lot of beginners do wrong is that you try to get too exaggerated and too much distortion too early. And then, before you understand the principals that make it look cool with the distortion and everything. And so, when you’re just starting out I think you go too far instead of like working up really slowly. Your beginning letters should look just like a typewriter. You know, just like perfect regular letters, and then tweak it out just a little bit… [I]f you do it slowly then your letters will still look tight by the end.

Practice has recognizable benefits for any undertaking, and KID4 was the most eloquent writer when describing why practice was important to him. As he described his personal development with graffiti literacy, he continually referred back to the importance that practice had on his progression.

I think that repetition is the basis for getting better at everything. And I think graffiti is even more that way because you need to, you know, practice your tag so it looks nice and practice different ways of writing. So, repetition is
really the biggest part but I think just drawing—I started out drawing a lot. You know, pencil and paper, pen and paper.

KID4 also advised,

just starting simple so you can get a better sense of making your letters proportional in size, making them lean the same way, you know, making them heavy on the bottom or top or middle, and just trying to make that consistent is like the first step. And then maybe moving on to more wild stuff. Whatever you want to do, you know, extensions or making it more abstract or whatever.

Eventually a novice graffiti writer will begin to understand the conceptual nature of their tag and, according to GOMEZ, the writer must make a decision about their level of commitment to graffiti. Those who desire to master graffiti need to change their focus from tags to pieces if they truly want to become known as a graffiti writer instead of a tagger.

So it’s like a line where they kind of split what became important to a graffiti writer. Was it getting out there in the riskiest spots and gettin’ your tag up, or was it working on your letter style? Which is probably the beginning [of] a fine line cuz you don’t have letter style. You just, you tag. So you’re just like getting up and having other people see your name and be like, “Oh yeah. I saw that one driving whatever…” Eventually you’re
letters, you know, you want to paint pieces cuz piecing is about letter structure in the end, and you need time to do that.

The focus of this thesis is on individuals who paint graffiti pieces, not taggers. Although there is considerable overlap between the two groups, graffiti pieceers have a more meticulous dedication to their craft than taggers due to the more complex nature of spray painted murals. The writers in my study honored the technical skill of graffiti pieces, such as can control, use of color, balance, size, and style. Taggers, on the other hand, value productivity and placement and generally don’t worry about things like color.

In order to move beyond the tagging stage, my participants had to find a safe place to work so that they could practice using spray paint without getting busted by authorities. Drawing on paper and in sketchbooks was good practice for learning letter forms, but it was no replacement for the specialized skills involved in creating large murals. Speaking of the local writing scene, GOMEZ described the point where a writer seeks to move past the tagging stage into true graffiti writing:

I think a lot of graffiti writers up here find spots where you can just go paint with no risk and get better and better. Then it gets to—well there’s a point eventually where a graffiti writer either starts doing that kind of stuff where they’re painting their pieces out of the way and they’re lasting, or they have a spot that’s cool to go practice their technique. As opposed to the people who stuck just for fucking tagging.
During our interview, KID4 admitted he is still transitioning from tagging to writing. As part of this transition, he had to become accustomed to using spray paint and working outside on sizeable walls. He explained the challenges that accompanied this advanced form of graffiti and why extensive practice is essential for someone wanting to create large painted pieces.

"Working on large scale things is just a lot different than small scale. You know, drawing your tag or drawing a piece out on a piece of paper. I feel like I can make an attractive graffiti piece on a piece of paper but when I go to put it on a wall the scale is just so different that, it’s just, I feel like I lose my flow and I lose my sense of where things should be. I have to go stand back twenty feet. It’s just a lot different. So I think working more with paint even though it’s expensive is a lot better than just drawing. But if you jump straight to paint then you’re just wasting your money cuz you need to have, I feel like, a sense of balance and scale and flow for your letters before you even try to put it on the wall.

For KID4, the benefits of practice were both economical and practical: he did not want to waste his expensive paints and he also sought to avoid creating a bad piece that others would see.

MUFASA was more liberal with his paints. By paying close attention to what happened as he used them, he was able to glean as much knowledge as possible
from his efforts. When I asked him what he did to learn graffiti, he immediately began describing the lessons he learned from practicing:

Well, I mean, a lot of [my understanding] came from experience. Cuz when you’re painting - the first time you paint you don’t have a sketch, you don’t have anything. Just find a bit of a wall and just like paint. You know, like, get excited. But then, after you start to paint you start to learn different techniques. Just by, well I learned some of them by accident you know just by doing some things. Like doing something on accident and somehow like, “Oh I like that a lot, I’ll use that,” you know. Certain colors I’ll blend and they’ll just come out pretty good.

Eventually, if writers stick to their practicing regimen and master the drawing part of the literacy, they can begin to find an effortless connection between what they see in their mind and what comes out of their hands. This gives writers the confidence they need to begin showing their work in public, and allows them to focus on the more conceptual elements of graffiti literacy. CAPTAIN PRACTICE described how it felt to be able to draw graffiti letters without having to think about all of the rules and procedures he learned while on his journey to proficiency:

I feel like now I just watch myself write things. I just watch myself draw. Like literally I feel like I’m watching a movie a lot of the time. There’s a direct connection between my artistic’s mind’s eye and what my hand is doing that my conscious mind doesn’t have to think about. Like I’m thinking
ahead of what I’m doing and I’m balancing way more abstract motions and
thoughts and drawings, then I don’t have to conceive, when I start this
piece…what this letter’s going to like when I start that letter [pointing to the
last and then first letters of a graffiti sketch]. …It’s gonna work itself out.
…Cuz I have confidence that I can pull it off.

Within the major learning strategy of practicing graffiti writing there was one
other minor strategy that all five of my participants identified as significant to their
development of graffiti literacy: “biting” other writers work. Practice was important
to them, but as they practiced graffiti this minor learning strategy gave them the
ability to improve more rapidly.

_Biting as a minor learning strategy._

Within the development of a graffiti writer, the first step toward proficiency
is to notice graffiti. The writers in my study claimed to study the graffiti they saw
around them; seeking out its diversity, technical qualities, and personal styles.
Before they were able to develop technical skills or styles of their own, they
necessarily drew from those works that influenced them most. In the Discourse of
graffiti, taking another writer’s letters and using them for your own is known as
biting. Biting is complex because every writer does it, but it is severely detested
among writers who have reached a master status. “I know it’s frowned upon and I
frown upon it,” GOMEZ told me, “but I think that as someone’s growing they should
bite the shit out of everything they like and then make their own style.”
Biting can be done with permission if a writer is a member of a crew. As a way of speeding up the process of developing graffiti proficiency, emerging writers will be given letters from more advanced writers. This was the case with NOIR, who told me that he

…didn’t understand how to break down the letters until I moved up [to attend college] and there’s a couple graffiti writers that I went to college with. …They would come over and we’d do graffiti, and they’d show me techniques and stuff, and letter forms and, like, um, often an experienced graffiti writer will give you letters or something like that. My friend [redacted] gave me this cool “A,” so I was like, “OK!” So I’ve made that “A” and so I tried to make letters that worked with it.

NOIR was fortunate that his friend was an advanced graffiti writer who could provide him with a visual example of what he was attempting to succeed in. Once his friend had given him the letter “A” with permission, he felt free to develop other letters around it that would have a similar style.

NOIR’s fine-art background helped him contextualize the importance of biting for new writers.

…like in Art class…we had a project where we copied a master’s piece and then now I can use his style for my own art work. And you’ll see in some of my artwork it looks a little bit like Lucian Freud, or Monet, or Van Gogh.
Because I’ve studied their work, did copies of their paintings and now I can incorporate it into my own style. Much like you do with graffiti too.

GOMEZ felt similarly to NOIR when he described why biting was a crucial strategy for a writer’s evolution. For GOMEZ, a writer had to physically play with the letters he was attracted to and not just look at them. By drawing the letters himself, GOMEZ felt that a writer would come to a deeper understanding of how each letter was constructed.

I would say that early on the best way to get better is to bite people who’s work you like. Cuz then you can really break it down. If you try to draw something that someone was drawing and they did a really fucking good job and you want to interpret or you want to take that shit, you got to draw it. If you draw it, then you start seeing, “Ohhh, I understand that,” more than if I would have gone, “Awww, I like that,” and then tried to do something on [your] own. Really trying to draw someone else’s shit or biting their letter, their “S”, whatever it is, then you can make it into your own later.

Once emerging writers began to understand the secrets bound within graffiti letters, they incorporate those secrets into their own work. According to MUFASA, “all ideas aren’t really original. You take ideas and then you grow… and kind of use it and tweak it into your own methods.”

NOIR also spoke about how the writers he was influenced by inspired him to create work that was similar:
Often graffiti writers that you’re influenced by—your style might be similar to theirs. Like, we were talking about [the famous writer] TWIST. I really like his simple letters with style so a lot of my pieces are really legible. You could probably read most of my pieces. And that would be like a TWIST influence.

As necessary as biting was for the writers I interviewed, KID4 cautioned against taking too much of someone’s style and making it one’s own. Like the other writers in my study, he too felt like “you’re gonna be influenced by other people’s work however hard you try not to be.” KID4 felt that biting too much or relying too heavily on the influence of other writers could lead to social disgrace or worse, personal shame.

Of course looking at other people’s stuff helps but it also is kind of limiting cuz if you see something you really like and you know you can’t do it, you can’t just copy it. You can’t just trace it and do it yourself. Cuz, I don’t know, someone might call you out on it or even if not you just don’t feel the same sense of pride in it.

NOIR agreed, and told me that it was when he began developing his own style that he finally felt like a true writer and not a toy. “Once you start to get good at emulating other people’s styles,” he said, “then you want to do something different to make your style more unique.”
MUFASA called the learning strategy of biting “necessary” to the development of a graffiti writer, saying that becoming a proficient writer “is like the whole process of accumulating many styles.” When I asked him what he meant by the accumulation of styles, he elaborated upon that idea. “Every idea is built off another idea. In graffiti it’s no different. When you come to terms with having created your own style, that’s like the final stage.”

MUFASA, like the other four writers I interviewed, felt that biting was simply part of the process of a writers’ development. It was a way for my participants to become familiar with the conventions of graffiti-style lettering before they knew how to do it themselves. In the words of CAPTAIN PRACTICE, “You can’t break the rules until you know the rules!”

While practice, paying attention, and biting are three ways of figuring out the procedures and rules of graffiti, they are no substitute for the direct instruction a master can provide to a new writer. In the next section I will discuss my participants’ views about the learning strategies of using crews and mentors.

*Utilizing crews as a learning strategy.*

A writer must practice continuously to develop proficiency, but every writer in my study claimed that the assistance of a crew and a mentor dramatically sped up the learning process. Graffiti crews are groups of writers who work together to benefit each other’s graffiti skills. Before modern media made access to graffiti information more widely available, graffiti crews were the only way to pass down
graffiti knowledge from one generation to the next. They are highly regarded in graffiti culture.

Crews are also formed to motivate writers by providing the camaraderie and enthusiasm necessary to participate in a literacy practice that is ostracized by most modern cultures. Graffiti writers in a crew will work with each other to get bigger and better placements, and writers will paint the initials of their crew next to their pieces or tags. Crews are not violent gangs – they are organized exclusively around graffiti, it is their only focus – but there can sometimes be tremendous competition between two crews. This competition is another motivator, and pushes each crew to outdo the other, thus improving the skill levels for everyone involved.

Within a crew, new writers may find a mentor who works one on one to teach the procedures and tricks of graffiti. However, not all writers in crews have a mentor, and some writers have a mentor but no crew. Four of the writers in my study had mentors to work with as they developed their skills. Three of them, NOIR, GOMEZ, and MUFASA had both crews and mentors. CAPTAIN PRACTICE had a crew, but never had a true mentor like the other three. KID4 had neither a mentor nor a crew, although he was actively seeking out other writers with whom he could share his enjoyment of graffiti.

GOMEZ believed that within graffiti culture, one main goal is fame: to be known for having the most tags and pieces up within a geographic location. Crews can assist writers in developing fame by writing each other’s names next to each
piece they make. Writers in each crew also write the crew’s name as much as possible so that the crew gets famous as well. KID4 saw it from an outsider’s perspective, and noted that “When you think about the ideas of crews it’s like very competitive based. Cuz you’re joining up with these people to get your name out as much as possible.” NOIR elaborated on this concept of writing each other’s names:

Everyone writes the same name to boost the crew and make the crew more famous. Sometimes you write each other’s names. So, I’ll do a piece and then next to it I’ll put my friend’s name right next to it. Or on one of my letters I’ll write his name too to give him respect.

NOIR and KID4 also commented on what they saw as the motivational aspect of crews. Within a literacy practice that is criminalized and vilified by the larger culture, it’s comforting to know that someone else is on your side. Sometimes writers will go out and paint together, and according to KID4 (who had painted “a couple of times” with another writer), “It’s more fun. I really like going out with other people. I feel like it makes me braver so I get better spots. Yeah, just camaraderie.” NOIR put it more directly:

A crew also motivates you to go out and paint. It’s nice to have a partner to go painting with. It’ll be like, “Let’s go! Let’s get out of the house and go paint!” It motivates you to get up and get out there – doing it on your own you might not do as much. …Crews could [also] help you with art supplies,
help you with paint…[or] you might crash at one of your friend’s house cuz he lives closest to the spot.”

In order for writers to improve their graffiti skills, they had to practice out in the streets, take risks, and paint at odd times to avoid detection from authorities. Crews allowed the writers in my study to band together. In this way, the crew serves not only as a motivator, but also what NOIR called a “support system” for writers. GOMEZ said that for his crew, “…what held them together was they were good at graffiti.”

Aside from the support and friendship my participants found in crews, there was also a strong educational element to them as well. Writers who joined crews were expected to put up only high-quality work so that the crew’s visible presence was formidable. “It became really important to the people that taught me that your letters are always fuckin strong letters,” said GOMEZ, emphasizing the importance of each crew member’s technical skill as a reflection of the crew’s graffiti ability. “That’s what my crew was like,” he bragged, “You don’t tag until…it comes out [perfect].” Crew members would provide tips and tricks to help each other with the technical side of graffiti, and teach them the procedures for creating large spray paint murals. NOIR likened this aspect of crews to a replacement for the classroom. CAPTAIN PRACTICE told me that his crew “was good to learn with.”

Out of all of my participants, GOMEZ was able to most specifically describe his activities with crews. When he first chose to become a serious graffiti writer, his
crew took him in and showed him the ropes. He credits his work in a crew with his proficiency in graffiti, noting that he might have never developed his skills otherwise. I asked him if being in a crew and working his way up through the ranks made him a better writer, and he responded:

Yes. Yeah definitely. You couldn’t write the crew name unless they gave you the OK to do it. And you had to start by tagging, and you couldn’t do your tag until you tag was OK’d by pretty much the all the good writers in the crew.

GOMEZ also described the ways in which his crew assisted him in the execution of large spray-painted graffiti murals. As KID4 described earlier, the transition from drawing graffiti on paper to painting it six-feet high on a wall is not only daunting, but challenging as well. KID4 was attempting to figure out the procedure on his own, and it was going slow for him. In contrast, writers in crews were able to learn from the group by first watching them paint, then slowly becoming more involved with the entire process. When I asked him if his crew demonstrated how to draw graffiti-style letters, GOMEZ put it this way:

Totally. Yeah. Sketch-wise and even painting-wise. Like I said, I wasn’t allowed to paint pieces at first in the crew I was in. But I could go and help do all the fill-ins. And they would teach me how to do, “OK, this is how you put down this color first when you do your fill-ins. Then you do your cutbacks, you know. You do your final outline and then you do your shell
and all your little frizzy shit.” I learned that because I would help dudes that way. Like, “OK, cool.” And that was just as important as having done it in my sketchpad or something. Like actually going there and doing that. You learned how to fuck with the spray paint cans.

When GOMEZ was not talented enough to draw the letters and pieces himself, he assisted more advanced graffiti writers with the mundane and simpler tasks involved in the creation of a large graffiti piece. He emphasized that for the crew he was in, “that was normal.” He reiterated that age did not give a graffiti writer status. It was the writer’s ability that conveyed status within the crew. “A lot of the kids [that] were into graffiti [were] younger than me personally, but we’re in the same position. So they would be there filling in pieces and learning how to do bits and how to use [spray paint] cans.”

*Utilizing mentors as a learning strategy.*

Crews give graffiti writers a group they can relate to, find a role in, and learn from. For the writers I interviewed though, a more personal connection was needed. Three of my writers found this bond in a relationship with someone whom they could relate to in a one-on-one fashion. In graffiti culture, this person is called a mentor. This relationship exists so that one writer can pass down information about graffiti to a younger or inexperienced writer. NOIR said,

Some stuff you have to figure out on your own, just with trial and error, what works best… But there are like basically things that the older generation
passes down, like whoever teaches you. You normally have a mentor, like someone you’ll go out doing graffiti with and they’ll kind of show you the ropes. …and then it becomes a cultural thing, like passing down the letters. Like I said, a friend gave me a letter that a friend of his might have given him, and a friend of his might have given him. So you’re like passing down certain letters.

When I asked NOIR why mentors were important, he called them “crucial,” saying I think that it’s really important so you’re not – so you don’t have to reinvent the wheel. Like you’re having people kind of mentor you through this process to…teach you the tricks and everything. So all that is crucial I think. Or it would take you like ten years or something before your letters start getting good. Or five years. When I did it in two years because people would help correct me. You know, like oil painting—if no one ever taught you how to oil paint and you just had all the pigments and oils and gamsol or whatever. And without anyone telling you what to do with it, you’re not going to come up with an oil painting! Or it would take you a lot of trial and error before you got to that point.

NOIR’s mentors worked with him on a more personal basis so that they could give him just what he needed at just the right time. As he mentions in the passage, a writer could develop without mentors (especially in today’s media-heavy
environment), but that would take much longer without the individual support of an experienced writer.

MUFASA was another writer who spoke at length about the importance of a mentor in the development of his graffiti. “I was fortunate to have pretty good mentors in my life,” he told me. MUFASA saw more experienced writers as someone he could learn from, and was not too proud to take their advice and honor their experiences. He credits them for speeding up the process of his graffiti skills acquisition:

I used to always hang out with older [writers]. …that was a benefit because I would learn knowledge that I would have learned in three or four years. And it was just given to me! So in many ways it’s like shortcuts. So it’s like a collective knowledge of shortcuts and you have a little bank of knowledge.

MUFASA was fortunate to attend art classes and an after-school program where he could use aerosol paints and practice graffiti on large canvases and boards, but he credits his mentor with teaching him the particulars of graffiti literacy, like “how to flare…when [the spray paint mark] goes from fat to thin.” These small tips were something that could only come from an experienced mentor willing to take the time to help out a new writer with enthusiasm and budding talent. MUFASA talked at length about his mentor, saying,
My friend [redacted], he taught me about the typography. And the elements of design and like color theory and lines, serifs, drawing serifs, and just different things. I mean I’d pick up things here and there.

MUFASA’s mentor even taught him some tips to keep from getting noticed as he was painting in the crowded metropolis of LA.

…while we were painting he’d tell me to stay focused. Like, “Don’t make triangle movements cuz that’s what catches people’s attention.” Like, “[Don’t put your] arms up as you’re painting. Just keep the arms low, close to the body. If you see cars lay down.” Like, you pick up different tips here and there and figure out how not to get caught little by little. It’s never any perfect technique, but it’s just like little precautions you can take in order for you to have less risk of being caught.”

MUFASA, NOIR, and GOMEZ crew-based learning is typical of what might be called the best way to go about learning graffiti literacy. Utilizing crews and mentors are important learning strategies and assist inexperienced writers with finding information that would not otherwise be easily available to them. However, writers like KID4 and CAPTAIN PRACTICE typify the other side of graffiti development because they did not rely so much on the help of others to become proficient. “I kind of got into it by myself,” KID4 confessed, “just based on my own interest, and so far I haven’t really known anyone that…had a lot to teach me. …I’ve never really had a mentor.”
In some cases, this can be a strength because it enables the lone graffiti writer to create a style that is distinct from a traditional notion of graffiti literacy.

CAPTAIN PRACTICE is a good example of this. He has had several people who assisted his understanding of graffiti in different cities, but his development was not dependent upon them. As such, his style is an amalgam of different influences. He told me:

…I was kinda always the one doing the weird graffiti. Like using letterforms that I knew how to do from other art forms. So I was kind of giving myself a unique edge that other people didn’t have. Maybe the other people who had graffiti mentors didn’t know where I was getting my styles from. Like, “Where the fuck is he pulling in this character work?” Or this calligraphy letter form style that they didn’t get cuz they didn’t have that side of the education that I had. I didn’t have the school of hard knocks education like my friend [redacted] had.

Even though CAPTAIN PRACTICE did not have a mentor in a conventional sense, like all of my participants he still affirmed the need to connect with other graffiti writers to accelerate skill advancement.

Within the major learning strategies of utilizing crews and mentors for more rapid graffiti literacy development, two minor learning strategies emerged: new writers and experienced writers would trade sketchbooks and sign or draw within them to pass along different styles and techniques; feedback was also a key element
for new writers to gauge their improvements in skill level or get tips on what would make their graffiti better.

*Sketchbooks as a learning strategy.*

Sketchbooks, also called black books or piece books, are ubiquitous within the Discourse of graffiti. Although each writer lays claim to a sketchbook, they are normally not the only one to write in it. Four of the participants in my study mentioned sketchbooks directly when referring to their learning process, and they commonly mentioned that other writers would draw in their sketchbook as a way to demonstrate proper graffiti-writing procedures. When NOIR asked himself, “Why does that [piece] look so good compared to mine?,” he was able to use his sketchbooks as a tool for comparing and evaluating advanced writing techniques.

One common method of using sketchbooks for graffiti development was called a “writer’s bench” by NOIR. He emphasized that this method of learning was both fun and informative for the writers involved. The term writers’ bench originates from the early days of graffiti when writers would sit on benches overlooking the elevated train tracks in New York City (Silver & Chalfant, 1983). Writers would not only relish seeing new work roll by, but they would also critically discuss the work with each other. The modern form of a writer’s bench still contains both enjoyable and didactic elements. NOIR put it this way:

Like a group of writers would all get together and you’d hang out and pass around each other’s sketchbooks and everybody does artwork in each other’s
sketchbook. And you’d trade a sketchbook for a couple weeks and then get it back and it’s got a bunch of new graffiti in it that you’ve never seen before.

When I asked MUFASA how important sketchbooks were in his development as a graffiti writer, he provided a response that typified the other writers whom I interviewed as well:

It was pretty important cuz that’s where you develop your style. It’s like your little bible. It was fun to pass it around to other kids and see what they could bring. Like, sometimes you get good stuff and sometimes you get mediocre stuff and sometimes you get bad stuff. Sometimes you never get your book back! [laughter] Yeah! It happens! Sometimes you won’t even get your book back until like three years later.

I pressed MUFASA about the purpose for passing around black books. I was curious if it was just for entertainment or if he was aware of the educational process involved in this learning strategy. He said

Well, it’s a little bit of both. It was, well, I mean, when you get people that were actually good writers and had style and pieced in your books and you’d like take a look at it and be like, “Oh, I like what you did here.” And kind of use it and tweak it into your own methods.

Similar to the learning strategy of biting, NOIR, MUFASA, and GOMEZ all mentioned that they would incorporate into their own style the features they liked about other writer’s work in their black book. They also noted that mentors or other
writers would draw their names in order to show them the stylistic possibilities within the letter forms. They would then copy that drawing so they could unlock the mystery of how those skilled writers were able to draw such amazing pieces. As he told me about how his friends contributed to his graffiti development, NOIR commented that

…other graffiti writers would write your name, like more experienced graffiti writers. In my book they would write my own name and then I could copy that, and then [I could] basically copy their style but they wrote my name so I could figure it out easier than trying to write, or copy, their name. …I would just try to reproduce the piece that they drew in my sketchbook until I could kind of figure it out. Make my letters look like that and have style like theirs did.

GOMEZ echoed NOIR when he told me

A lot of times the guys who were better, especially my very first black books, would do pieces of my name so I could see how they would do it. And then I would copy that shit. So yeah, that was important. Or they would tag it for me and then I would be like twenty pages of my tags trying to copy their tag. So, that was important.

MUFASA and NOIR also mentioned how sketchbooks would facilitate feedback from experienced writers. While sketchbooks were one way to initiate feedback from other writers, the participants in my study also indicated that feedback
could come from discussions with crews and mentors, as well as be written directly on the wall next to their tag or piece.

*Feedback as a learning strategy.*

After drawing their new ideas or fresh work in their own black books the writers would show it to their mentors or other writers in order to be critiqued. This process is known as “schooling,” and aspiring writers would willingly have their work dissected by master writers so that they could gain a better understanding of the subtle qualities that separate good graffiti from poor graffiti. This strategy was explained by MUFASA:

I had a couple of friends that I would mainly sketch with. We’d critique each other’s pieces, we’d write each other’s names. You know, we’d have sketch exchanges and sketch sessions. Well, like my mentor [redacted], he would always tell me to go through certain steps of how to complete a piece so that it’s up to par. And he’d go over letter structures, the flow of the letters, the dimensions, the colors, [and] the lighting.

As NOIR told me about his use of sketchbooks, I asked how he went about learning letter structure and style aside from the pieces other writers would leave in his book. NOIR’s answer mirrored the feedback learning strategies my other participants mentioned. He told me that whenever he would paint a new piece or showed other writers a new drawing, “they would critique your work all the time and point out what’s wrong.” I asked if he accepted such critiques—if he appreciated
being told that he was doing something wrong. He became very enthusiastic about his desire for such exchanges:

Yeah! Well, yeah cuz you want to get better! And you know that you’re toy when you’re just starting out so that would help you get better. They would point out all your mistakes and what they would have done differently.

GOMEZ also repeated how feedback was an essential element in improving one’s graffiti abilities. “I think the feedback’s important,” he told me. He shared his experience of being a beginning graffiti writer and having the elder members of his crew explain how to go about creating graffiti pieces. As he grew in his abilities, he would show his new work to his crew mates. He was, “just drawing and working on things and then having it critiqued by other people that [he] respect[ed].” They would tell him, “Like, ‘That letter’s cool but it could have been cooler if this part was bigger and heavier…”

For GOMEZ and the other writers in my study, feedback was also closely linked to the element of fame. My participants wanted to hear good things about their work and when they received criticism, especially if it came from more experienced writers, they were quick to heed the knowledge that was given to them. GOMEZ put it this way:

Feedback’s pretty important even through it’s a weird egotistical tool. You could probably do it yourself and not get feedback and still be into it, but it’s not even as rewarding unless someone else says it. That’s like really where
you’re like, “Awww, yeah! You saw that I was there doin’ that.” Now that is some fuckin’ weird shit.

GOMEZ felt that feedback was important because it validated the work he had done, and motivated him to go out and do more pieces. He also acknowledged that feedback from other writers allowed him to gauge how his work was being perceived in the local writing scene, saying “I got schooled by older dudes who were better at it.”

Sometimes feedback would be spoken to GOMEZ by other writers, yet other times it arrived in the form of messages painted next to his pieces on the wall. He spoke about the phenomenon of being “crossed out,” where another writer would draw a line through his work, expressing their distaste for what he had done (or their beef with him). I asked him how it felt to be crossed out, have negative remarks written next to his work, or worse, painted over:

At first it sucked worse than it does later. You take it more personal… But when it comes to gettin crossed out yeah that shit sucked at first. And that was part of the competition too. Like between graffiti crews - especially tagging. Getting crossed over the first few times that’s not good.

GOMEZ continued, stating that getting crossed out was part of the process of going through the toy stage and emerging a stronger writer.

Yeah. Really that’s what’s going on. If someone crosses you out and tags right next to you that’s what they’re calling you is a fucking toy. So yeah,
that’s like, “I’m not a toy. [sad face from GOMEZ] I’ll cross out everything I ever see of yours…”

GOMEZ’s reaction to being crossed out is indicative of how the writers in my study genuinely honored the dialogue that occurred when writers would leave messages for each other on public surfaces. For them, it wasn’t just meaningless scribbles but a communication method that allowed for a continuous discourse even when other graffiti writers were not physically present. For example, not getting crossed out can carry just as much meaning as being crossed out. A piece that exists for a significant length of time can be interpreted as being very good because other writers don’t wish to disturb it.

KID4 was the only writer in my study who did not have either a crew or mentor to aid him in his development. As such, he relied almost entirely upon the marks left by others as a way to learn from the feedback he was receiving.

It’s really hard to tell. It’s not very - at least for me it’s not a very social - it’s social but it’s not face to face. You don’t really know what a lot of people are thinking most of the time. You know? So it’s hard to tell how other people perceive me most of the time. It’s really tough to say when you stop being a toy and you start being good.

Without knowing other writers, the discourse on the wall was KID4’s only way to evaluate how others viewed his work, and how he was progressing with his skills. He told me,
…it’s hard to get feedback cuz I don’t like to talk about it to most people because most people don’t care or, you know, I don’t want my name to be associated with my tags - at least for the public.

I pressed KID4 to tell me about how he read the marks that were (or were not) left next to or on top of his pieces and tags. His responses are specific to his situation, but they also demonstrate how the other writers in my study would read and write graffiti with intent and meaning. KID4 said,

I feel like you can assume things from how people, how other writers react to your work. Like, at the beginning I would get crossed out, or no one would write next to me. But later on I feel like when I tag something and then some other, what I assume are kids or something cuz they’re not very good they come up and write next to me. I feel like that’s kind of feedback you know. I like getting up next to people that I respect. Maybe that’s a form of respect or maybe they don’t see it in the same way.

KID4 recognized that the Discourse of graffiti has a complicated, socially-negotiated system of meaning making, and he was dependent upon interpreting other writers’ marks in order to get feedback.

When he did get face to face feedback, KID4 was appreciative of the straightforward way in which it was laid out. Either it was good graffiti or it was poor graffiti, and he could rely on other writers to critique him in a direct way.
... people will come see my work, and you know I’m not a good piecer and I’ll admit it. And they’re like, “Oh... That’s not really that great.” And that’s fine but I feel like most people in other situations would be like, “Oh, that looks good. That looks nice.” Even if they don’t mean it. I feel like a lot of graffiti writers are more honest. Maybe that’s not true but that’s just the feeling I get.

As I mentioned above, feedback is closely related to the motivational element of fame within graffiti writing culture. Just as KID4 wanted to hear honest feedback from other writers, he also craved to eventually receive positive remarks about his work. Not only was he learning from the feedback given to him, but he was motivated by it as well. In the end, the goal of each writer in my study was to hear how well he had done. They wanted everyone to know who they were and how skilled they were at graffiti. In the words of NOIR, “That’s what you want to hear, is people talking about how good your graffiti is.”

The challenges faced by each writer as they began their quest for graffiti proficiency ranged in complexity and included having access to experienced elders who could mentor them as well as growing up in locations where graffiti was not prevalent suitably for their interests. Although each writer’s individual development varied, all five of my participants were motivated to become experts in a communication form that has been denigrated and criminalized in our culture and around the world. Nonetheless, each writer pushed forward and made use of the
resources available to him to understand what made the Discourse of graffiti so compelling. Without a formal educational system for graffiti, the writers had to figure out their learning on their own. They improvised and read the subtle cultural marks that led them to a deeper involvement and a higher level of skill.

Our understanding of the attraction of graffiti to potential adolescent writers and their self-taught educational strategies may increase and become more sophisticated as researchers continue to push the boundaries defining what a literacy means for those practicing it, and why certain groups make deliberate choices to become involved in specific literacies.

The interviews granted to me by my generous participants reveal a variety of factors related to the development of a graffiti writer from a toy to a master. While varied in scope, these narratives point to a larger socially-constructed system of informal education that enables motivated individuals to acquire mastery of a marginalized literacy practice. In the following chapter, I will present an analysis of the participants’ responses and their understandings of what influenced them to begin writing, what motivated them to continue learning in the face of cultural vilification, and the learning strategies they employed during the development of their graffiti skills.
CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS

Graffiti is a Discourse that generally occurs in (and on) public spaces, although it has been shown in the Results chapter that much of the Discourse also happens in private meetings with crew members, or simply drawing alone with a paper and pencil. One reason for the criminalization of graffiti’s public expression may be due in part to the frightened response of otherwise caring individuals who misunderstand the intent and content of the message that graffiti carries. No matter what the reasons for its cultural condemnation are, the effect has been one of discrediting graffiti as a literacy practice. In turn, academia has neglected to openly address the obvious educational implications inherent in this Discourse. Graffiti has been enthusiastically embraced by the fine art community and graffiti’s popularity among pop culture and consumer culture can hardly be contested. Unfortunately, the illegal nature of most public graffiti expressions discredits the messages that underlie the prohibited paint. This message has been ignored and marginalized by the majority, but it is the same message that has spoken so strongly to the writers in this study.

The formal academic literacy in our modern public education system may cause some individuals who cannot relate to it, or see the value of it, to turn away from school-based literacies and seek instead a form that aligns more closely to their
way of understanding the world. Literacy practices are a part of the larger notion of Discourses, which have been referred to as identity kits (Gee, 2008). They allow individuals who successfully participate in a particular Discourse to assume the identity it portrays. In this study, the Discourse offered by graffiti culture has been more attractive to the writers than that which was offered by formal education. That the writers have taken it upon themselves to master the Discourse of graffiti, in spite of its illegality, demonstrates their affinity to the identity given to the participants in graffiti culture.

KID4’s quest for a comrade with whom he can share his graffiti identity is emblematic of the socially constructed nature of literacy practices. Through careful observation and unwavering practice he has been able to acquire the core elements that compose the foundation of graffiti culture, but without someone to share those sentiments he continues to feel as if he resides on the edge of the Discourse. However, his skill level and continued involvement with graffiti demonstrate that within the literacy practice of graffiti an effective pedagogy is at work. KID4 has figured out his education unaided, but for the other writers in the group the success of this pedagogy is evinced by their swift ascension through the stages of graffiti development and their current status as masters. The specific question that this thesis sought to address is: In the absence of a formal education system for graffiti, what processes of informal learning and sense-making enable writers to successfully acquire this marginalized literacy practice?
This chapter will explore the narratives of my participants in order to elucidate the out-of-school educational experiences that contributed to their development of graffiti literacy and the effectiveness of their self-motivated scholarship. I will also distinguish some of the socially-negotiated processes which align graffiti with other, more recognized literacy practices and demonstrate how my participants have not only been shaped by the existing conventions of the local graffiti Discourse, but that their efforts to obtain proficiency have also contributed to and altered the practice in their locality. My analysis will first address the overarching progression of a writers’ development and the factors that help or hinder their development. The discussion will then focus on the three themes highlighted in the results chapter: the aspects of graffiti that originally influenced the writers to begin practicing graffiti, the motivational elements that held their attention and dedication to the craft, and the learning strategies they employed in their development of proficiency.

By its very nature, this qualitative research is limited to the interpretation of the lived experiences as told to me by the five writers who participated in the study. These limitations, along with the application of the results and analysis presented here, as well as the implications for future research, will be subsequently discussed in the Conclusion.
The Progression of a Writer

In the marginalized literacy practice of graffiti, it is natural for writers to begin writing at different ages. Unlike formal academic literacy, graffiti is rarely pushed onto an individual, and in the cases of my participants the choice to begin was a voluntary one. There were elements that limited their initial participation, and each writer in my study began actively pursuing their graffiti development when the social environment precipitated and assisted their skill progression. Indeed, three common themes were revealed that fostered the writers’ initial decision to begin writing. First, the writers needed to be exposed to graffiti. Their geographical location either restricted or enhanced their access to high quality graffiti in public locations which they could visit in person. Second, the writers required a social group with whom they could share their interest in graffiti and learn from more experienced practitioners. Finally, each writer had to have the dedication to stick with graffiti in the face of the rigorous pressures of illegality and demanding technical skill.

The locations where the graffiti writers grew up affected the quality and amount of graffiti they saw. Graffiti is an urban phenomenon: the sheer density of people clustered within the confines of city walls enables impressionable writers to be surrounded by graffiti and graffiti writers. Much of the graffiti in cities is understandably poor, but some of it is inspiring enough to influence a young writer to try his hand. The opposite can be said for rural locations. The writers who grew
up in small towns had very few positive graffiti models from which to draw their inspiration. They primarily witnessed their graffiti from various media like magazines, album covers, and internet sites. The fact that MUFASA began writing graffiti at an early age reflects the density of graffiti writers in his city. Rural writers were not so lucky. In order to understand the internal structures that moderate the literacy practices within a Discourse, one needs access to masters and to be able to participate in the activities of the Discourse, however peripheral that participation may be.

Graffiti is a literacy practice, and literacy practices are socially situated. Literacy practices involve socially recognized or patterned ways of using literacies to accomplish tasks. For example, graffiti writers use graffiti to communicate messages about their identity, their social group, and their skill level. Literacy events are the actions that occur within the literacy practice—those activities that people actually do with literacy. The literacy events that influenced my participants were graffiti pieces: public expressions of a writer’s identity painted according to the socially negotiated norms and customs within which the pieces originated. The socially situated nature of graffiti meant that my participants could view these events (other writers’ graffiti pieces) from outside the Discourse, but they would not be able to understand them in their entirety. The writers who grew up in rural locations demonstrated this by stating that they were not aware of the deeper meanings and purpose of graffiti at the time they became inspired to participate.
When a literacy event (like a graffiti piece) is viewed from outside the social practice in which it is embedded, different interpretations can be made about the event. All of the writers in my study admitted that they knew very little about graffiti when they first encountered it, yet they assumed that it was created by a type of individual with whom they identified. They desired to create graffiti pieces too, and made a conscious choice to begin pursuing graffiti proficiency.

KID4 has primarily had a solitary involvement with graffiti. Despite his peripheral participation he has found legitimate avenues for learning the more complex features involved in the literacy practice. Without a social group to learn from, KID4 relied upon local walls and internet sites as resources for his development. However, because he cannot verify what he knows with other graffiti practitioners he is unsure if his knowledge is accurate.

Drawing tags in phonebooks was CAPTAIN PRACTICE’s way of practicing the technical side of graffiti, although his limited access to graffiti masters prevented him from acquiring a mature approach. Like the other writers in this study, once CAPTAIN PRACTICE was able to link up with people already actively practicing graffiti he was able to utilize his social connections to learn the conventions and methods of graffiti literacy in their entirety. MUFASA and GOMEZ were fortunate to have access to graffiti masters when they made the choice to begin writing. Subsequently, they were able to simultaneously develop both their conceptual (meaning-creating) understanding of graffiti along with their technical skills. They
worked alongside experienced practitioners and their experience with graffiti was scaffolded. Participating at first in low-skilled graffiti activities, as their skills developed they were given tasks that gradually became more complex.

The quality and amount of access each writer had to graffiti-specific social groups determined how quickly and confidently they could grasp the literacy practice of graffiti in its entirety. As their awareness grew, the writers began to see beyond the painted murals that had captured their initial interest. They became conscious that the literacy practice involved much more than painting pieces, including but not limited to the selection of a name, the hours of practice involved in perfecting a style or skill, an awareness of placement, and the need to participate in social groups that center around graffiti. Once the writers had a more nuanced picture of the complexity and difficulty of graffiti, they had to decide if mastering the craft was worth the effort. The writers had to make a commitment to practicing relentlessly, accepting harsh critiques of their work, going out late at night to paint, and come to terms with the risk of being caught. Learning graffiti meant dedicating themselves to the task.

Literacy is intimately connected to one’s identity. At the core of their commitment to graffiti, I believe that the writers were pursuing the craft because they wanted to have the identity of a graffiti writer. Any type of significant learning changes how an individual looks at and interacts with the world (Gee, 2008a; Lave & Wenger, 1991), which in turn involves the construction of a new identity. The
writers all saw something within graffiti with which they identified. Acquiring the identity of a graffiti writer gave the writers a clear goal and allowed them to justify the dedication it would take to learn a new literacy practice. For the writers, this meant having the skills to create graffiti pieces and having the knowledge of where and how to place them in the public sphere. The goal of painting a masterpiece on a public wall enabled the writers to situate their learning. They could directly apply their new knowledge and skills in a way that was meaningful for them, their new identity, and their graffiti peers. The writers’ learning was also socially situated since mastering the literacy practice meant working with others (in person or in a wall-dialogue) to figure out the deeper meanings of graffiti.

Drawing graffiti in a sketch book is not sufficient for someone who wants to be known as a graffiti writer. True writers paint on public surfaces, openly displaying their skill and knowledge while at the same time exposing themselves to criticism, unwarranted feedback, and arrest. NOIR explicitly stated that he wanted to move on from drawing in his sketchbook to painting pieces so that he could credibly call himself a graffiti writer. GOMEZ also pointed out that he wanted to be a part of his graffiti crew because it was something he wanted to do, not something he had to do. GOMEZ saw his involvement with a graffiti crew as a way to facilitate his development and transform into a writer. He explained that those crew members who didn’t share his commitment to graffiti got “shut out” because their development stagnated.
Developing proficiency with any artistic expression is difficult work. For the graffiti writers in my study, this work was made more or less difficult by their initial geographical location, their access to experienced graffiti writers, and their level of dedication to improving their skills and conceptual understanding of the practice. The next section will explore in more detail those preliminary incidents that influenced each writer to begin the long progression from toy to master.

At the Beginning: A Writer’s Influences

This thesis seeks to explain how a writer went from knowing absolutely nothing about graffiti to becoming a master at it. As was mentioned previously, the literacy practice of graffiti was never imposed onto my participants. Something within graffiti called out to them and caused them to search for more meaning behind the messages they saw. Every day, millions of people move through cities and most of them ignore the graffiti saturating the surrounding surfaces. What was it then that my participants saw when they were new to graffiti? How did it speak to them, and what did they hear? Why did they make the choice to begin writing? This section will attempt to explain some of the forces that inspired the writers to take up their spray can and eventually become proficient at a skill many people wish never existed.

The Results chapter noted that prior to their exposure to graffiti all of the writers had an artistic inclination that let them see graffiti as something more than vandalism. It was also revealed that my participants generally carried a
countercultural outlook and were attracted to the fringe elements of society. Through rap music, skateboarding, clothing, or hairstyles, the writers sought to align themselves with domains of culture that were not mainstream at the time. All of the writers stated that seeing graffiti, physically standing in front of it, was also their primary motivation to try it out themselves. Upon witnessing the illicit letters in person the participants finally found an outlet that could unite their dissident outlooks with their artistic sensibilities.

The narratives shared with me all pointed to an initial interest in graffiti during a time in their lives that they were seeking an identity that ran counter to the prevailing contemporary culture. Before their primary curiosity in graffiti, the writers all had a pre-graffiti-writing attitude that enabled them to have an open mind toward the expressive qualities and opportunities inherent within graffiti. This alternative attitude underlay their drive to find meaning in the literacy practice and to try graffiti for themselves. There are two important features that contributed to the writers’ uncommon approach to communication. First, the writers’ disdain for authority and a generally countercultural outlook drove them to seek out non-dominant expressions of skill. Second, each writer had an appreciation for individuals who succeeded in their attempts to carry out these alternative expressions. Simply put, the writers were not content to follow blindly along in a culture they felt did not represent them or their interests. Graffiti allowed them to
find a niche where their attitude was reflected in the actions of others with similar feelings.

A disregard for established value systems and a scorn of popular opinion predominated among the participants. They had a different outlook on the world from most people and they desired to find expressions of that outlook wherever possible. Not only did they want to see other people breaking established norms, they wanted to see those norms being broken in a skillful way – a way that demonstrated artistic intent as well as a fearless appreciation of the hazards involved in carrying out such acts.

CAPTAIN PRACTICE let me know in no uncertain terms that he would never find himself golfing in a cashmere sweater and displaying his skills in such a pompous manner. NOIR relished hip-hop as a youth. At the time, hip-hop music was in its infancy and many listeners rejected the seemingly foreign and beat-driven, profane lyrics. GOMEZ was into skateboarding – a sport that, without permission, used and abused the infrastructure of cities in ways that were condemned by authorities. In another case, KID4 admitted to shoplifting as a way of rebelling against established norms. The risk of getting caught excited him. He felt that doing things he wasn’t allowed to do gave him more authority and autonomy over his life.

In every instance, the writers saw these unconventional expressions as vehicles for their non-conformist beliefs. Such activities as skateboarding, shoplifting, and listening to hip-hop were a way to explore the intersection of power
relationships in society, and my participants enjoyed pushing the limits of what CAPTAIN PRACTICE called “expression on the cusp of acceptability.” They felt that these activities were a way to rebel against the established norms which they detested.

When speaking about their first experiences with graffiti, all of the writers noted that they found it “cool,” and they immediately identified with it even if they didn’t understand it. KID4 was inspired by the self-motivated nature of pieces he witnessed. He had an epiphany that graffiti was done for different reasons than the other activities he had been taught in school. It was apparently without purpose. He admitted that at first he could not see a motive for it, even though so much time and money had been put into it. The other writers felt similarly about graffiti. Not only was it a visually appealing expression to them, but it involved risky behaviors that appealed to their adolescent outlooks. Graffiti’s inherent secrecy intrigued their sense of curiosity, and finding an insider group that resisted the power of authority encouraged them to feel that they were not alone in their dissidence.

Graffiti is an art form that is striking when reproduced in pictures, but viewing a photo of a masterpiece is nothing like standing in awe in front of a fresh wall covered in stylistically superb, precisely painted letters. Even for advanced writers, the thought of “How did they do that?” can come to mind. This is especially true if the letters are twenty feet up and ten feet out on a six-inch ledge. Upon seeing
such feats of courage and craftsmanship, my participants couldn’t help but be impressed.

GOMEZ called his first impressions of graffiti “exciting,” especially for someone who already identified as an artist. Similarly, NOIR also felt that graffiti was something within his artistic grasp. Along with CAPTAIN PRACTICE, all three writers talked about the pleasure they felt when practicing graffiti and drawing with their friends; finding others who felt similarly about art and culture allowed them to feel that their desired identity was supported and encouraged. They belonged to a society of other young men who held the same attitude they did toward mainstream culture, and they felt like they could identify with this literacy practice in a way that was not possible with other means of expression.

Literacy practices always involve power relationships, and graffiti’s relationship toward established powers was clear. Participating in this marginalized literacy practice gave the writers a distinct venue from which to shout their distaste for the status quo. The highly public nature of graffiti communications instilled tangible reasons to practice since they, like all writers, wanted to be the best. If they were going to commit themselves to a craft that could potentially put them in jail, they wanted to be sure that they were contributing the most they could.

The highly public nature of graffiti also gave these writers something to do when they moved throughout the city. The same thing that initially inspired them to begin writing, seeing tags and pieces, motivated them to get up and get out as much
as possible. Once they were initiated into graffiti’s deeper meanings they wanted to see the graffiti in their city and add to the discussion with their own works. The next section will discuss those elements of graffiti that gave them the motivation to continue practicing this illegal literacy. In the face of public scorn and potential incarceration, what kept them going? Why did they feel the need to push on and continue improving their graffiti skills?

*Taking the Next Steps: The Writer’s Motivation to Continue*

After their initial influences, the writers in this study knew they wanted to participate in the graffiti scene. Graffiti enabled them to put a visible face to their nonconformist beliefs. It united their distaste for the norm with their artistic sensibilities. However, there was a long road in front of them. They yearned to participate in the graffiti dialogue even when they didn’t quite know what that participation entailed.

As beginners to graffiti, they had inclinations about what graffiti meant, how it was done, and who participated in the literacy practice. However, it wasn’t until they began their active participation that they were able to come to a deeper understanding of the culture. Before they could become insiders, they had to negotiate their outsider status and push past the cultural barriers that stood in their way. This took significant motivation, spurred by an intense desire to be a part of the graffiti community.
The motivation to continue writing was closely linked to the identity that each writer wanted to have as a result of participating in the graffiti Discourse. They craved the sense of elitism that came with being an insider in a highly secretive, reclusive literacy practice. Even though this aspect of their identity was hidden from most people (and still remains that way), it was incredibly satisfying to know that they had made the commitment, stuck to it, and succeeded. The writers believed in what they were doing so strongly that their reward was not financially motivated. Instead, the writers’ motivation was based on two main elements of graffiti culture. The first element corresponded directly to the writers’ desire to participate in a countercultural movement. The illegal nature of most graffiti placements gave them a rush and grounded their efforts in an intense commitment to get it right. Indeed, if they failed at their efforts it meant social ostracism, jail, or even death.

The second element for the writers’ motivation was more personal. They wanted the fame and pride that came with being an accomplished graffiti writer. Within this element of fame and pride there were a variety of personal benefits reaped by each writer. Primarily, they relished the opportunity to be on the inside of an exclusive club. This meant the writers had to figure out the Discourse, discover its secrets, and apply them successfully. Participating in the socially negotiated literacy practice of graffiti meant that not only were they a witness to their own development, but that other writers were as well. In their efforts to improve at graffiti the writers were actively contributing to the dialogue happening on their local
walls. The feedback from other writers, or lack thereof, directly influenced their desire to continue writing and excel.

**Counterculturalism and illegality as a motivator.**

The efforts of graffiti writers lie outside of mainstream, culturally approved communication practices. As was noted earlier, graffiti writing continually places the writers on the boundaries of the law, allowing them explore the frontiers of acceptability within the culture at large. Among graffiti writers though, this border exploration is inherent and built into the structure of the Discourse. Beyond breaking city and state laws when they illegally paint, graffiti writers continually struggle to find a unique style that can set them apart from other writers. As such, they are attempting to break the unwritten rules of graffiti by writing in a way that no other writer has. This border area is exciting, and highly motivates writers. Graffiti culture’s artistic foundation rewards those who can creatively add their ideas to the discussion.

In their narratives, the participants had a strong focus on style. Style is a resource for respect among graffiti writers, and it indicates that writers have paid close attention to those artists who have come before them without copying or imitating their style. Instead, they have struck out on their own, defining a new way of manipulating alphabetic symbols. Just like breaking a municipal law, breaking the conventions of letters can be risky.
As MUFASA and CAPTAIN PRACTICE both noted, true breakthroughs occur in art when one pushes a style so far that it ends up failing. It is the reconstruction that occurs afterward, the analytical understanding of why the style failed or what could have been done differently that indicates a sincere desire to look past the immediate flaws and turn them into something productive in the future.

GOMEZ was another writer who confessed to staring at photos of his work for hours in search of what went right or wrong. Indeed, a highly motivating factor for my participants was pushing the limits of the craft. As writers chart new ground with their work, they change the Discourse, illustrating again the socially negotiated nature of this literacy practice. While they rely on the established conventions created by those who have come before them, they also seek to undermine those conventions with the creation of a new style that finds its niche in an area previously unexplored in graffiti literacy.

In the same way that pushing the limits of the Discourse can be exciting for the writers, pushing the limits of the law or breaking the law brings an unparalleled rush. The illegality intrinsic in public graffiti placements is as frightening as it is enticing. NOIR pointed out that once he became accustomed to breaking the law, he began to perceive it in a new light. NOIR understood that “the man” was not continually looking over his shoulder for any indiscretion he might commit, and it freed him to see the whole city as his potential canvas. KID4 mentioned that the heightened sensitivity he experienced when writing in public allowed him to be more
aware of what was happening around him. Knowing that getting caught was a possibility, and that it carried huge consequences, was intensely motivating for him.

KID4 and NOIR held philosophical beliefs regarding their involvement with graffiti’s illegality, but the same could not be said for the three other writers in this study. While they were keenly aware of graffiti’s place on the margins of societal acceptability, the fact that they were breaking the law was not in itself motivating. However, their illegal activities still held a motivational influence for them. The possibility of being caught heightened their commitment to the craft and forced them to be in the moment when they painted. GOMEZ reiterated this commitment by pointing out that writers face other dangers too. “You’ve really gotta believe in what you’re doing,” he declared in response to a story he told about a writer falling to his death from a high ledge. GOMEZ also went into great detail about the risks writers encounter when defacing another writer’s work. Violent altercations have been known to arise from the beef that many writers start by crossing out or painting over another’s piece.

Thus, the illegality of graffiti is only one hazard of the literacy practice with which writers must contend. It is true that they could be arrested and go to jail for contributing to their Discourse, but it is likely that they could suffer physical injury or death as well. After the experience of living so close to the edge, the writers found difficulty in replicating that rush. Not only did graffiti allow them to express themselves in a way that felt appropriate to them, it also granted them a high that,
once tasted, was difficult to satiate in any other form. As such, their motivation to continue writing had as much to do with replicating this rush by facing physical danger and pushing the limits of the law as it did with pushing the limits of the discourse.

*Fame and pride as motivators.*

Within graffiti culture, fame is central to a writer’s motivation. One of the primary goals of graffiti writers is to impress other writers with one’s skill, tenacity at getting the best placements, and a uniquely identifiable style. When a writer creates a piece that effectively demonstrates all three elements just described, he gets fame. Fame can come in many forms, but it is most desirable when it comes in the form of positive feedback from other writers. Sometimes this feedback is spoken, and other times it arrives as small tags and phrases written around the successful piece. Fame can also come from the general public, but it is not as meaningful because the general public is usually not aware of the many subtle, socially-negotiated customs underlying the painted pieces.

However, fame isn’t the only source of pride for graffiti writers. Being on the inside of the exclusive discourse of graffiti is also highly coveted, and brings with it the satisfaction of successfully finding a way into the insider group. Once my participants were initially inspired to write they had to forge a path when they didn’t know what they were doing. As they developed, their progression was visible and tangible. The writers’ learning was motivated by the immediate responses (from
peers, other writers, or the public) to their freshly acquired skills. They knew right away whether or not they were improving, and this motivated them to keep getting better.

The marginalized literacy practice of graffiti has no established rules or formal pedagogy to guide new writers on their quest for proficiency. When I asked each writer about the rules for graffiti, all of them had different answers. KID4 stammered at first and then replied, “Rules… [long pause] Are there rules?” This absence of a publically-known system for creating and disseminating graffiti presented a considerable challenge to my participants. They craved to achieve even when they didn’t quite know what achievement meant. In a literacy practice like graffiti, meaning is socially negotiated, so it was only natural that the writers looked to their peers for support and encouragement.

Graffiti seemingly has no purpose to those outside of the literacy practice. The meaning of graffiti is filled in by those witnessing the literacy events like pieces, tags, and other graffiti expressions. Discovering the deeper, socially based meanings of graffiti was a source of pride for the writers I interviewed. In four out of five cases, the writers only truly came to understand graffiti once they began to study with other practitioners, either through crews or with mentors. In an apprenticeship-type fashion these more experienced writers were able to pass down information they had learned. As the writers gradually developed skill with graffiti, their place within an inner circle of writers allowed for a venue of immediate feedback.
Being a member of an insider group was satisfying on its own, but an even more genuine source of pride for writers came with knowing they were advancing their technical (skills-based) and conceptual (meaning-based) understanding of graffiti. Their self-perception of skill was tangibly visible when they compared their work to those writers whom they admired. However, without the feedback from others, their personal opinions of their work were not validated. The participants finally reached a significant stage when they improved to the point where they could confidently place their work in public. This exposure opened them up to potentially harsh criticism but it also provided clues about how their work was being perceived by local experts. GOMEZ’s account of being crossed out for the first time, and the pain it caused him, was balanced by the feelings of elation he described when members of his crew gave him positive feedback on his work.

As with any literacy practice, the writers’ self-perception of skills were dependent upon the other writers in their area. CAPTAIN PRACTICE loved the fact that he was completely responsible for the quality of his writing, but also felt that others in the scene were the only ones who could accurately judge the quality of his work. This sense of holding an exclusive right to assess graffiti was a source of pride for all of the writers I interviewed. While this led to some motivating competition in some cases (NOIR was especially motivated by the need to outdo other writers), the eventual goal of fame was a more significant underlying factor. Beyond fame was a sense of community that the writers felt when contributing to the
dialogue in their chosen literacy practice. There was indeed a community within graffiti crews and mentorships, yet graffiti’s visual nature also enabled the graffiti community to exist on walls where members were physically absent. Even in relative isolation from graffiti crews or mentors, KID4’s development was socially negotiated through the messages writers left (or didn’t leave) near his public paintings. His story helps illuminate this sense of community that develops on the wall.

KID4 was the only writer I interviewed who made his way through the graffiti ranks alone. His solitary advancement was not as singular as it appears though. Through his efforts, KID4 was able to develop a highly perceptive awareness of the visual discourse occurring on his local walls. As a beginner, he saw his first tags get ignored or crossed out. His pieces, once he got to that level, were quickly painted over. Gradually though, as his skills improved, KID4 started noticing that when he left a tag, other tags would appear around it. When he painted a piece it would be left alone. He interpreted these actions as an approval of his work and understood that he was participating in a community dialogue. While he may not have been able to hear about his fame through spoken words, KID4 was able to be proud that his expressions were affecting what other writers were doing on the wall. When they saw his pieces they could cross them out or paint over them, but when they started leaving them alone he took that as a sign of respect. Knowing he was a part of this community, even in a small way, was deeply motivating to him.
KID4’s nuanced perception of the visual dialogue inherent to graffiti indicates the refined understandings and meanings that all of the participants developed in their desire for graffiti proficiency. Getting there wasn’t easy for them since they faced major cultural hurdles, including the illegality of graffiti and a lack of established pathways to success. However, graffiti’s countercultural aspects, its embrace of individual expression, and the ever-present promise of fame and pride motivated the writers to push past those hurdles and achieve proficiency. In the following section, I will explore some of the learning strategies utilized by the writers to improve their graffiti skills and conceptual understanding.

Learning Strategies

The writers all began at the same level. They knew nothing about graffiti except that it captured their attention and influenced them to give it a try. Four of them had no resources from which to figure out the deeper meanings of the literacy practice, they simply had to figure it out on their own. As they grew in their involvement with graffiti they were able to make social connections that facilitated more rapid growth. These social groups were self-organized and lacked a central command or structure, but nonetheless assisted the writers through clear pedagogical methods like mentorships and black book exchanges. The writers I interviewed are now masters at their craft. Between their status as toys and their current mastery, they followed distinct pathways to proficiency. Among my participants though,
there are several shared factors that were employed as learning strategies to develop their knowledge of graffiti literacy.

It has been shown that literacy practices do not have distinct boundaries and that their border regions are fertile grounds for exploration; where literacy skills and abilities are combined in new ways and for new purposes (Barton & Hamilton, 2005). Individuals exploring these boundaries are commonly extracting the skills, examples, and advice from one literacy practice into another literacy practice. In some cases, the new literacy practice may be a hybrid between several different modes of communication (Kress, 2003).

All of the writers in this study were taking elements of school-based literacy practices and mixing them into their new-found literacy practice of graffiti. Their knowledge of alphabetic encoding was blended with their artistic skills to create a communication system that gave them a sense of purpose and agency. Although many of the strategies my participants used in their quest for proficiency mirror academic methods or have their roots in school-based literacy, none of the writers practiced their explorations of graffiti at school. Their efforts, and eventual success, are a reminder of the socially-situated nature of any literacy practice. Mastery, then, does not reside in the teacher, but in the community of practice in which that mastery is honored and perpetuated (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The narratives presented to me by my participants have revealed two primary strategies that were used to develop proficiency in the marginalized literacy practice
of graffiti. Primarily, the situated efforts of the writers gave them an immediate
venue for utilizing their skills in a meaningful way. The activities they performed in
their attempts to improve their graffiti literacy were strongly self-motivated because
they could see a purpose for their hard work. Second, all of the writers cited
repetitive practice as the central strategy used to improve their skills. Repetition was
the key to unlocking the graffiti mysteries that captivated them. This repetition was
carried out on their own or with others, or in sketch books. Sketch books were used
as a method for transferring knowledge throughout a larger, geographically or
temporally separated group. The writers also took advantage of the malleable
structure of graffiti writing to consistently create public works, even before they
were truly ready to do so.

The other strategies utilized by the writers were memberships in crews and
mentor-based partnerships. These social connections served as a replacement for the
traditional classroom, enabling the writers to advance their learning beyond simple
trial and error. Within crews, feedback and critical discussions allowed the writers to
learn both the technical (skills-based) side of graffiti as well as the conceptual
(meaning creating) foundations. Additionally, crews and mentors provided a support
system for the writers, giving them scaffolded learning opportunities, real-time
feedback, art supplies, and procedural supports to help carry out meaningful literacy
events.
Situated, self-motivated strategies for learning.

One of the perplexing elements of graffiti is its seeming simplicity and accessibility. Because the literacy practice occurs mainly in public locations and on public property it can appear that anyone can do it – all they need is a can of spray paint and they can be a graffiti writer. However, all of my participants expressed their disdain for writers who publically write before they are ready. This notion that a writer must be proficient before presenting their work to the public reveals that graffiti is not something that everyone can do. Only those individuals who have dedicated enormous amounts of time practicing their skills and understanding of the conceptual elements of writing will be successful in creating meaningful literacy events.

The most important learning strategy for my participants was informed practice (versus simply copying other’s work). Practice enabled them to arrive at a deeper understanding of the fundamentals of letter structure, spray can control, line quality, and more. KID4 and NOIR both stressed that they could tell when a writer had practiced their skills and knew the literacy “inside and out.” For them, presenting oneself to the public without first mastering the basic elements of graffiti writing was shameful. The singular way to achieve such mastery was though simple, analytic, repetition. GOMEZ noted that when he was first learning graffiti he would practice his tag hundreds of time on a single sheet of paper, then move on to do two hundred more sheets in the same way. With each tag he would analyze what went
right or wrong, and attempt to correct it with subsequent attempts. This type of dedication to developing one’s skills is not easy, but the goals of my participants were clear to them. They wanted to be the best, and they understood that the only way to achieve their goal was to, as CAPTAIN PRACTICE noted, “practice, practice, practice, practice.”

The self-motivation that each writer expressed when they first began would be the envy of any classroom teacher. Normally in an academic setting the goals of learning are external and the learning strategies are explicit. In such a context, creating an essay, filling out a worksheet, or reviewing a book is typically not the choice of the learner so the learner is not engaged in an intrinsic, motivated way. The avenues for applying the fruits of one’s labor are not readily apparent and seem to end when the learner exits the school campus.

Graffiti writing, initiated by choice among the participants, is the opposite. The learning that happens through practice can be immediately applied to a goal of improving and becoming visibly better at writing graffiti. Furthermore, the learning is situated because the novice graffiti writer is participating in a meaningful way within the culture of graffiti. Even if this participation is minimal, it provides an authentic venue for realizing the value of the acquired skills. This immediate application of skills can take the form of private or public drawings, but in each case the learning is situated. Through small advancements and genuine participation, the writers take on an informed ownership of their learning.
Even though they would discourage it now, all of the participants stated that they would freely write in public before they were truly ready to do so. Through feedback on their graffiti (either spoken or written) the writers could gauge their skills with others in the graffiti scene to see whether or not development had occurred. Their goals, being self-chosen, created an internal motivation for the writers and gave them the passion and excitement needed to practice relentlessly. There was a purpose to their actions that carried great meaning for the writers. When they wrote publically before they were ready, it enabled them to make real mistakes and get real feedback on their work. Even if the feedback indicated they had a lot more work to do, it still meant that they were participating in a literacy practice of their choice.

Among the participants, a learning strategy related to practice was the use of sketch books. Sketch books gave the writers a private location to work out the complexities of their craft. The bound nature of the books also preserved their efforts so they could revisit them at a later date. In addition, the writers lucky enough to have mentors noted that these more experienced practitioners would sign a tag or draw a piece in their sketch books as a model for the inexperienced writer. Sometimes these tags and pieces would be the name of the mentor, but when they drew the participants’ names in their sketch books, those models genuinely assisted them in figuring out the letters in their own name. With free permission to copy as
many times as necessary in the private venues of their books, the writers could study, through deliberate action, what made their mentor’s writing successful.

The writers’ discussion of sketch books also revealed that they were an effective self-organizing tool for disseminating and commenting on new styles or innovations within a specific graffiti scene. Although sketchbooks were the property of one writer, many times that writer would pass their sketchbook off (often for days or weeks at a time) to other writers so that they could draw in it as well. The result was similar to that of a textbook for the writers to refer back to when they craved inspiration or motivation. Within sketch books writers could leave a trace of their skills for other writers separated by geography or time. This allowed my participants to be exposed to a much broader array of graffiti than if they simply relied on local walls for learning. Thus, the ephemeral nature of public graffiti placements was countered by the relative permanence of the writers’ sketch books.

**Crews and mentors as learning strategies.**

Without a situated need to improve, many school-based literacies rarely engender a desire for critical feedback and a full commitment toward improvement. Thus, schools tend to value shallow representations of knowledge instead of permanent and true understanding. Graffiti writers who take part in the full Discourse of graffiti have, in contrast, many reasons to embed their learning within a deeper understanding of the culture. The personal investment my participants had in
learning graffiti enabled them to openly value critical discussions of their work as well as the work of others.

Among graffiti crews and mentorships this honest discussion of techniques and concepts is one example of their educational foundations. GOMEZ and NOIR pointed out that as graffiti writers mature they need to make a choice about how far they are willing to go with their skills. Compared to the relatively solitary and simple practice of tagging, painting pieces is an extremely complex task. In order to master the craft of piecing the writers needed access to all of the elements involved in creating a piece. Crews provided this essential task to four of my participants.

Three of the writers also relied upon mentors to help lead them through the unwritten rules of graffiti writing. With these aids they didn’t have to rely solely upon trial and error to improve and they progressed significantly faster than KID4, who was making his way alone.

Crews are a physical manifestation of the socially-negotiated process of learning a new literacy practice. Their function is two-fold: to create fame for the crew and the writers in the crew, and to recruit new members who will be the next generation of writers to take over the crew. In an effort to be the best they can be, crew members participate in legitimate educational endeavors meant to improve the skills of everyone in their crew. The writers’ bench, mentioned earlier, is one example of crew members getting together to critically discuss and observe each other’s work. NOIR was especially fond of this strategy and felt that it validated
what he did or did not know about graffiti in a space that was safe and comfortable for him.

Because the writers’ learning was situated – it had direct, applicable goals for the skills the writers desired – it enabled the learning within crews to be authentic and straightforward. Crews could provide scaffolded support to new writers, meaning that they were able to provide the right amount of assistance at just the right time. GOMEZ, whose narrative provided the best picture of this scaffolding at work, stated that his crew allowed him to go on bombing (late night painting) missions where he gradually took on more responsibilities. At first he was just watching how things were done. Soon, as his own painting skills progressed, he was encouraged to do the fill-ins of letters that were drawn by more proficient members. He then moved on to doing small characters (expressive, cartoon-like figures) next to the experienced members’ pieces, and eventually was permitted to do his own pieces. Each step of the way, he had the support of his crew members who showed him how to accomplish each technique in a respectful, encouraging, and risk-free manner (as long as they weren’t busted for painting!). These step by step procedural supports were also mentioned by NOIR, CAPTAIN PRACTICE, and MUFASA as their second-most effective learning strategy.

Within crews, some of the writers I interviewed were fortunate to have a personal, one-on-one connection to another, more experienced writer. Within graffiti culture this connection is known as a mentor. Like crews, mentors can offer
scaffolded support but their assistance is often even more individualized and specific to the needs of the writer. NOIR, GOMEZ, and MUFASA all had mentors.

MUFASA noted that graffiti was a literacy that had to be learned “collectively” and he shared with me the specifics of his mentor’s tutelage. For example, from his mentor MUFASA was able to learn how to control his spray can and how to keep a low profile when painting illegally.

Literacy practices always involve power relationships. In the case of formal education, those power relationships can sometimes be hidden beneath layers of school rules and traditions. Within graffiti mentorships the power relationships were honest and open. There was no hiding the fact that a mentor had superior graffiti skills compared to his mentee. In this case, two things helped level the playing field in order to create a comfortable, skills-driven relationship. The fact that the mentorship was a chosen endeavor meant that the new writer could back out at any time – a luxury not afforded to students in public education. Also, the hierarchy of power was not based on age or disciplinary measures. Visual demonstrations of skill determined status for the writers and each person could easily recognize what made one skill level better than another. For NOIR, GOMEZ, and MUFASA, their goal was to improve their understanding of graffiti. For their mentors, the purpose of the relationship was to pass on their knowledge about the customs of graffiti to a new generation of writers.
One method of passing down knowledge was to give letters to writers who were just beginning to figure out letter structure. NOIR understood that his letters were poor and could easily surmise that his mentor was able to effortlessly generate powerful letters. When his mentor gave him an “A” to use (his real graffiti name includes this letter) he was able to construct the remaining letters in his name around this solid base. At this stage of his writing NOIR was unable to articulate the concepts behind poor or strong letters, and simply copying a piece would have been unsatisfactory because his copied piece would never look the same. Working from the given “A” though, he was able to get to know proper letter structure in a physical form by drawing that “A” and then figuring out the other aesthetically similar letters on his own. GOMEZ and KID4 also reiterated the need to draw one’s own letters in order to come to a legitimate understanding of letter structure.

Knowing why a letter is successful gave authenticity and pride to my participants’ work. Furthermore, by showing their work to other members of their crew or taking it directly to the streets, the writers were able to immediately apply their new skills in a specific venue that allowed for timely feedback. This situated, socially-negotiated learning environment was a highly effective training method that allowed for them to discover both the technical and conceptual sides of graffiti literacy.

Feedback was essential for the writers to develop their awareness of the many facets of graffiti literacy. For all of my participants this feedback could come in two
forms. When it came in a painted form, such as being crossed out, painted over, or tagged next to, the feedback was more environmentally specific. This feedback was the primary channel for my participants to learn the technical side of graffiti since these comments relied mainly upon the writers’ presentation of skill. Feedback that came from mentors or crew members tended to be media specific. It focused on the tools and techniques the writers were using and how those tools and techniques could generate a more nuanced message. In this way, those writers who were in crews had greater access to both forms of feedback, which facilitated a more rounded approach to the craft. KID4, relying only upon the skill-based feedback he received on walls, could not be as confident that he understood the conceptual elements of graffiti. The four other writers not only had more confidence in their skills and conceptual understanding, but their experience with both forms of feedback enabled their skills and confidence to grow more quickly.

Conclusion

The narratives shared with me by my participants revealed a wide range of experiences specific to their geographical locations and their access to graffiti experts. An analysis of these narratives has exposed the difficulties encountered by writers on their journey to proficiency, as well as the unique pathways and strategies they utilized to overcome such barriers. The challenges the writers faced included the illegality of the literacy practice, being raised in a rural area devoid of street-level graffiti, and finding other writers from which to learn. Some successful learning
efforts identified by the writers were persistent, informed practice, the use of sketchbooks, and being receptive to constructive feedback from their mentors, crews, or other writers in the area.

Individual influences and motivations varied between the participants. However, there were some factors that were shared by all of them. Particularly noticeable among these factors were four themes that emerged as being most important to the writers’ development. First, the writers all viewed the world through the eyes of artists. This creative mindset allowed them to see graffiti as artistic expression rather than vandalism. Second, they had to be exposed to graffiti in order to be motivated to try it themselves. Witnessing the grandeur of perfect masterpieces was so compelling for them that they had to try it themselves. The writers also had a certain outlook on society that placed them on the fringe of social norms. This countercultural feeling, although subtle, was critical to their attraction. The fourth theme was a desire for the fame and the pride that resulted when a writer had achieved mastery of their craft. These feelings were addicting and the quest to be the best writer kept them motivated to continue practicing and improving their skills.

The writers’ relation to these themes was linked to their need to identify themselves as graffiti writers. All five writers were keenly aware that their outlook on life placed them outside mainstream cultural ideals. They were attracted to graffiti because it allowed them to embody these outsider feelings and express their
opinions in what they felt was the most appropriate way. Graffiti was a perfect union for them, giving them a creative outlet for their attitude and an identity that fit with how they felt about themselves as individuals.

The next chapter will explore the limitations of this thesis, the ramifications of the findings for professional educators, and recommendations for future research on the marginalized literacy practice of graffiti.
Five master writers shared with me the story of their journey from incompetence to proficiency in the marginalized literacy practice of graffiti. As I sought to understand what influenced the writers to begin their interest in graffiti, what motivated them to continue learning graffiti when faced with many cultural barriers, and what learning strategies they utilized to acquire their graffiti skills, I came to two major insights. Primarily, I was able to successfully answer my research question which sought to understand how graffiti writers attain proficiency through informal learning and meaning making. Second, from the writers’ perspective my request to interview them supported their passion for graffiti writing. Frequently this passion is seen as a liability, even by the writers, due to graffiti’s illegality. When I asked them to participate in this study their skills were honored, and they found it thrilling to participate in an academic paper. The writers appreciated the opportunity to speak freely about graffiti in such a way that the literacy practice was made real and validated instead of being ignored or denigrated.

The interviews were qualitative in nature, enabling the writers to describe in their own language the significant moments in their quest for graffiti proficiency. The results presented in this thesis were strictly limited to the writers’ recollections of lived experiences. Each writer was able to choose from the innumerable events
that led them to their current status as masters. Within the confines of an hour-long interview, this selective process underscores the impossibility of uncovering every detail of their development.

The writers’ narratives authenticated claims that graffiti is a literacy practice constructed through socially-negotiated networks of meaning and sense making. These social connections were essential to the writers’ comprehensive development within the Discourse of graffiti. On their route to proficiency the participants discovered, through friends, images, and media, those larger cultural indicators that would eventually enable them to be graffiti writers. Simply knowing the literacy practice—having the ability to manipulate alphabetic symbols according to socially specified systems—was not enough. Their educational journey also taught them how to look, sound, and act like graffiti writers. The result was full access to the Discourse which allowed for legitimate learning as they came to a situated understanding of graffiti and were able to converse with other writers. Additionally, their growing proficiency enabled them to add their unique contributions to the literacy practice as they brought different schemas of prior knowledge to bear upon their own interpretations of graffiti literacy.

A major hurdle for all of the writers was finding access to a social group from whom to learn. Graffiti’s illegality prompted the writers to hide their graffiti identities and only disclose their status to other writers. Four of the participants were able to join graffiti crews and found support and enhanced expertise through their
crews. One writer in this study learned his craft alone. He never successfully joined others face to face for the purposes of teaching or learning. However, his determination led to a proficiency that demonstrates how the graffiti Discourse lives as much on the walls where it is painted as it does in the physically present relations between writers.

**Limitations of The Research**

The research for this study was based upon semi-structured interviews. Due to the qualitative nature of the data collected, I can only draw conclusions for the writers interviewed. The marginalized literacy practice of graffiti is a world-wide phenomenon carried out by similar writers and for similar purposes, but the results of this study apply only to the five rural writers who agreed to share their stories with me.

Graffiti’s illegality presented some difficulty in finding participants to interview. The laws banning graffiti in the geographical area where I was collecting data cause writers to hide their graffiti identities. They must be highly secretive in order to protect themselves from the harsh penalties handed down if they were to be caught participating in a literacy practice in which they strongly believe and with which they strongly identify. Because of this, some exceptional writers may be so guarded that they would never consider taking the risk to participate in an academic interview for research purposes, even for a researcher with good contacts and verifiable references. Additionally, graffiti’s countercultural status is a strong
attractor for some writers, and those writers who seek to maintain graffiti’s underground character may refuse to be interviewed so as to prevent a more open discussion of graffiti’s merits. Indeed, some writers would be wholly turned away from graffiti if it became more commonly accepted in mainstream culture.

Graffiti’s illegality also presented some technical challenges for gathering data in a secure way that did not cause potential harm for the researcher or participants. The limitations set forth for me by the Institutional Review Board prevented me from collecting visual records of data regarding the writers’ development. As such, this study focused exclusively on the spoken experiences articulated by those who participate in a uniquely visual expression. Therefore, my data collection and analysis focused on the social progression of the writers’ skills and not on their visual or technical progression.

Finally, the volume of interview data that I collected far exceeded the narrow focus of a Master’s thesis. I could only draw out the most significant themes and those aspects that did not effectively fit into such themes were necessarily left out. An increased analysis of the interview transcripts may provide for an even deeper understanding of the writers’ informal education from graffiti toys to graffiti masters.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

While I analyzed the results of the writers’ narratives, many opportunities for future research were revealed. Primary among these was the need for a larger sample size. The relatively limited nature of the results could be made more
applicable to larger populations of graffiti writers if the sample size were increased. For example, sample groups from other rural communities in the United States could be used to compare the similarities and differences of writers’ developments throughout separate geographical locations. Also, in my research, four of the participants were European American and one was Asian American. Data from a broader range of ethnicities would also help provide for a more comprehensive understanding of how graffiti writers learn this marginalized literacy practice, and what, if any, implications can be drawn in regard to the ethnicity of writers. In addition, this study focused exclusively on a male perspective of graffiti. Future studies of graffiti education from a female perspective would enhance an understanding of the literacy practice as a whole, as well as illuminate the unique challenges females face when attempting to learn graffiti.

The interviews that were conducted for data gathering were specific to the needs of this thesis and the experiences of mature, competent, adult writers who were looking back upon their personal developmental experiences. Research aiming to discover teen aged adolescent writers who have just begun their quest for graffiti proficiency would paint a more vivid picture of the early influences that drive young boys and girls to make such a choice. Their fresh perspective would not be corrupted by the length of time that passes between their initial influences and a researcher’s data collection. Even more effective would be a longitudinal study that followed these writers from their earliest attempts at graffiti through to their eventual
(if any) mastery. Such a study would provide the best (although non-generalizable) results regarding the trajectory of young writers as they travel through the stages of graffiti development.

Another area for future research would be to explore the effects of graffiti’s illegality on the lives of writers. In addition to the obvious legal implications (e.g., arrest, fines, community service, incarceration, etc.), a study that sought to define the psychological effects of this literacy practice upon its practitioners would allow for a more nuanced perspective on the hazards of vilifying any literacy practice. Considering the growing numbers of young men and women who are choosing to take up the spray can throughout the world, it would be prudent to explore not only why they are making this choice, but also what effects such a choice has on their psyche. Learners who excel at recognized and approved literacy practices are publically honored and rewarded for such efforts. Graffiti writers who excel at their craft must hide their expertise, and this forced secrecy undoubtedly has distinctive psychological consequences.

Similarly, a better understanding of adolescents’ informal learning and sense-making of literacy practices is needed. Research focusing on literacy practices helps to locate literacy away from a set of properties existing in the minds of people and toward an interpretation of literacy occurring in the relations between people and within social groups and communities. Adolescents are combining their formal academic literacies in the service of less dominant models (Ito et al., 2010), and it
would be critical to have a more diverse body of New Literacy Studies-based inquiries that are focused exclusively on youth. More studies that seek out the broader underlying factors that inform youths’ construction of literacy practices may assist educators and policy makers in crafting a new model of education for Twenty-First Century learners. To avoid studying such changes would be to deny the existence and importance of marginalized literacy practices among young people, and serve to divert their energies from formal academics and toward those social groups and communities which foster increased acceptance for their choices of alternative expression.

Summary

This thesis adds to the limited research on graffiti writers’ informal learning practices. In the analysis of their narratives, it was revealed how the writers’ situated learning strategies are similar to a body of research that already acknowledges the importance of the New Literacy Studies as a pedagogical outlook. In this study, I was seeking to unite conceptions of literacy with authentic out-of-school learning experiences. An increased understanding of the importance of marginalized literacy practices in the lives of youth may contribute to new educational models that will give equal weight to all forms of literacy instead of perpetuating an outdated, autonomous model. Rather than relying upon a dominant model that privileges one form of literacy and has the potential to overshadow the fragile identities of young, inquisitive minds, I hope this research will allow educators a fresh look at the
possibilities that education can offer individuals, and the ways in which diverse identities can be honored within compulsory schooling.

The positive, affirming opportunities that graffiti has allowed in NOIR, CAPTAIN PRACTICE, GOMEZ, KID4, and MUFASA are the result of any individual’s successful embrace of a literacy practice. The writers’ mastery of graffiti is proof that social groups have the power to transform lives, even when such transformation is deemed illegal. Future educators have much to gain by accepting a wide array of literacy practices in school. Freeing students to bring their unique identities to school, as well as take what they’ve learned to their lives out of school, will give them the support they need to discover the infinitely varied ways in which they can contribute to our shared society.
APPENDIX A

ANNOTATED GLOSSARY OF GRAFFITI TERMS

The following terms are fluid and socially negotiated among graffiti writers. They are subject to variation based upon regions or time periods. This appendix is intended to give the reader more familiarity with graffiti vocabulary, not to provide an exhaustive list of graffiti terms.

Bombing: the act of writing prolifically, especially in a single day or night.

Crew: an organized group of writers. The writers may organize for several reasons, including camaraderie, pooling of resources, and informal educational efforts.

Hip Hop: the form of music that is generally associated with the birth of graffiti.

Today, graffiti artists do not always associate with this genre.

Oner: an individual working solo without a group or a crew.

Piece (noun): a multicolored graffiti mural with several layers and an emphasis on stylized letters. Pieces are generally considered the highest caliber graffiti.

The term is a shortened version of “masterpiece.”

Piece (verb): the act of creating a piece.

Tag (noun): a writer’s signature on a highly visible surface. Some tags are stationary, written on fences, signs, walls, and other stable surfaces. Some tags get more exposure when placed on moving objects such as busses and delivery vehicles.

Tagging: the act of writing a tag.
Toy: a new, unsophisticated or inexperienced writer. Toys often get crossed out or
disrespected simply because they are presenting a poor quality form of
graffiti to the public.

Scribbling: poor quality tagging.

Sketch book: the graffiti writers’ bible. Sketch books, also referred to as piecebooks
or black books, are where writers share styles, practice tags and pieces, and
develop innovations. They are often shared among writers, although one
writer lays claim to the book. Sketchbooks are critical to graffiti education.

Spot in heaven: to get a piece or tag on a highway overpass or sign. Typically, the
higher the piece or tag, or the further out it is over the highway, the more
regarded it is due to the risk of placing the piece or tag in such a location.

Throwup: A quickly-drawn graffiti mark. Throwups are larger than tags but
typically smaller than pieces. They are characterized by bubble-type letters
that are two colors. One color fills in the inside of the letters, and a
contrasting color outlines the letters.

Writing: the act of tagging or piecing.

Writer: a person who creates graffiti publically.
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

The following questions were designed to gather data about graffiti writers’ influences for beginning to write graffiti, their motivations for continuing the practice, and the learning strategies they employed (or currently employ) to achieve proficiency in graffiti writing. The interviews were set up in a Semi-Structured format. The questions presented here provided a frame for the interviews, but topics discussed in the interviews varied depending on the participants’ answers to the questions. To allow for the complexity of diverse perspectives and individual expressions of graffiti writers’ point of view, it was essential to let the interviewee lead the conversation. Additionally, follow-up questions are included and may have been asked in order to probe further as necessary. The questions listed here were not necessarily asked in this scheduled order. Finally, some of the questions I asked in the interview came from the context of the conversation and were not from this interview schedule.

What influenced you to begin writing graffiti?
How important were your friends and/or neighbors as agents of this influence?
Did you see other graffiti writers’ paintings in public spaces? What affect did these observations have on your decision to begin writing graffiti?
Were you exposed to graffiti magazines and websites before or after you took an interest in graffiti? To what extent did these resources contribute to your decision to begin writing?

Did you take any art classes in school? If so, what types of art did you make?

Was graffiti ever brought up in your art classes at school? Why or why not?

Did you have any friends or acquaintances that were into graffiti?

Did your family have any influence on your decision to begin writing?

Did your family know about your involvement with graffiti? Do they know now?

How does their acceptance, resentment, and/or unawareness of your involvement in graffiti affect your involvement?

What other influences contributed to your desire to begin writing graffiti?

How important to you was the desire to belong to a graffiti community or take part in the culture of graffiti?

To what extent was your involvement with graffiti motivated by a need to identify with an underground or counter-cultural movement?

To what extent was your desire to write graffiti influenced by a need to figure it all out for yourself?

To what extent does your involvement with graffiti have to do with anti-establishment philosophies?

How does the illegal nature of some graffiti activities affect your desire to participate in those activities?
If you participate in illegal graffiti activities, what appeals to you about the illegality of them? Do you have any concerns about the illegality of them?

How do you go about keeping a low profile and hiding any potentially illegal behavior? Who taught you these strategies, or how did you figure them out?

How important are the visibility of graffiti texts to you? If other writers see your work around town, how does that contribute to your motivation to continue your involvement with graffiti?

How do you feel when you see your own work around town?

How were you accepted and welcomed into a graffiti community? What did you need to do to become a member of this community?

How does hanging out and working with other graffiti writers motivate you, if at all?

To what extent does competition among graffiti writers and graffiti crews motivate your involvement in graffiti?

What else motivates you that we may not have discussed?

What did you do to learn graffiti skills?

How important was a sketch book in your development of graffiti skills?

What is a writers’ bench? Have you ever participated in one? What was that experience like?

How did you learn about letter structures and conventions?

What makes some letter styles better than others?

How does a graffiti writer create their own style?
What differentiates one style from another?

Did you ever watch any demonstrations of how to draw graffiti-style letters?

Did you have a mentor to help you become a more proficient member of graffiti culture? How did you meet this person(s)? To what extent did they contribute to your development as a writer? As you became more proficient, how did their role as mentor change?

What kind of feedback was important to you as a new writer?

Did you ever have someone school or critique your sketch book?

How important is it (or was it) to hear feedback from other writers about the work you’ve done?

How did you learn about the unwritten rules of graffiti? Can you describe some of those rules for me?

What does it feel like to have a piece crossed out or painted over?

Have you ever had anyone bite your work? How did that feel? Did you ever bite someone else’s style as you developed your proficiency?

To what extent is biting a necessary step in the evolution of a graffiti writer?

At what point did you consider yourself as not being a toy? Did you make that distinction, or did someone else?

What type of skills did you need to learn so that you were not a toy?

How long have you been writing graffiti?

How often do you write?
How do you compare your skills to other graffiti writers in our local area?

How does the graffiti scene in our local area differ from those in other areas?
REFERENCES


