Deconstructing gang graffiti

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Introduction

Gang graffiti is a longstanding form of graffiti production. With some traditions spanning over eighty years, gang graffiti’s longevity is second in the United States only to hobo writing (Livingston, 1910; Daniels, 2008; also see Lennon, this volume). Despite its substantial history, gang graffiti’s marginality and connection to criminality and violence have resulted in relatively little academic analysis, disproportionately negative characterizations from popular media and law enforcement, and rampant misconceptions about its purpose and content.

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to gangs as social groups and provides some fundamentals for understanding gang graffiti by looking at law enforcement practices surrounding gang graffiti and scholarship on gang graffiti. I then turn to two case studies, both based in Los Angeles. A final section examines the entrance of the gang-related “cholo” style into global circuits of graffiti production.

Graffiti and gangs

Gangs are small-scale social groups associated with criminal behavior, violence, and drug dealing. Gangs operate in many countries, in contexts from first to fourth worlds. They have varying relationships to broader criminal enterprises, kinship systems, and cultural groups. Some gangs have arisen independently or in conjunction with transnational law enforcement patterns, such as deportation (Zilberg, 2011). The United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), a national security and intelligence organization, estimates that there are over 1.4 million gang members in the United States, with membership in 33,000 gangs.

Associations between gangs and graffiti exist globally. In the United States, gang graffiti is associated with written systems of representation that appear in various media – on walls, on bodies, in dance, in speech, and, increasingly, on internet forums. Gangs use graffiti to define neighborhood space, to create lists of members, to signal affiliation, identity, enmity or alliance with other individuals or groups, and to create memorials. Gang writing usually carries cultural aspects of the broader social groups from which gangs emerge, as well as carrying symbolic representations of affiliation, enmity, and alliance with other groups (Vigil, 1988; Alonso, 1999; Phillips, 1999).

Several related factors fostered the development of gang writing in the urban United States. Hostilities in neighborhoods and in prisons, a lack of hierarchical communication, and the need...
to communicate neighborhood identity in absentia, all forced reliance on abstract messaging. As Jack Goody suggests, “writing represents not only a method of communication at a distance, but a means of distancing oneself from communication” (1986: p. 50).

In that sense gang graffiti acts as a semi-permanent alternative that represents neighborhoods without the risk of human presence. Graffiti is a particular written medium that helps gangs to define neighborhood space and infuse it with prideful or aggressive messages. Graffiti writing allows gang members to assert their identity despite tensions with warring groups or sanctions by law enforcement officials. In the process they have developed distinct styles and practices, and have made use of multiple media in which to express their messages.

**Gang graffiti and law enforcement practices**

In the United States, gangs have generated a significant amount of police interest since the early twentieth century. Police interpretations of gang graffiti range from being highly informed to laden with false assumptions. Informed practices involve police using graffiti to chart membership, map neighborhoods, and follow conflicts between individuals and groups.

More problematic interpretations involve a core assumption that aggressive graffiti leads to gang violence, a claim that has been contested in scholarly and activist arenas (Alonso, 1999; Phillips, 1999). The Los Angeles Police Department website, for example, states that, because gangs use graffiti to create intimidation, “innocent residents are often subjected to gang violence by the mere presence of graffiti in their neighborhood.”

No statistical evidence, however, is offered for statements such as these, which rely on assumed linkages between gang graffiti and violence. Alonso (1999) offers a spatial analysis that de-couples graffiti from violent acts. Phillips (1999) reports that gangs will continue to cross out the names of enemies even if warfare between them is no longer active. Determining whether graffiti acts a driver of gang warfare in any neighborhood context requires more empirical data gathering and analysis.

Even when law enforcement minimizes direct links between graffiti and violence, gang graffiti is associated with “broken windows” policing, which posits that targeting smaller crimes, such as vandalism, will lead to the prevention of larger crimes. Though widely adopted as a law enforcement strategy, broken windows policing remains an unproven theory that has been debated in both law enforcement and academic circles (see, e.g. Harcourt, 2005).

In terms of legislation, penalties for gang-related graffiti may be subject to gang enhancements, which are legal mechanisms that provide lengthier sentences based on gang-related status. Gang enhancements may add time to graffiti vandalism sentences when the perpetrator is a gang member and/or when graffiti is shown to be in service of a gang. Gang enhancements added to vandalism charges can change the designation of a crime to a more serious misdemeanor or can convert a misdemeanor crime to a felony.

In California, graffiti and other forms of gang representation, such as handsigning, clothing, tattoos, or photography, comprise five of ten criteria that enable police to identify individuals as gang members. These criteria were established via California’s 1988 Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act (STEP), state legislation designed to protect the public from the violence of gangs (Katz & Webb, 2006; Klein & Maxson, 2010). The ten criteria are as follows, with specific references to graffiti appearing in numbers six and ten:

1. Admits gang membership or association.
2. Is observed to associate on a regular basis with known gang members.
3. Has tattoos indicating gang membership.
4. Wears gang clothing, symbols, etc., to identify with a specific gang.
5 Is in a photograph with known gang members and/or using gang-related hand signs.
6 Is named on a gang document, hit list, or gang-related graffiti.
7 Is identified as a gang member by a reliable source.
8 Is arrested in the company of identified gang members or associates.
9 Corresponds with known gang members or writes and/or receives correspondence about gang activities.
10 Writes about gangs (graffiti) on walls, books, paper, etc.  

If individuals meet two of the ten criteria, they can be identified as gang members in a court of law and subject to the gang sentencing enhancements described above. (These were also established by the STEP Act). Meeting two of ten criteria also merits placement of individuals in the CalGang Database, a statewide database that tracks purportedly gang-related individuals for law-enforcement purposes.

Several activist and policy organizations, including the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC) and the Justice Policy Institute, have tracked use of the CalGang database, and have advocated ways in which youth can find out if they are on it, and can be removed from the list. The database is secret and can include minors. Most people are unaware that their names are included because they can be placed on it “without having been arrested or accused of criminal activity” (Muñiz & McGill, 2012: p. 4). The CalGang Database may be used further to determine who is served with gang injunctions – which are civil mechanisms that limit the freedom of gang-related as opposed to non-gang related individuals (Green & Pranis, 2007; Muñiz & McGill, 2012).

Given the role of graffiti and other expressive media in the ten criteria used to identify gang members, it is possible that at least some of the over 200,000 individuals in the CalGang Database have been placed there for representational reasons alone. Clearly more analysis of the CalGang Database is necessary, but only one group – the YJC cited above – has managed to access the data necessary for such analysis.

In 2012, the Los Angeles City Attorney’s office used the gang injunction mechanism against members of a graffiti crew called Metro Transit Assassins (MTA) (Romero, 2012). The injunction prohibits members of MTA from being together in public or possessing graffiti tools. It also mandates individuals named in the injunction to obey an adult curfew. According to the YJC, many non-gang graffiti crews are also placed in the CalGang Database. Because of the close alignment of graffiti with the penalization of youth, the YJC recently worked to challenge a proposed citywide graffiti injunction (Muñiz & McGill, 2012).

Punitive graffiti-related policing strategies are intended to help stop graffiti writers from graduating to more serious kinds of crimes or gang related behavior. But there is no empirical evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of these tactics. Using gang-related policing tools against non-gang members, such as graffiti writers, confounds different kinds of graffiti writing groups and ultimately produces harmful youth-based profiling without substantive evidence.

Despite law enforcement knowledge of gang graffiti practices, even highly informed agencies such as the LAPD or the FBI regularly display ignorance of the distinction between gang writing and the graffiti of graffiti crews that stem from the New York tradition. Law enforcement agencies routinely place images of hip-hop style tags on their web site and other materials and mislabel these as gang graffiti. At best this practice demonstrates the lack of a holistic understanding of gangs that includes forms of representation. At worst such mistakes compromise law enforcement expertise regarding gang-related issues more broadly.  

Reading the walls can be an informative policing tool when law enforcement personnel minimize assumptions and maximize reliance on empirical data. Graffiti can tell police a great deal about the geography of gangs, their membership, and about ongoing rivalries. But the
overreliance on assumptions rather than empiricism is widespread. This is in part because of how limited scholarship on gang graffiti has been. Of the few analyses conducted, an even smaller number carry an applied focus that might have resonance within policing arenas. Studies tend to remain buried in book chapters or journal articles whose content prioritizes academic issues. This work carries little relevance for policing practices both because of the weight given to theoretical concerns, and because findings are critical of policing practices to begin with.

As evidenced from the above discussion, analyses of power and injustice as related to gang identification, and the use of gang-related legal mechanisms against graffiti crews are critically important. Scholarship certainly has a role to play in terms of checking police strategies with regard to graffiti and gangs. But police officers in both rank-and-file and administrative capacities tend to ignore research that might be relevant unless it stems from academic criminology/criminal justice, a discipline that is perceived by some as already acting as a small arm of law enforcement.

Scholarship on gang graffiti

Despite its prevalence in urban landscapes, gang graffiti’s study has been eclipsed by an overwhelming focus on contemporary street art and on graffiti styles that emerged from 1970s New York (see, e.g. Cooper & Chalfant, 1984; Austin, 2001; Grody, 2006; Ganz, 2009). A small number of scholars have focused on gang graffiti exclusively or as part of broader research projects. There are only two contemporary book-length treatments of gang graffiti (Phillips, 1999; Chastanet, 2009), as well as one book that folds graffiti into a surface-level treatment of gangs (Leet et al., 2000). These works attempt to translate gang graffiti and symbols for a broader audience, link graffiti to other aspects of gang life, and examine the style and meaning behind graffiti for practitioners.

Though the study of gang graffiti is underdeveloped, case studies in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Phoenix, Chicago, and Philadelphia have resulted in two discernible threads of scholarly interest. These revolve around issues of language and representation, and territory and landscape, respectively. I return to the concern with style and aesthetics in a later section.

Scholarly interest in gang graffiti began with a 1974 landmark study conducted in Philadelphia by geographers David Ley and Roman Cybrwisky. Published in the *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, “Urban Graffiti as Territorial Markers” is the first published article that takes gang graffiti as its primary topic. Ley and Cybrwisky mapped the spatial layout of graffiti in Philadelphia neighborhoods and distinguished between different kinds of graffiti and the role that these were playing. They noted the presence of “aggressive” or “affirmative” graffiti and mapped these in relation to other neighborhood boundaries.

Graffiti is one lens through which scholars continue to examine links between gangs and territoriality. Geographer Alex Alonso (1999) follows Ley and Cybrwisky’s (1974) work in his work on Los Angeles gang graffiti. In this case their analysis of gang graffiti bleeds into or stems from broader discourses in human geography for people like Timothy Cresswell who theorize the place-making strategies of individuals and groups (Cresswell, 1996).

In one case, scholars have used graffiti as a “proxy for scent marking” to draw parallels between the territorial behavior of gangs and coyotes, wolves, or honeybees (Smith et al., 2012). The work exhibits a fairly nuanced understanding of gangs. But the authors exhibit little awareness that comparing contemporary gang members to coyotes and wolves contributes to dehumanizing discourses surrounding those populations. In most cases, graffiti-based work on gangs counters facile law enforcement or popular beliefs that gang members act like dogs marking territories.

In the other cases, scholarly analysis feeds into examinations of social power, and relationships to dominant cultures, cultural formation, and social exclusion. Beginning in the 1990s, gang
graffiti was included in several studies with a focus on sociolinguistics. These works expand ethnographies of literacy, examine the boundaries between oral and written communication, analyze overlap with other media such as tattoo, dance, clothing, and makeup (Mendoza-Denton, 2008), and query interrelationships between material expression and identity (Rymes, 1996; Phillips, 1999; Mendoza-Denton, 2008).

Rhetorician Ralph Cintron (1998) describes gang graffiti as repetitive semiotic indicators that communicate respect and identity in hostile conditions. He identifies four “negative morphemes” in Chicago-based gang expression. Cintron (1998) considers these negative morphemes to include reversed letters, inverted letters/symbols, the addition of the letter K, and “cracking,” or crossing out. All mark disrespect for other groups, and allow gang members to use graffiti to engage in symbolic battles over respect and disrespect. For Cintron, studying gangs is part of a broader project regarding how people create respect in “situations of little or no respect.” He offers that precise styles, neat and clean lettering counters neighborhood environments that are neither neat nor clean.

Where Cintron (1998) is interested in morphemes as akin to parts of speech, Adams and Winter (1997) position Phoenix gang writing as a “discourse genre,” emphasizing its equivalence to speech acts. They analyze over 1500 instances of gang graffiti as “turns” and “utterances,” viewing them as monologues and dialogues. Adams and Winter (1997) view intergang antagonisms on the walls as following explicit norms and conventions. They see gang graffiti as systematic and rule-driven and as an interactive, dialogic process.

Author of another Chicago-based case study, Dwight Conquergood (1997) describes how gangs use graffiti to navigate between invisibility and hypervisibility and in the process create complex symbolic and written performances that he describes as “gangster grammatology” (Conquergood, 1997: p. 358). He analyzes the complex lexicon of Chicago-based People and Folk gangs, which divide into two groups that take the numbers five and six, the five-pointed and six-pointed stars, and a host of other symbols associated with particular gangs. Phillips’ (2009) work on Bloods and Crips, two well-known national gangs, also examines linguistic elements of gang expression in multiple media. Phillips describes different crossovers between graffiti, tattoo, speech, handsigning, and even dance.

As a whole, scholarly analysis counters the notion that gang graffiti is solely about marking territory. Academics show that gang graffiti is deeply social, based in communities, it represents interpersonal or intergroup relationships within neighborhoods, it plays in and out of related media, and it is about symbolic negotiations of power both within gangs and between gangs and the larger society. Rather than symbolizing control over turf alone, gang graffiti signals control over respect in neighborhoods.

Gendered analyses of gang graffiti remain under examined. While female gang members do write graffiti, they write with more frequency in indoor spaces or on notebooks. In addition to ignoring women’s work, scholarship tends also to ignore explicitly masculinist components of writing and what gang writing means in terms of constructing masculinity.

Two case studies

I now turn to two case studies of gang writing in Los Angeles, California. The first introduces the basics of Chicano gang writing, and the second looks at the graffiti symbolism of African-American gangs called Bloods and Crips.

In Los Angeles, gang writing begins in Latino barrios in the 1930s and 1940s as a straightforward association of individual names with neighborhoods (see Figure 4.1). To some degree this system is based in an earlier tradition of hobo writing that dates back to the turn of the century
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(see John Lennon’s chapter on Hobo Graffiti in this book). At its most basic level, gang graffiti recalls Norman Mailer’s quip that “the name is the faith of graffiti” (Kurlansky et al., 1974).

For Eddie and others who wrote underneath the bridges around the L.A. River in the late 1940s, railroad tar was a key medium. Black tar would drip from passing freights, and kids would either put globs of tar onto fingers, or put the tar into a container to dab on with a stick. Several dozen instances of gang graffiti survive from this era.

Tar has a special longevity as a medium. Tar wins any war with spray paint. If whitewashed or written over, tar will soon reappear from underneath the paint. With time, tar will also etch into concrete, so that writing may survive in bas relief even after the tar falls off. Additional graffiti media from the early period of gang writing include chalk, railroad spikes or rocks on concrete, pencil, charcoal, lighters, and crayon. These are surprisingly durable, whereas spray paint will fade with time. Other media include shoeshine polish, paint and brushes, and flares. Most kids used what they had on hand or found along their journeys.

The 1940s aesthetic traditions included the use of quotations surrounding two or four corners of the composition, the use of crosses topping the compositions, the production of simple fonts usually in squared capital letters and sometimes including serifs, and a balance between compositional elements.

For Chicano gangs in Los Angeles, the basic association between neighborhoods, names, and dates eventually branched out to include expanding arenas of gang politics. By the 1990s these included age-graded cliques, streets, city or neighborhood names, regional divisions, the telephone area code, and a prison-based northern or southern designation (Phillips, 1999). This broader system remains the core, though not the sum total, of what gang members write (see Figure 4.2).
Figure 4.2 from the Tortilla Flats neighborhood demonstrates a telescoping process of representing identity. Several levels of affiliation are present in this composition. The top line reads “Goofy, Demon, Sparky,” which are the names of individual gang members. Goofy, first on the list, is probably responsible for the composition. Below is a larger “TxFlats” for the Tortilla Flats neighborhood, with “x” being null space. Further below is the name of the clique to which those members listed belong: the Dukes. Cliques are smaller, subgroups of members who are usually the same age and from the same part of a neighborhood.

On the right side of the composition is a “Sur 13,” a general proclamation of the South and a reference to the Eme prison gang. “M” is the thirteenth letter of the alphabet, and is shared as a symbol by some other groups, including bikers, because of its association with marijuana. Chicano gangs had long used the M to mean also *mota* (marijuana) or Mexican. By the 1990s, the 13/M was an exclusive reference to the Mexican Mafia prison gang, also known as *La Eme*, or “M.” The 14/N developed later as a counter-reference to Northern California and the Northern prison gang, *Nuestra Familia*.

Prison gangs like *La Eme* extort taxes from street gangs, whose members must send a portion of profits from criminal activities to incarcerated members. Most gangs are beholden to this system for support. Use of the thirteen in gang names and compositions precedes *La Eme*’s control over this symbol, which is part of why it has been successful. Today usage of the thirteen in compositions – and gangs who claim “Sur” – are references to ties between prison and street gangs. In Figure 4.2, the “S” at the end of the word “Flats” serves as the first letter of “Sur,” thus symbolically linking the two aspects of identity.

Missing from this image are references to the region (i.e. Harbor Area) and telephone area code. Although they sometimes appear in writing, region and area code are more commonly
referenced in tattoos than graffiti. Both region and area code play into prison-based subgroups known as “cars.” Broader than neighborhoods, cars are metaphorical vehicles in which people from the same areas “ride.” These individuals may bunk together and spend time together on the prison yard or during meals.

Within Chicano gang writing, the individual name is anchored into a Durkheimian marriage of the gang social system and its collective representation. The writing in Figure 4.2 is a good example of the way Chicano gangs divide their social world in graffiti. Figure 4.3 is a more developed example of graffiti from an aesthetic perspective. Chicano gang members have historically placed significant interest in clean, crisp writing, in the development of specialized fonts, such as Old English or block lettering, and, by the 1990s, in the creation of monumental representations (see Figure 4.3). The section below on “Cholo Writing” goes into more detail regarding Chicano gang aesthetics. Figure 4.3 is an example of monumental block lettering from the “Santeros,” or “Street Saints” gang in South Central Los Angeles.

For African-American gangs, the second case study, graffiti traditions followed the example of earlier Chicano gangs. African-American communities in Los Angeles did not develop gangs until the 1950s, when gang development was largely in response to pressure from white racist youth groups. The earliest African-American gang writing documented in L.A. dates from the mid-1960s (Phillips, 1999). An earlier system of African-American gangs was active in the 1950s, and included groups like the Ditalians, Slausons, or Businessmen. The widespread unity resulting from both the Civil Rights Movement and the 1965 Watts Rebellion brought a halt to overt gang warfare between these groups. Toward the end of the 1960s, gang unity was in part disrupted by the same law enforcement tactics, such as COINTELPRO, that disrupted Black Nationalist
movements as a whole. By 1969, a new generation of youth formed the Crips, which soon splintered into several groups. Several more groups, such as Brims and Pirus, consolidated to form the Bloods in the early 1970s.

Today African American diasporic linguistic traditions continue to inform African American gang writing. Like Chicano gangs, Bloods and Crips have developed a written system to represent social divides as well as collective power. Crips divide into various sub-categories (Neighborhood Crips, East Coast Crips, Compton Crips, Watts Crips, and so forth). Bloods break down into Bloods, Brims, and Pirus, which are all types of gangs that exist under the Bloods umbrella. Further divisions include the gang name, the names of street-based cliques, individual nicknames, listing of enemy names, and routine crossing out of enemy initials. Any of these categories may be represented in writing as series of words, initials, or numbers.

Gang communication with each other and among gangs is not restricted to graffiti. Within gangs, written conventions crosscut various media. Handsigning is a gang medium that originated in the African-American gang world, in which gestures and finger shapes represent particular letters, numbers, or insignia. Hands form the shapes of letters and are used in person-to-person communication, and also may be signified in graffiti and tattoo. Oral speech conventions also figure into gang writing. Avoidance of key enemy letters, crossing out, and different kinds of spellings represent basic affiliations or animosities and recall the “negative morphemes” Cintron discussed in relation to Chicago-based gangs. Avoidance and crossing out are evidenced in the image that follows.

Figure 4.4 is a composition by the 42,3 Gangster Crips based on 42nd and 42rd Streets in Los Angeles. The writer wrote the gang’s initials vertically on the left facing side of the wall. This is partially obscured and reads “423G,” with the “C” covered beneath a layer of paint.
This composition shows both generic and specific enemies of the gang. From left to right, the composition reads: “Fucc Piru Killa, Bloods Killa, and Avalon Killa’s all day.” Whereas Pirus and Bloods are generic group enemies, Avalon is a fellow Crip gang just west of the 42 Street neighborhood. The writer demonstrates enmity with all three groups and asserts identity in different ways. First is the color choice of blue, the Crips’ signature color that stands in contrast to the red of Bloods. Second is avoidance of the initials “ck,” which means “Crip Killa,” in the word “fuck.” By changing “ck” to “cc” the Crips avoid inadvertently denigrating themselves. This mirrors other linguistic strategies on the part of African American gangs. Gang members avoid using certain letter combinations in speech as well as in writing and made frequent use of “disnames,” which are derogatory nicknames for enemies.

Next is the proclamation “Piru Killa,” in which the “P” is also crossed out. In the word “Blood,” not only the B is crossed out, but the two “o”s are also crossed out, as are zeros in the rest of the composition. Zeros are another category of Crips – enemies of this gang – named for streets whose numbers end in zero (30s, 60s, 90s, and so forth). Each A is also crossed out because it stands for 53 Avalon Gangster Crips, a key enemy of this gang.

African-American Crips in Los Angeles are frequently enemies with Bloods as well as with other Crip gangs. Bloods more commonly list Crip-only enemies unless there is active warfare with specific Bloods groups.

The examples from Los Angeles Chicano gangs and Bloods and Crips demonstrate how gangs use graffiti to create statements of pride, affiliation, enmity, and alliance. They demonstrate how gang members infuse graffiti with aesthetic and linguistic elements that often derive from their broader cultural groups. Some of these traditions have begun to find resonance in circuits of global graffiti production, which is examined in the next section.

The cholo style

Gangs have generally been excluded from conversations around street art and graffiti, as they occupy a more isolated social position that carries undercurrents of poverty, criminality, and violence. Despite problematic broader contexts, gangs exhibit an undeniably rich aesthetic heritage, have developed key styles, and perform the familiar work of claiming public space for youth-based expression.

The rise of interest in street art and graffiti globally has also seen an interest in the so-called “cholo style” of Los Angeles gang graffiti (Chastanet, 2009). Interest in this art world began in the 1970s with the explosion of gang writing in Chicano neighborhoods that saw the development of elegant, single-line scripts. Romotsky and Romotsky’s (1976) Barrio Calligraphy, Cesaretti’s (1975) Street Writers, and more recently Chastanet’s (2009) Cholo Writing and Acker’s (2013) Flip the Script are all interested in gang graffiti as a stylistic phenomenon.

Several key artists and exhibitions have brought this style to prominence and heightened its influence in street art circles globally. The cross-pollination between Los Angeles gang-influenced styles and graffiti/street art practices has brought recognition to Chicano communities as having produced a kind of “art world” (Becker, 2008). The production of lettering-based works by artists like Chaz Bojorquez, Cryptik, Prime, Sleep, Dufer, and Retna have begun to represent this work within regional and global circles of art collecting. Key exhibition venues have heightened the legitimacy of lettering styles that ultimately derive from gangs. In 2011, the Los Angeles’ Museum of Contemporary Art mounted Art in the Streets, a major exhibition that included gang work in a broader range history of graffiti history (Deitch et al., 2011). In 2013, Alphabet Soup was a smaller, more focused gallery exhibit with a focus on “hand styles” that stem from the cholo tradition (see Figure 4.5). The Getty-sponsored 2014 exhibit Scratch at the
El Segundo Museum of Art and accompanying project *La Liber Amicorum* also had a heavy presence of cholo-style lettering. The connection between art and gang worlds is based in Los Angeles and does not seem to have parallels in other gang-oriented cities.

Reference to “cholos” is in some sense a gloss away from the violence of gangs. It is a look back to the heyday of Chicano gang script styles in the 1970s and acts as a buffer from criminality by focusing on style instead of social context. This buffer is a construct linked to the fear that gang writing evokes – and the assumption referenced above about ties between gang graffiti and violence.

Additionally, relationships between gangs and other graffiti writers have often been hostile. Castleman writes of New York gangs hiring early graffiti writers for their artistic skills (Castleman, 1982). Since then gangs and writers have tended to have more antagonistic relationships. In the 1990s, the Mexican Mafia encouraged the beating or murder of graffiti artists or taggers who...
competed with gangs for neighborhood space and were assumed to be disrespecting gangs either directly or indirectly (Phillips, 1999).

Graffiti artists who utilize gang-related hand styles tend not to be actual gang members but rather members of communities where gangs are present. The artistic, archival, and academic work that focuses on *cholo* styles adds depth to the contemporary graffiti scene without embracing more problematic associations with gang lifestyles and criminality. But it also acts as an erasure of gang culture from the artistic innovations produced by gang members. This erasure plays into graffiti art markets by using style instead of social life to anchor the work of multiple artists.

**Conclusion**

Gang graffiti is a rich communicative medium whose analysis has enhanced understandings of subcultural social groups, symbolic production, and aesthetic practice. Clear emphasis on aesthetics as well as encoded meaning, are critical parts of gang compositions. Studying these trajectories through time is possible in cities with longstanding writing traditions.

The aesthetic quality and frequency of gang writing has decreased since the late-1990s. This is likely due to law enforcement success in dismantling street gangs, more frequent use of indoor spaces for recreation due to the digital revolution, social media, and cheap consumer goods, the migration of neighborhood artists into non-gang graffiti arenas, as well as the virulence with which cities have mounted graffiti erasure campaigns.

Through graffiti, gangs exhibit a fluidity of performance, a combination of orality and literacy, and a set of written conventions that have their roots in broader cultural traditions. Understanding gang social categories is critical in order to understand gang writing. While the representation of social categories is more insulated, the aesthetic traditions of some gangs have generated widespread recognition and subsequent adoption outside of gang culture. Because of persistent associations of gang graffiti with violence, how to navigate the entrance of gang styles into graffiti art worlds will remain an open question for some time to come.

**Notes**

1 Documented instances of hobo graffiti date to the end of the nineteenth century. While hobo writing continues now, the practice and style of the phenomenon have undergone radical changes and its associated cultural participants have diminished in number. Whether hobo writing traditions can be said to be continuous in nature it requires more research and documentation.


3 [www.lapdonline.org/get_informed/content_basic_view/23471](http://www.lapdonline.org/get_informed/content_basic_view/23471).


5 Interestingly some gang books and policy reports also suffer from this same problem. See for example Justice Policy Institute’s 2009 *Gang Wars*, cited above, which frames its book with a New York-style graffiti art piece. See also the FBI’s website, found here, which shows “gang tags in Cincinnati,” but which are actually the tags of a graffiti crew. [www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/gangs/gallery](http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/vc_majorthefts/gangs/gallery).

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