Introduction
My initiation into the world of graffiti writers began in the fall of 1995. I was riding my bike over the Williamsburg Bridge in Brooklyn, New York and was overwhelmed by a large and colourful graffiti painting. The piece said ‘Sento’ and each letter had a different style, and twisted into the next producing a wholeness that was readable even to my novice eyes. Various greens melding into blues, twisting back into the forest green background, yellow highlights orange accents, light blue shading and white outlined letters ‘S E N T O’. Although surrounded by graffiti in New York City, it had finally penetrated my indifference. This was the first time I had really looked at it as something to be seen, instead of just white noise, something to be overlooked and avoided. I relayed my bridge incident to a co-worker who I had overheard was involved with graffiti. He lent me his copy of the classic book, *Getting Up: Subway Graffiti in New York*, by Craig Castleman (1982). The book told the story of the New York City graffiti scene during the 1970s, albeit one of graffiti’s most colourful periods, but since then not a single text had been written about the graffiti that I had seen on the bridge and I badly wanted to know more.

I would spend the next decade studying graffiti subculture. I established entrée in the graffiti community by asking writers to piece words in a ‘blackbook’, and I would then interview the writers based on the words they chose. As time went on my knowledge of the culture grew which increased my ability to establish relationships with more accomplished writers. I spent years hanging out with writers such as VERT, ESPO, AME, PSOUP, AMAZE, MEK, CRO, HUSH, RELS, KR, DES, KEST, EARSNOT, ZER, KEZAM, COLT and others, who taught me about their world. In these participant observation settings, I often played the role of lookout and documenter, and once even proudly assisted ESPO in the painting of one of his murals (Snyder, 2009).

The beginning
TAKI 183 was the first New York writer to recognise that the purpose of writing your name was to produce fame. A 1971 *New York Times* article, ‘Taki Spawns Pen Pals’, inspired many youth all across the city to begin writing. In just a short time, the culture progressed from scribbled
signatures to elaborate masterpieces, or ‘pieces’, done with multiple aerosol colours on the sides of New York City subway cars. Soon thereafter, the best writers would paint pieces that covered an entire train, or the ‘whole car’. Writers whose names were up the most were called ‘Kings’ and they were exalted by their peers. By 1974, BLADE was doing conceptual pieces in which an octopus held up each letter in his name. By 1977, LEE and members of his FAB 5 crew painted an entire train, a total of ten cars, over the period of two nights. Other superstars from this period include STAY HIGH 149, HURTZ, SLUG, SLAVE, DOC, MONO, VULCAN, and BAMA.

This activity got considerable attention throughout the world, and while the reaction from the public was often positive (Goldstein, 1980), the response from city hall was not. Both John Lindsay and Ed Koch, mayors during the 1960s and 1970s respectively, implemented wars on this new form of writing, which they called graffiti (Austin, 2001). Meanwhile, gallery owners and art collectors at home and abroad, were treating some writers like artists and paying them for their work. This was their first glimpse that they might be able to have a future of their own making.5

While New York City’s mayors were busy leading their war on urban youth, gallery owners at home and abroad were inviting talented writers like DONDI, ZEPHYR, PINK, CRASH and others to exhibit their work on canvas. The first show was in the Bronx, in 1978 at the Fashion Moda gallery. Then in the spring of 1980, ZEPHYR and FUTURA developed a relationship with Samuel Esses, an art collector. In an effort to preserve graffiti art, Esses, along with ZEPHYR and FUTURA, invited writers into his studio to do aerosol on canvas. It was here that writers learned that they could successfully translate some of their creative ideas to a new medium.

In 1983, Dutchman Yaki Kornblitt invited DONDI and others to show their work in his gallery. Later that year these writers, who at home were being treated like criminals by the mayor, showed their work at the Boymans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, Amsterdam.

When I began my research, the academic literature on contemporary graffiti was slim. Craig Castleman’s Getting Up (1982) was seminal in its exploration of the train era, while cultural criminologist Jeff Ferrell’s (1993) Crimes of Style explored the graffiti scene in Denver, Colorado. That, along with Richard. Lachman’s article ‘Graffiti as Career and Ideology’, (1988), was it.

In the new century, graffiti’s popularity within the academy increased rapidly. Nancy Macdonald argues in The Graffiti Subculture (2001) that graffiti is a site for the formation of male identity. Joe Austin’s Taking the Train (2001) is the seminal historical account of the social construction of graffiti as a crime in New York City.


In 1989, the New York City train era officially came to a close. When city officials refused to put painted trains into service, graffiti on the subways no longer produced fame. So writers took to the streets, and continued to progress the form. This move freed writers from underground tunnels and forced them to become experts of urban exploration in cities all over the world. (Some writers still paint clean trains for the thrill and the ‘flicks’ (i.e. photos), although the trains are never put into service.)

The idea of graffiti names on canvas lost much of its momentum, but in the mid-1990s the next generation of writers, many of whom were art school graduates, forced their way back into galleries to do installations. TWIST (Barry McGee) was a pioneer in this direction and his
success created opportunities for others. Fellow former writers, ESPO (Steve Powers), REAS (Todd James) and so many others have moved beyond piecing with spray cans to conceptual pieces that deal with signage, commercialism, fame and urban aesthetics. This artistic work is not graffiti, but it is clear by their use of letters, graphics and sometimes aerosol paint, that each of these artists’ vision was developed in conversation with the cities’ built environment.

There are also writers who have turned their youthful graffiti success into other adult careers. There are writers like the members of TATS CRU who are muralists for hire, tattoo artists like VERT, graphic designers like DES and numerous magazine publishers.

Graffiti is not a monolithic culture. Writers are white, brown, light and dark skinned; they are rich, poor, smart and dumb; most are male; some are militantly opposed to social norms, some are quiet conformists, while others are practical political activists; they span a broad range of ethnic groups; they come from the cities, from the suburbs and some from the country and they are from cities which include, New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, DC, Paris, Berlin, Stuttgart, Amsterdam, Tokyo, Sao Paulo and Santiago.

The culture of writers is not bound together by appearance, language, birthplace, or class. Although many recognise and respect these differences, what binds them is the history of graffiti and the process of doing it. Writers are a multi-class, race, ethnic, religious and lingual culture of younger and older people who define themselves not on what they look like or what language they speak, or what clothes they wear, but on what they do. Their identities are as writers first, and as ethnic, religious etc. –writers second. I am not trying to claim that writers never experience or evince the racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia that is typical in our culture but it is important to understand that writers’ identities are largely constructed from their achieved status as rather than from an ascribed status imposed upon them by the larger society.

Many of the original pioneers of the graffiti movement, like DONDI, DEZ, KASE 2, SKEME, STAN 152, STAY HIGH 149 and FUTURA, were black, also many like, SEEN, PJAY, MIN and CAP, were white. Over the last fifteen years, however, graffiti writing has become less popular among black kids, and more popular among white kids. As hip hop grew and progressed, many talented African-American youth chose rap over writing because of the possibility of monetary reward. However, the ubiquity of white kids writing graffiti is not the same as white kids playing the blues, or rapping. White kids writing graffiti should not be construed as an act of cultural thievery or imitation. Graffiti writing – unlike most indigenous forms of American music is not specifically steeped in African-American cultural traditions – white kids, black kids, brown kids, rich kids and poor kids have all participated in the creation and perpetuation of graffiti culture from the beginning.

The explanation as to why so many white kids write graffiti, however, does perhaps follow class lines. Graffiti is not part of the sports and entertainment industrial complex; there is no dream of huge monetary rewards that will offer a way out of impoverished circumstances. Since race continues to limit access to opportunity in this country, kids of colour are more likely to be poor, and hence, more inclined to focus their talents on more lucrative endeavours, like academics, sports or music. White kids practice graffiti because they can afford it. Meaning they can afford to do something in which the monetary rewards are not immediate. I am not trying to claim graffiti for white boys, or even to somehow suggest that white privilege does not operate in graffiti, but it is the case that this subculture is primarily a meritocracy.

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

While graffiti talent is not gendered, graffiti writers must literally fight for their reputations and this fighting tends to turn off many women, who often concentrate on legal walls. But there are the exceptions. PINK wrote right along with the boys during the train era in the 1980s and has achieved legendary graffiti and artistic fame. CLAW, who describes herself as a nice middle class Jewish girl (Ashman, 2007), has been a dedicated street bomber (illegal graffiti writer) since the mid-1990s with pieces, throw-ups and tags all over the city. Today her fame is everywhere. She is the subject of a book, Bombshell: The Life and Crimes of CLAW MONEY, is featured in the Doug Pray film, Infamy. She runs her own business, a successful clothing line that features her iconic claw with the three finger nails (Ashman, 2007).

Very often women team up with men for protection and comradeship and this was the case with CLAW who bombed NYC in the 1990s with MQ of DMS crew. However, more recently she has taken young, up and comer MISS 17, as her partner in her PMS (Power, Money, Sex) crew. These women are no doubt tough, and while they are less likely to be roughed up or harassed by cops, or male writers, women have had their share of beefs (disputes) with other writers. Nevertheless, women face enormous challenges negotiating dangerous streets alone at night. The street, in many ways, is a place for maleness, but these women and many like them have braved the night and demanded inclusion. While female writers have no doubt experienced sexism from their male counterparts, their accomplishments are duly noted and respect is given if they have put their names up and are ‘all city’, a term used to describe writers who have saturated the city with their names.

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

As the decade wore on, politicians continued to wage war on graffiti writers and the novelty of graffiti on canvas for outside collectors began to wear off. By 1989, the public art show that had run on New York City subways had ceased and the gallery opportunities, especially in the US, were also drying up.

But writers kept writing, and they were good. On walls, on clean trains that never ran, and in secret tunnels, they continued to progress the form. Many of these writers had become excellent self-taught artists and were encouraged by some sympathetic adults (high school counsellors) to put portfolios together with photos and sketches of their graffiti work and apply to colleges. This is a significant point that receives little or no attention. Many of the first and second generation of post-subway graffiti writers like ESPO, KR, VERT, AME, PSOUP, KEST, DES, AMAZE, CYCLE, HUSH, and KAWS, all went to college. There they expanded their repertoires and learned many of the skills that would help them to start magazines, retail businesses, and/or become fine artists. All of which increased the career options for adults who were successful graffiti writers as youth.
Graffiti magazines

Although in the post-train era writers quickly began to paint on walls all over the city, there were no longer central locations, like the so-called Writers Bench at the 149th and Grand Concourse subway station, where writers could view passing graffiti on the trains. The movement, though, found a new medium for producing fame: the photograph. Photographs made ephemeral graffiti pieces permanent, allowing writers to study the work of others without attachment to a specific place or time.

Initially, graffiti was documented by sympathetic outsiders, many of whom became advocates for the art and the artists. Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper’s classic photographic study Subway Art (1984), and Chalfant and Prigoff’s Spray Can Art (1987), showcased some of the world’s very best graffiti art, and along with the films Wild Style (1982) and Style Wars (1985), fuelled the dissemination of graffiti culture beyond New York City.

However, as photographic and publishing technology became more affordable, writers began to actively document their own subculture. This began with the simple trading of photos, but quickly evolved into magazines and videos. This transition also allowed writers to take control over the representation of their subculture, as well as to reap possible financial rewards.

The International Graffiti Times (IGT) was the first graffiti magazine and was established in 1983 by legendary pioneer PHASE 2 and editor/graffiti-advocate David Schmidlapp. Originally done in black and white in a fold-out, subway map format, IGT was one of the first instances where graffiti wasn’t exclusively about public space. This development was significant, as it created solidarity among writers who became both producers and consumers of graffiti related material.

Anti-graffiti campaigns, in which ‘moral entrepreneurs’ insisted that graffiti is always vandalism and never art, did not go unnoticed by graffiti writers, who saw the them as opportunistic and hypocritical – especially given the fact that artists, collectors, critics, journalists and even some corporations, were defining graffiti as a legitimate artistic pursuit, and one that, at times, could generate considerable money. Experienced graffiti writers responded by creating their own subculture media to combat the perception that they were in ESPO’s words ‘immoral idiots’, and his magazine On the Go offered intriguing art, hip hop journalism and thoughtful critical analysis. Other important graffiti magazines include: 12oz. Prophet, GSXL, Can Control and later While You Were Sleeping.

The writers who started magazines were also influenced by the DIY ethos of punk zines. Duncombe (1997) argues that zinesters, as he calls them, create a subculture of both readers and writers who find solace in an anonymous collectivity and the expression of middle class ennui. While Atton (2002) suggests that a commitment to political activism is at the core of alternative media, his definition focuses on the collective activities involved in the production of alternative media, from researching and writing, to making copies and finding outlets for distribution. He argues that through working together to put out alternative media, individuals feel a sense of collective power that is in the end political.

The subcultures that Duncombe and Atton describe come about through the process of making media, zinesters and alternative media activists do not document a subculture, but create one. Cultural Studies scholar Paul Hodkinson (2002) uses the term ‘subculture media’ to describe media which is produced by members of existing subcultures with the intent of serving the needs of that subculture. The creation of such media comes after the creation of the subcultural form, and in many ways expands the reach of the subculture beyond geographic and physical space. This, I argue, is the critical component in understanding how contemporary subculturalists make careers out of their subcultural pursuits. Graffiti magazines showcase the very best graffiti...
and therefore produce subcultural capital for writers, who often turn this subcultural fame, into actual capital.

The one requirement for those in the production of graffiti magazines however, is status as a current or former graffiti writer. These magazines report on illegal activities and often use illegal graffiti tactics to market themselves, all of which require the skills and interpersonal trust developed by graffiti writers. The production of magazines on a larger, more professional scale has also had the effect of providing jobs, and for some like Roger Gastman careers, in the publishing industry (Gastman, 2001; Pressler, 2006).

For the most part graffiti magazines have run their course, as most folks have turned to the internet and social media to showcase graffiti writing. The first graffiti web site, Art Crimes (www.graffiti.org), now showcases graffiti from all over the world and offers links to hundreds of graffiti sites with photos and articles, as well as providing links to spray paint manufacturers. These sites are forging closer and closer ties among a vast population of underground illegal artists, who continue the process of turning illegal fame into legitimate, if alternative, adult careers.

The creation of subculture media is the key to understanding the subculture career. Modern day subculture participants, like skaters, bmx street bikers, bike messengers, parkour practitioners, street racers and so many others, use digitally documented evidence, disseminated to a worldwide audience to increase their subcultural reputations which are then translated into real capital, both inside and sometimes even outside of the subculture itself.

Subculture theory

Graffiti writers are not a spectacular subculture in the tradition of mods or punks; they do not have a style of dress that announces to the larger society that they are part of a subculture. In fact, writers are cautious and try to remain anonymous around outsiders and have the option of choosing how and when to reveal their secret identities.8 Graffiti writers were one of the first global subcultures, yet they have been largely ignored by modern and even post-modern subcultural scholars (Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Hebdige, 1979; Muggleton, 2000; Hodkinson, 2002). Subculture theorists focus almost exclusively on participants’ style of dress and musical tastes.

In Resistance Through Rituals, Hall and Jefferson argue that subculture participation is merely symbolic resistance; it does not have actual effect on the lives of the participants because they can never escape their class position. They write:

The problematic of a subordinate class experience can be ‘lived through’ negotiated or resisted; but it cannot be resolved at that level or by those means. There is no ‘subcultural career’ for the working class lad, no ‘solution’ in the subcultural milieu, for problems posed by the key structuring experiences of the class.

(Hall and Jefferson, 1975: 47)

They argue that being punk, while interesting for a time and resistant for a moment, is ultimately tragic because participants cannot escape working class oppression. Hence, even though they had spectacular youths, their adult lives, will in all likelihood, be similar to their parents’; rife with occupational boredom and class exploitation.

The Birmingham School also anticipated that the culture industry would quickly market punk style as a commodity for mass consumption (Hebdige, 1979), which meant that subculture resistance was futile and led to the so-called ‘death of punk’ (Clark, 2003). Clark argues however, that this death also led to punk’s rebirth, where new followers are in a constant dialogue with
the forces of commodification. He argues that the commodification of stylistically resistant punk, led to the politicization of punk whose consequent forms of resistance were no longer merely symbolic. As Clark writes, ‘contemporary punk has forgone these performances of anarchy and is now almost synonymous with the practice of anarchism’ (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003: 233).

Much like graffiti writers who responded to media criticism by making their own media, Clark argues that punk’s experience of witnessing the commodification of their own subculture, politicized them to the point where the spectacular was replaced actual political activism.

Early in the twenty-first century, a new generation of UK scholars, many of whom had subcultural experiences (Hodkinson, 2002; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003), reassessed subcultural theory from a post-modern perspective. These ‘post-subculturalists’ took many of the Birmingham tenets to task; specifically the notion of class homogeneity, and symbolic resistance. However, their focus remains almost exclusively on music subcultures in which participants signal their membership through their style of dress. Subculture studies is still mostly concerned with young people playing dress up, and researchers have for the most part neglected subcultures that do not revolve around a specific type of music.

While contemporary scholars have done an excellent job of dragging subculture studies into the post-modern era, even these conceptions cannot account for cultures like graffiti. Most subculture literature focuses on passionate fans who consume a style of music and dress to identify themselves as such.

While Angela McRobbie (1988; 2002) often gets less credit than her Birmingham colleagues, she has consistently defended young peoples’ attempts to make their own lives. Rather than claim an authentic political purity, she argues that subcultures have an ‘entrepreneurial dynamic [that] has rarely been acknowledged’ (Gelder and Thornton, 1997: 197). This was a fact that most of her colleagues denied or ignored because they were beholden to a political ideology in which any sort of commercialism was evidence of capitalist co-optation. McRobbie takes seriously young peoples’ ambitions and desires for success ‘on their own terms’, against those who want to judge young people for their complicity with capitalism and consumption (McRobbie, 2002: emphasis added).

It turns out that McRobbie was right about the lasting impact of subculture. The ‘entrepreneurial dynamic’ has in fact sustained them over the past thirty years and can be attributed in part as a reaction to the boring career choices many young people face. (Thornton, 1996; McRobbie, 2002) While not every subculturalist achieves upward social mobility, it is equally narrow minded to assume that those who do have material success, should be deemed selfish, complicit, apolitical or amoral.

Further, many scholars (Hogan and Astone, 1986; Furstenberg et al., 2004) take it as a given that subculture is something that one leaves as one ages. While many have argued about the significance of subcultural style, whether as symbolic resistance or as a facilitator of post-modern identity, few have theorised the impact that youth subculture participation has on the members themselves as they move into adulthood. Most scholars assert that subculture membership will cease as one gets older, or will lead to more serious forms of criminality, or that these youths will become simply, ordinary, working class adults.

Although success in a subculture leads to increased status within the subculture, my experience with graffiti has shown that kids who write graffiti, and are good at it, have a very good chance of becoming successful adults. There are many reasons for this, from the psychological benefits of fame and respect, to the way in which writing and writers teach each other about art, or the way in which clever young people understand that there is a market for their transgressive activity.
Though it may be an over-simplification to assess subculture on a normative level, subculture scholars from Chicago to Birmingham, all predicted that bad things were going to be in store for these bad kids and this is simply not the case. I have witnessed kids in their teens and twenties going ‘wild in the streets’ only to become, successful adults. In the literature, this issue is usually framed in terms of co-optation and selling-out, but I would argue that even the Birmingham School would find it difficult to criticise the success of these completely self-made young people.

There are trace elements in the deviant literature of the understanding of subcultures leading to careers (Lachmann, 1988) however, few, if any, have described the impact of youth culture into the adult years. While this may not have had the political impact that Birmingham scholars had hoped for, it is the case that many kids found creative ways to thrive as adults.

While understanding the complexities involved in this foray into consumer culture, I do not intend to suggest that any of these graffiti careerists have sold out graffiti culture. In fact, they are better understood as pioneers who created greater awareness of the power of their medium and the ultimate result may be more opportunities for more young people and less hassle from the police and politicians.

Coda

Stephen Powers (ESPO) made a very successful transition into the art world. He has generated both critical acclaim and financial stability, but he would balk at the notion that he is a street artist.

These days VERT goes by the name Timmy Tattoo. He owns and operates his own tattoo shop in Huntington, Long Island, following a path from graffiti to tattooing, pioneered by early legends like SEEN.

AME, the incredible graffiti talent, is long gone. Matt’s transitions were made through some very tumultuous college years. He switched from graphic design, to painting, to sculpture where he excelled. Matt’s biggest accomplishment through this time was winning his battle with depression. He completed a two year course in toy design at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City, but still has problems with the compromises involved in commercial success.

All in all, the real discovery of this research is that many graffiti writers find ways to make adult careers out of their participation in the graffiti subculture. As the research grew, so did my contacts, and as they aged, they began to focus less on illegal graffiti and more on how to turn their graffiti success into an adult, income generating career.

Notes

1 To all the writers, past and future, thank you for your patience, tolerance and everything that you’ve taught me. I am humbled by this culture and am honoured to have had the opportunity to tell a bit of your story.
2 The book was listed as ‘missing’ from most New York City libraries.
3 Writers carry sketchbooks that they call blackbooks which they use to practice outlines and to get autographs from other writers.
4 It is common practice in graffiti magazines to write a writer’s name in ALL CAPS, and this practice is repeated here.
5 For more on the early phases of the gallery scene see Witten and Whites (2001: 146–180).
6 In the early 1980s in New York there was a group that called themselves the Photo Kings, who encouraged the trading of flicks with kids in other cities. (ESPO interview, 1996)
7 Author interview, summer 1997.
8 This insight came about through a series of prodding questions from Tony Jefferson at the ‘On the Edge: Transgression and the Dangerous Other’ conference, John Jay College, August 2007.
References


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