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Abstract

This exploratory study uses Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) conceptual model of the three planes of 'good' citizenship activity to consider the civic contribution of youth graffiti *writers* in the community of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Through seven qualitative case studies of youth and young adults, it examines young graffiti artists' perceptions of their participation in their communities and their views on graffiti writing and its place in their lives. The results show that contrary to public opinion, the youth interviewed who participate in graffiti writing in its most artistic form, "piecing", are not focused on vandalism but have carefully considered their relationships with their community and their art. The use of a Youth Research Assistant in five of the interviews demonstrates that youth themselves, given specific roles in the research process, can add to the richness of data collected. Drawing on literature in graffiti, Hip-Hop cultural studies and community and youth engagement, this study adds to the growing body of research that focuses on youth 'assets' (the existing strengths that youth bring to their involvement in societal affairs) (Benson, 1997; Scales & Laffert, 1999; Ungar, 2005). The research and findings offer an alternate perspective on youth voice, civic identity, citizenship and rule breaking in Canadian democratic society.

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My father who spent his life in the pursuit of democracy both in and out of education would have been proud of me I hope. Love and thanks to my mother for being my sounding board, cheerleader and stress reliever. Thanks to my extended family, friends (especially the "fab three") and co-workers for your encouragement, laughter and love. A big hug of thanks to my husband Richard, whose passion for music and food, sustained us all and allowed me to pursue my own artistic passions. To Caitlin and Dylan thank you for sharing with me your friends, your thoughts and your own passion for learning and the arts. Without you, none of this would have been possible.

Chapter One: Introduction and Review of Relevant Literature

Introduction

“Anti-graffiti squad erases children's fun; City cleans huge hopscotch after Glebe resident complains,” (Ottawa Citizen, 2007) was the newspaper headline in the spring of 2007. Reading it caused me to both chuckle at the overreaction, but also to shake my head at the seemingly absurd lengths to which vigilant citizens and our local municipality were willing to go to eradicate anything remotely related to graffiti (in this case a colourful chalk hopscotch, created by local children, which stretched four blocks along the streets of an upscale residential neighbourhood in central Ottawa, Ontario).

A few kilometres away, across the Ottawa River, in the town of Aylmer, Quebec at Les Fleurs de macadam (Fleurs de macadam, 2008), people of all ages gather annually to produce colourful chalk drawings on the streets and sidewalks of a commemorative park in the town. Every year the event grows and residents and visitors come from miles away to see and participate in creating and viewing the vibrant street art. Aylmer’s celebratory, youth-affirming approach to urban art creation runs in sharp contrast, at least on the occasion described above, to the City of Ottawa’s overzealous application of graffiti by-laws which had resulted in the rapid removal of a children’s chalked hopscotch.

Ottawa and Aylmer’s differing attitudes towards street art caused me to reflect on how public attitudes towards youth’s actions can also differ, and how quick and oversimplified assessments of their actions cause the general public to categorize youth as “good” or “bad” citizens. I had seen these superficial assessments made by the public when I was out with my own teenagers and their friends, who attracted negative attention, in malls and other public venues, due to their physical appearance. While some of them had brightly dyed hair, facial piercings, or shaved heads (perhaps purposely designed to make a statement or attract attention),

their external appearances bore little relationship to the kind of people (intelligent, thoughtful, and principled) I knew them to be. But as much as members of the public shook their heads at these creative fashion and hairstyle choices, I knew that their stereotypical attitudes towards the youth would have been doubly reinforced if they had known something else: some of the youth - incredibly gifted artists, regularly engaged in illegal graffiti 'piece' production.

Graffiti (whose root is from the Greek word *graphein* meaning to draw or to write) is a widely used term that has been used in art and urban sociology circles to describe elaborate public art murals often referred to as 'pieces', but is also used by law enforcement when describing urban vandalism in the form of 'tags' (stylized personal signatures or pen-names in script-like scrawls made with spray paint or markers). Many of those who work in law enforcement as well as other government officials, often fail to distinguish between 'tags' and 'pieces' - a distinction that, as I detail later in this thesis, is critical within graffiti culture. To law enforcement and to much of society, the presence of any type of graffiti is seen as a sign of ineffective crime prevention, urban decay and blight (Callinen, 2002; Ferrel, 1995; Graycar, 2003; Halsey, 2002; Lachman, 1988; Rice, 2005).

The media, public discourse, and municipal law enforcement policies surrounding the issue of graffiti, usually characterize youth who engage in graffiti as destructive, rebellious teenagers, disengaged from society, lacking in self restraint and civic pride (Callinen, 2002; Ferrel, 1995; Graycar, 2003; Halsey, 2002). The focus of much media that addresses youth graffiti is on youth criminalization. In contrast to these views, significant research has demonstrated that graffiti production is more complex than these superficial assessments allow. Research on graffiti culture indicates that many or most graffiti crews (a group of *writers* or graffiti artists) are complex organizations that encourage graffiti *writers* to value both self and community as "a way to resist the status quo, a tool...for challenging the power of those

responsible for its oppression” (Christen, 2003, p. 77). These works make clear that graffiti production is: (1) not limited to teenagers, (2) carries many layers of meaning for those who engage in it, and (3) serves multiple and overlapping purposes in its production (Callinen, 2002; Christen, 2003; Phillips, 1999).

I found it hard to reconcile my talented young acquaintances with the images of criminal vandals that the public, police, and municipality appeared to have of them. I still believed they were, or could be, ‘good citizens’ and I suspected that, although their graffiti activities surely reflected a rebellious streak, the graffiti writers also felt they were contributing something positive to society. I wondered if perhaps there was something that quick judgments had missed about these youth and about the part graffiti played in their lives.

Little is known about the perceptions of youth involved in graffiti writing, their views on graffiti, it’s meaning in their lives, their views about their place or graffiti’s place in society. By examining young graffiti *writers*’ perceptions of their own rights, roles, and responsibilities as democratic citizens, this exploratory study adds to the growing body of literature that focuses on youth ‘assets’ (the strengths that youth bring to their experiences) (Benson, 1997; Scales & Laffert, 1999; Ungar, 2005) and offers alternate perspectives on the formation of civic identity beyond the typical visions of the obedient and law-abiding “good citizen.” My research questions include:

- How might engagement in graffiti *writing* contribute to the formation of civic identity?
- How do graffiti *writers* perceive themselves and their communities?
- Might producing graffiti serve as a form of civic participation?

I also raised a methodological question, as I made decisions as to how best to obtain rich authentic data from a typically elusive group of youth.

- What are some of the benefits and limitations of using peer interviewers for research concerning youth?

The answers to these questions that derive from the findings of this study add to discourse surrounding the roles and expectations of youth and young adults in sustaining Canadian democratic society and civic processes.

Review of Relevant Literature

In order to situate the research, I reviewed three main areas of inquiry: youth voice (including voice in a school environment), civic engagement (including school-based engagement, community-based engagement and Hip-Hop related engagement), and graffiti culture.

Graffiti

The history of graffiti stretches from the dawn of man's first communications on cave walls to the politically charged urban wall murals or 'pieces' of today's inner cities. Historically it has been a flashpoint for conservative politicians and a rallying point for those living oppressed or disadvantaged lives. In North America, however, it rose to prominence as a result of its link to the culture of Hip-Hop in urban American centres in the late 1960's and 1970's. Hip-Hop itself appeared as a jubilant outgrowth of music, dance, art and social commentary from post '60's idealism, civic unrest in Jamaica, Vietnam War protest and a growing frustration over the marginalization of the primarily black, urban, ghetto community of the mid 1970's (Chalfant & Silver, 1983; Chang, 2005; Phillips, 1999). As previously mentioned, the musical element of Hip-Hop is best represented by DJing, dance as B-Boying (or break dancing). The spoken form of Hip-Hop culture is referred to as "rap" or "MCing" and the visual and written culture of Hip Hop is expressed through graffiti. Coming as it did during a time of political uncertainty and racial division, graffiti has served as political commentary, art form and 'voice' to the

marginalized. As such and despite frequent efforts by government to cast it as only criminal activity to be prevented, it is not difficult to make a connection between graffiti and civic engagement.

There is evidence to suggest that the origins of Hip-Hop culture were actually very much politically based and intended to affect political outcomes. One of the key personalities of early North American Hip-Hop culture, Afrika Bambaataa was instrumental in the founding of the 'Zulu Nation.' Among the group's tenets was the importance of taking pride in one's family, in one's heritage and in one's community as well as promoting self-sufficiency. Under his influence, violent confrontations between neighbourhood groups diminished and were replaced with Hip-Hop "competitions" of the various components of Hip-Hop culture. The winner "would claim supremacy and neighbourhood youth would support their sound systems and travel with them as they "battled" other crews" (Usher, 2006, p. 42). As Usher observes, "it represented the single most effective method through which Hip-Hop culture spread and its political ideas germinated within urban communities"(ibid). The competitive nature and "battles" of break dancing and graffiti continue in present day practice.

Within Hip-Hop's graffiti culture, the terminology¹ that *writers* (those who create graffiti) use is specific and descriptive. 'Piece' (an abbreviation for masterpiece) describes multi-coloured, intricate graffiti murals that can sometimes take up to several nights to complete. In contrast, 'throw-ups' refers to the hastily drawn and quickly executed amalgam of 'tags' (stylized signatures and pen names) and quick sketches that tend to be more visible throughout the community. 'Tags' and 'throw-ups' generally require a far less developed set of artistic skills than the more elaborate and skillfully rendered 'pieces.' The action of producing 'pieces' is often referred to as 'bombing.' The motivation for creating 'pieces' includes a desire to create an aesthetic environment as well as to gain respect from peers for the graffiti *writer's* skill. It is

common for graffiti *writers* who do “pieces” to show great disdain for those who “tag” (Christen, 2003; Halsey 2002, Phillips, 1999). For consistency throughout this research the term ‘*writer*’ will be used in reference to someone who participates in graffiti production (both for those who *tag* and for those who create *pieces*). A glossary of commonly used graffiti terms is located on page 131 .

Graffiti has traditionally been perceived as a male-dominated pursuit based on the art’s tendency toward an anonymity that protects the gender of the writer, inherent harsh working conditions necessary to perfect the art, and by the fact that graffiti literature has focused primarily on men. Despite this perception, women were early pioneers of the graffiti movement in the ‘70’s and have continued to be very active, although in smaller numbers than men. As in so many other domains in the public sphere, in order to make a name for themselves, women have had to work harder to show their stamina, prove their own merit and gain respect from other graffiti *writers*. In recent years as graffiti has changed toward new offshoots such as stencils (which allow for more work to be done in private, making for a safer, quicker application of the stencil out in public), there appears to be movement toward a greater gender balance in participation. (Bruner & Kelso, 1980; Carrington, 1989; Cresswell, 1996; Ganz, 2006; Greenberg & Martin, 1979; Jarman, N., 2005; Lachman, 1988; Little & Sheble, 1987. MacDonald, Milnor, K., 2005, Workman, 1983).

Appreciation for and participation in graffiti by youth has grown significantly in the last two decades. This remarkable growth in popularity of the activity increasingly “incorporates kids from outside the ethnic and economic frameworks of its originators” (Ferrell, 1995, p. 35). The popularization of a subculture (i.e. the appropriation of graffiti style by media and marketers), however, is viewed negatively by those who are most interested in the development of graffiti as a respected artistic alternative (Christen, 2003).

Those who engage in graffiti production or “bombing”, often find themselves at odds with mainstream institutions such as family, schools, and law enforcement agencies due to graffiti’s illegality and the necessity of engaging in the activity at times and in places where they can not be apprehended. Since there are few places where it is legal to produce graffiti, youth are compelled to engage in their art in hidden areas after dark. The risk of being caught can increase the excitement for many youth and prestige is often derived from the most daring locations chosen to create *tags* or *pieces* as well as for the complexity and creativity of elaborate *pieces* (Phillips, 1999).

The fact that there appears to be so much negative discourse about and action taken against graffiti indicates that the dominant culture feels extremely challenged by graffiti’s ideology. It is possible that because graffiti is accessible to everyone, there is a fear that the strength and dynamic of graffiti will supercede the influence of those in affluent circles. As Noble observes, “When business, political and law enforcement leaders criticize graffiti's practice and form, they are doing so from a privileged position” (2004, section 2, paragraph 6). Members of subcultures challenge hegemony by drawing on the particular experiences and customs of their communities, ethnic groups and age cohorts, thereby demonstrating that social life can be constructed in ways different from the dominant conceptions of reality. The mix of repressive and co-optive responses by police and media to subcultures is determined by, and varies according to the content of each subculture’s ideological challenge to the dominant culture’s hegemony (Lachman, 1988). The penalties for challenging this hegemony depend upon the age of the *writer*, their history of previous encounters with law enforcement and the location where they are apprehended. In Ontario, for example, the penalties for being caught *writing* graffiti, range from community service, to expensive fines and for some, incarceration (Provincial Offences Act, R.S.O, Regulation 67).

In 2007, in Ottawa, municipal council approved an “enhanced Graffiti Management Strategy,” which imposed strict consequences for youth engaging in any kind of graffiti. The following year they increased the existing budget for graffiti removal which a few years earlier, in 2003 was \$50,000 to \$1.9 million dollars in 2008 (City of Ottawa, 2008). According to the City’s definition, graffiti “means one or more letters, symbols, etchings, figures, inscriptions, stains howsoever made or otherwise affixed to a property or other markings that disfigure or deface a property but does not include a mural sign permitted in accordance with By-law No. 2005-439, the Permanent Signs on Private Property By-law.” The definition of a ‘mural sign’ is “a decorative mural that is painted directly onto the exterior fabric of a building and that serves as an expression of public art” (Graffiti Management By Law 2008-01, City of Ottawa). The by-law does not specify a way to distinguish between alleged graffiti and “expression of public art.”

City councillors had attempted, but did not succeed in shutting down one of two ‘legal’ graffiti walls in the city in 2007. Legal graffiti walls are places that *writers* can paint, free of prosecution. The one legal, city-owned site plays host to an annual Hip-Hop music, dance and graffiti event (House of Paint [HoP]) sponsored by a local paint vendor, where graffiti artists vie to create the most interesting wall mural. Local Hip-Hop activists, including Sabra Ripley, the organizer of HoP, made presentations to council and were able to save the remaining site only after much advocacy, even though the legal wall is out of public view under a bridge (City of Ottawa, Community Services Committee, Minutes of the City of Ottawa, October 2007). One of the most visible and popular semi-legal graffiti sites in the city is a non “City” site referred to as “Tech Wall” since it is located in the yard of a former technical high school owned by the local English Public School Board². The site is on OCDSB School Board property, but they do not have a history of prosecuting those who add their ‘pieces’ to the artistically dynamic wall murals. The site is almost a block long and is visible from the street. Every day thousands of bus

commuters pass by it on their way downtown.

The City of Ottawa's, "zero-tolerance," enforcement-based approach (Kanellakos, 2007) stands in contrast to evidence available close to home that shows that graffiti vandalism can be reduced significantly through a more collaborative, tolerant and youth friendly approach. In Toronto, Ontario, a much larger urban centre about 400 km south west of Ottawa, with a multicultural majority, local police have worked with youth from the graffiti community to create collective urban murals and to encourage businesses to provide wall space for these sorts of creative endeavours (Mills, 2008).

In 1999, the City of Gatineau and the provincial recreation ministry, in the province of Quebec, across the river from Ottawa, instituted a youth-centred graffiti project. One of its main features was providing empty canvases in parks across the city. The intent was to have the canvases used by youth to display their graffiti. At the same time they worked to remove offensive vandalistic 'tags'. Gatineau discovered that by providing opportunities for young people to display their artwork and giving positive recognition to youth for the artistic nature of graffiti, that rates of vandalism were reduced significantly (L'Amour, 2003). Toronto and Gatineau's approach is supported by research on the issue in other municipalities across the world. It is clear that to address the issue of graffiti, as well as vandalism and to effectively involve youth in workable solutions it requires a creative, interactive response from various levels of government and the community (Graycar, 2003).

The work done in Toronto and Gatineau to bridge the gap between municipal bylaws and youth who paint, appears to have triggered progress in recent months in Ottawa. Several municipal councilors have begun working with local youth advocates and businesses coordinated by Mike Young, a long-time youth advocate and former social worker who now coordinates Ottawa CAVE (Communities Advancing Valued Environments). Through donations and

sponsorships they are able to pay the youth to create neighbourhood murals. The initiative based on communication and mutual respect creates permanent relationships between residents, businesses and youth as they work together to renew and transform communities (Ottawa CAVE, 2008). This form of community collaboration is concrete evidence of the potential that graffiti holds for creating opportunities for youth civic participation.

Youth Voice

A wide variety of terms are used to describe young people's abilities, needs, desires, and interests in exerting an influence upon their own environment. Some studies describe these as youth engagement or youth empowerment (Framework For Success, 2006; Frederiks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Pittman et al., 2003). Others focus on youth development, or meaningful youth participation (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Hart, 1992). Some researchers and community-based organizations prefer the term youth voice (Fletcher, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Rubin & Silva, 2003) or youth agency. For example, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (2000) provides us with the following definition of youth agency:

The power to understand, act on, and effect positive change in one's personal and social contexts; embodying the sense of hope and possibility (grounded in an understanding of social reality) that one can make a difference in one's own life, family, school and local community and in the broader national and global community. (p. 2)

The Youth Development Institute at the Fund for the City of New York, frames its work with some of New York City's marginalized youth as 'youth engagement' using a definition from Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn (1992): "engagement stands for active involvement,

commitment, and concentrated attention, in contrast to superficial participation, apathy, or lack of interest" (p. 11). Although the different terms, "agency" and "engagement", each have a more specific definition, they share a central concept, which in this thesis, I will call "youth voice."

Youth voice in this context refers to youth being involved in and/or having a say in meaningful decision-making, on issues that directly impact them. Having a 'voice' depends upon a young person's ability to navigate structures of societal or organizational power in order to express ideas, opinions, attitudes, knowledge, and actions that are particular to their age group and to their environment, to be able to influence matters of importance in their lives (Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn, 1992). A number of scholars argue that if children and youth are to voice their opinions and actively participate in local and global concerns (United Nations, 1989), they need to acquire the skills first by being provided with sufficient guidance and opportunity to express their cultural customs, beliefs and values (Wehmeyer, 2004).

Youth Voice In School

Since schools provide a significant influence on youth (at least while they are enrolled), schools have the potential to be training grounds for youth to exercise their developing "voice" as participants in the educational process. Unfortunately, rather than participating in the educational process, many students merely end up "receiving" an educational product (Rubin & Silva, 2003). Although there is much discourse around the importance of empowering youth and ensuring that they learn how to make appropriate choices (for themselves), research has shown that many youth have limited practical opportunity to exercise these choices and only marginal or token decision-making power and autonomy at the school level or higher (Batchelor, 2006; Gallagher, 2008; Grover, 2005; Moll, 2005). Continued inequitable provision of civic school-based learning opportunities according to socio-economic (and racial) status may also contribute to the problem. Consequently, students from higher socioeconomic levels, who already have

more options open to them, (i.e. greater opportunities for self-determination) are more likely to exhibit traditional markers of civic identity (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

At the same time that schools limit youth's decision-making opportunities, many express concern, when graduates of our public education institutions fail to participate actively in civic affairs such as voting. What appears to be missing in schools are efforts to authentically engage young people in educational change and in their learning at multiple levels using multiple strategies and connecting the work they do with larger systemic issues operating at the school, district, or community levels (Forum for Youth Investment, 2005; Framework for Success for All Students, 2006). Without opportunities to experience the positive effects of using their own 'voice', they are unlikely to be interested in traditional 'voice' outlets such as voting, writing or editing a newspaper, or becoming involved with a social agency (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008).

Civic Identity and Engagement

Atkins and Hart define civic identity as "a sense of belonging to and having responsibilities for a geographical community" (2003, p.157). Atkins and Hart and others assert that in order to develop a strong civic identity, youth need to a) participate in their community, b) have or gain knowledge of their community, and c) learn to tolerate views different from their own in such a way as to support the principles of fairness, justice, and the upholding of civil liberties. Similarly, in several research studies on youth engagement, youth who reported an absence of each of three engagement assets (community involvement, constructive use of time in groups and sports, constructive use of time in religious activities or groups) were significantly more likely to engage in risk behaviors than youth who had these assets (Bellensen, 1993; Bruce, Nicola & Menke, 2006; Feldman, Pasek, Romer & Hall Jamieson, 2007; Grover, 2004; Howe, 2007; Oman et al., 2004; Pittman et al, 2001; Roche, 1999; Rubin & Silva, 2003).

In a democratic society, participation in the voting process is commonly accepted as one

of the key markers of a country's democratic 'health' (Bowman, Lehoucq, & Mahoney, 2005). In Canada, voting rates for Canadian youth are significantly lower than for all other age groups. Using statistics from a recent election in the province of Ontario, research showed that voter participant rates dropped in the last 20 years from 80% in the 1980s to an all time low of 50% in this first decade of the second millennium. Youth participation revealed a similar, if not deeper decline (Elections Ontario, 2007). Evidence points to both life cycle effects (i.e., voting naturally increasing with age) and generational differences. While involvement in political groups and parties is relatively low among older citizens (33%), it is markedly lower amongst youth (2%) and recent evidence points to a decline in political knowledge across all age groups (Gidengil et al, 2004; Norris 2003; O'Neill, 2007; Stolle & Cruz, 2005). Far from being apathetic though, the results of youth surveys conducted by Milan in 2005 demonstrate that Canadian youth engage in high rates of unconventional political activity (activities such as petitions, involvement in consumer boycotts, political protests and demonstrations). The percentage participation in non-traditional political activity was equal to or higher (59%) amongst youth than that found in every other age category (O'Neil, 2007).

Copious research has been done in the United States and Canada on the factors which contribute to the making of "good citizens," the development of civic identity, and the many facets of youth civic engagement (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Chareka & Sears, 2006; Lerner, 2004; MacKinnon, Pitre, & Watling, 2007; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Newman, 1992; Obradovic & Masten, 2007; Rubin, 2007; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002; Smith, Lister, Middleton & Cox, 2005; Stolle & Cruz, 2005; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald & Schulz, 2001; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Several of the assessments in the United States such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Vanishing Voter Project and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic

Education Study. sounded an alarm at the poor results of students from disadvantaged racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, whose parents have low education levels, or who leave school early (Baldi et al., 2001; Hahn, 2001; Lutkus et al., 1999; Niemi & Junn, 1998). In contrast other studies assert that American students, when assessed for knowledge of civics related content, and their understanding of ‘democracy’, compared favourably with other students internationally (Baldi et al, 2001; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). Although American students’ content knowledge appears to be fine, or at least comparable to other countries, students from marginalized communities are being out performed by their more socioeconomically advantaged peers. There are hopeful signs in Canada and recent compelling evidence in the US that youth voting and civic engagement may be on the rise amongst “Millenials” (those born between 1985 and 2004) (Kiesa et al., 2006), either the result of a trend toward charismatic “youth friendly” candidates (such as US president, Barack Obama) or the cumulative result of past decades of civic education efforts. The record-setting youth turnout during the 2008 American presidential election has given hope to those in the US concerned about low youth involvement in the democratic process (Hyman & Levine, 2008). It remains to be seen whether the election results will galvanize American youth sufficiently to sustain an interest in politics and other civic activities in the long run.

It is also just as possible that the many ways traditionally used to describe civic engagement have become either calcified and/or obsolete in describing contemporary youth attitudes, skills, and knowledge for democratic engagement (Llewellyn et al., 2007). We need to consider, that just as the world has rapidly changed, so too have our youths’ methods of civic engagement. Investigation of atypical youth activities such as graffiti and its links to democracy may be one way to determine how best to reach a new generation of citizens, understand what motivates them and possibly broaden our understanding of who is (or who might be or should be

considered) a “good citizen” (MacKinnon, Pitre, & Watling, 2007; O’Neil, 2007).

School-Based Civic Engagement

Many researchers suggest that the solution to declining levels of civic engagement is classroom instruction (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Traditional approaches to civic education treated civic knowledge as specific content that must be learned in a classroom setting (Milner, 2002; Niemi & Junn, 1998). Milner, in *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work*, refers to social capital, political participation, political knowledge and civic literacy, which he defines as “the knowledge and ability capacity of citizens to make sense of their political world” (Milner, 2002 p. 1). He believes that the effect is cyclical in nature and that by promoting civic literacy, there will be greater political participation, which will lead to more equitable socioeconomic outcomes, which in itself promotes civic literacy. Other research aimed at analyzing the potential of the school environment to encourage civic participation has uncovered some hopeful connections including the link between level of education and civic engagement (individuals with higher levels of education tend to be more civically engaged) (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995; Davila & Mora, 2006). Past images of the “classic” engaged student (in leadership positions in school government, involved in school clubs, or participating in other school activities with good grades, regular attendance, and few discipline problems) failed to include the majority of the school population. Not surprisingly, engagement which attracts this kind of student has not led to much in the way of change either for the individual student or for the system (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Even after several decades of research and funding, a clear association between school-based activities and youth participation in civic processes remains tenuous (Niemi & Junn, 1998).

Community-Based Civic Engagement

A growing body of research has begun to look outside the specific content and skills in a

classroom setting. This new approach considers the possibility that civic identity is most effectively developed through various interactions with the environment and perhaps specifically with people that work within youth's communities. It also suggests that by engaging and involving the community, the community is ensuring youth civic participation. (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994; Youniss, McLellan, & Yates, 1997). Much of this research tells us that effective programs engage young people in a variety of ways, so that they are more than just physically present, but that their mind, emotions and social systems are centred on the program (Bellensen, 1993; Feldman, Pasek, Romer & Hall Jamieson, 2007; Howe & Covell, 2007; Mandel, 2005; McLaughlin, Irby & Langman, 1994; Moll, 2005; O'Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2004; Pitman et al, 2001; Roche, 1999, Rubin & Silva, 2003;).

Youth stand to reap other tangible benefits from involvement in their community. A 2001 Statistics Canada report indicated that young people who participated in volunteer organizations in Canada generally had stronger academic skills, higher self-esteem, and better health than those who did not participate. Harell and Stolle (2004) analyzed the Canadian National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY), and came to the conclusion that youth engagement in community groups and other types of clubs is one of the most important predictors of club membership, of how willing they are to volunteer and how able they are to take on special responsibilities in an organization four years later. Based on this and other similar research, several provinces here in Canada have initiated compulsory community service as a means to involve students in their communities. Normalizing community participation, and demonstrating the benefits of reciprocity may lead to greater future participation by youth in community-based civic activities (Nakhaie, 2006). This attempt to build individual *Social capital* (the web of human relationships which support and create a sense of safety) has also been associated with

participation in other types of activity, such as voting (Jacobs, 1961; Krishna, 2002, Putnam, 1995). Other recent research has demonstrated that required community service leads to higher academic performance in many academic subjects and also increases an individual's chances of graduating from college (Davila & Mora, 2007). Neighbourhood-based organizations (NBO's) have also been researched as potential routes to youth civic engagement. Studies have focused on the considerable amount of time that youth spend unsupervised between school and sleep and how this time might be better used to support youth, encourage school attendance and promote civic engagement (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Bruce, Nicola & Menke, 2006; Checkoway, Alison & Montoya, 2005; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2001; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Sherrod, Flanagan & Youness, 2002; Kirshner, O'Donoghue, McLaughlin, 2002; Klem & Connolly, 2004; McLaughlin et al, 1993; Morrell, 2006; O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2004; Rubin, 2007; Sherrod, Flanagan, & Youniss, 2002 ; Stephenson, 2007; Zeldin, McDaniel, Toptzes & Calvert, 2000).

Top-rated community programs shared the following features: they were well attended; received positive evaluations from youth; were maintained year after year in neighbourhoods where staffing is a challenge; included the mentorship and example of strong, trusted adult role models and created an environment of security and high expectations of commitment and discipline (Klem & Connolly, 2004; Morrell, 2006, O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2004). Similar adult support underlines the work done by Youth Force, a youth-led project in the South Bronx that has created a Democracy Multiplied Zone, which enables young people to promote public awareness and critical consciousness through initiatives such as *Tag Up Here* (graffiti art and public murals portraying issues from their own lives) (Checkoway, Figueroa, & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

Both school-based and neighbourhood-based examples of youth engagement strategies,

although youth-focused, are still primarily adult initiated (Torre & Fine, 2006). Far more rare in the literature are studies of youth-initiated or youth-driven routes to civic engagement. An important underlying theme of this research, therefore, includes listening to the voices of youth and how **they** define themselves. Ironically, this aspect of “voice” has at times been missing from research focused on civic engagement (Black 2006; Campbell Edgar, 1994; Morrell, 2006; London, Zimmerman & Erbstein, 2003). This qualitative study sought to explore “voice” as it relates to youth graffiti *writers*.

Just as adult support enables young people to become more civically engaged, there is evidence that group engagement offers similar benefits. Graffiti *writers*, working together in crews within neighbourhoods can teach a myriad of skills to urban youth and allow them to experience a form of political and social activism to which they would not usually be exposed (Christen, 2003). Evidence of benefits from group engagement, further supports theories based on *social capital*. Putman, who wrote the in 1995, defines *social capital* as “connections between individuals.” He believes that a decline in social capital including particularly, participation in community and volunteer organizations, leads to a decline in public trust and co-operation, which results in lowered political participation. If a loss in social capital results in lowered political participation, then it seems reasonable to assume that a gain in social capital (i.e. increased group engagement) will lead to increased rates of political participation. Encouraging group engagement in the community (including engagement with groups such as graffiti crews) might actually increase civic participation.

Hip-Hop Related Civic Engagement

In contrast to Putman’s view that social capital is decreasing in society, scholars of Hip-Hop culture argue that rap or M-Cing, D-Jing, B-Boying or break dancing and graffiti are leading to a global increase in connections between individuals. This relatively new academic

focus looks at Hip-Hop culture and considers why and how Hip-Hop has grown to be so popular with youth across the world. Many academics who research this subject believe that Hip-Hop, especially the spoken and musical components, offers youth an opportunity to remodel their identities (Auzanneau, 2001), serves as a way to both learn and provide information about local issues, and also may in some cases provide a blueprint for social action (Bennett, 1999). As Gabriella Djerrahian suggests, Hip-Hop appears to have been re-appropriated by non-African-Americans “as a system of meanings relating to the particular historical resistance of a minority group” (Djerrahian, 2003, p. 11).

Although most Hip-Hop research mentions graffiti, much of the research tends to focus on rap lyrics and music as concrete examples of resistance and youth identification. The words and music in political rap clearly exhort marginalized minorities in urban centres to focus their frustration and anger by becoming politically involved. However, rap has also been a site of controversy because of its sub-genre of “gangsta rap” (Chang, 2005), which has been accused of promoting or sensationalizing drug culture, violence and misogyny. A genre that was created in the early 1980s ostensibly by rappers SchoolyD and IceT, it is also the most commercially lucrative. Just as political rap artists may be condemned by those who are unfamiliar with the differences between subgenres, graffiti *writers* who create *pieces* by participating in an illegal activity, are perceived, not to be engaging in a form of political action or civil disobedience but rather in unlawful vandalism. Given this context, those artists who persevere in a controversial art form may be participating in a politicized action as a way to resist hegemonic pressures. The Westheimer and Kahne (2004) conceptual model (see Table One, page 30), considers a citizen engaging in this kind of civil disobedience, to be exhibiting markers of a justice-oriented citizen whose efforts are focused on a desire to solve social problems and improve society by questioning, debating and changing established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of

injustice.

Little is known about the youth involved in graffiti writing and their views on graffiti, its meaning in their lives, their views about their place in society or how, or if, graffiti writing may have affected the development of their civic identity. By examining young graffiti *writers'* perceptions of their own rights, roles, and responsibilities as citizens in a democracy, the analysis of the interviews collected in this study, adds to the growing body of literature that focuses on youth 'assets' (the strengths that youth bring to their experiences) (Benson, 1997; Scales & Laffert, 1999; Ungar, 2005) and has the potential to redefine traditional perceptions of what constitutes a "good citizen" in a democratic society. As Rubin (2003) relates, the lived experiences of youth in community and school settings helps to shape their understanding of civic processes.

Graffiti As Civic Participation

Although graffiti, due to its illegality, is considered to be outside the limits of acceptable civic behaviour, the fact that so many youth, despite serious legal consequences and personal risks, engage in some form of "writing on walls," leads one to believe that there is some other inherent reinforcement provided by their participation. For some graffiti *writers* (perhaps a large portion), graffiti may represent little more than destructive vandalism, but evidence from the field indicates that others may see graffiti production as something closer to what O'Neill (2007) refers to as 'individualized results-oriented civic action'.

In an ethnographic study conducted in the early '90's, by McLaughlin, Irby and Langman, *Urban Sanctuaries. Neighborhood Organizations in the Lives and Futures of Inner-City Youth*, successful community-based organizations (and their leaders) shared a number of common characteristics: they approached youth from an asset-based perspective; they acted locally within the environment that youth inhabit in neighbourhoods, and institutions; they

provided family-like interactions with clear rules and clear appreciation for individuals' involvement; they were knowledgeable and sensitive to the hopes, beliefs and realities of young peoples lives; finally they challenged and empowered young people to develop their skills and competencies through practice and experience (McLaughlan, Irby and Langman, 1994). Recent studies that explore graffiti crews, training their youth members share very similar characteristics (Christen, 2003).

This research study was designed to allow youth's own voices to shed more light on youth experiences with graffiti *writing*, so as to better understand the links between youth voice and youth engagement in and out of school. With this information I had hoped to uncover potential channels or alternate venues for youth civic participation. I was also interested to see if graffiti was used by youth as a vehicle or a 'voice' to express their feelings toward the civil society in which they are expected, but do not always feel truly welcome to participate.

In order to understand the potential relationship between graffiti production and youth civic participation, it is necessary to disclose the underlying assumptions made in this study with respect to areas of controversy in public discourse. The controversies include, whether graffiti piecing should be considered a valid urban art form, an act of civil disobedience or destructive vandalism. The assumptions that have been made in the study reflect the researcher's bias but are also based on widely shared discourses in the arts and cultural studies fields. One line of discourse -- the debate over the validity of graffiti *piecing* as an art form -- is fairly straightforward to me. The aesthetics, the technical expertise and the passion that are in evidence in the production of large, skillfully rendered graffiti *pieces*, indicates to me, and to many in the arts and academic community, that this is indeed a valid art form.

Piecing occurs in public space and generally is performed without permission on property belonging to someone other than the *writer*. According to current laws, *writing* without

permission, on someone else's property is illegal. Therefore, those who create *pieces* are considered by our current laws to be committing a crime. What needs to be remembered is that laws do not remain static. Laws change to reflect changes in societal values. During prohibition in the early part of the first and second decade of the 20th century, it was illegal to sell or consume alcohol. Those who sold or imbibed alcohol would have been considered criminals and therefore not "good citizens." This cultural situation has changed and as a result the law has changed as well as public perceptions of "good citizenship." I would argue that the legal system has not kept up with public discourse on street art and *piecing*. As a result, it does not yet reflect the views, which highlight the positive contribution this art form can bring to our communities. Therefore for this explorative study the assumption is made that graffiti *piecing*, while illegal, is nonetheless an "art form". Historical evidence has shown that "the arts can help with establishing or refashioning civic identity, can rally isolated communities around a particular purpose and give voice not only to feelings of loss and despair, but also to quicken hope and instill pride in a shared heritage. The arts have the power to address cultural and communal needs in ways and to a depth that few other approaches can claim" (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Graffiti *piecing*, seen as an art form, shares this power.

Janice Rahn's 1999 ethnographic study of motivation and graffiti culture in Montreal, Quebec, demonstrates the power of graffiti to transform the lives of students, many who have become disengaged from civic institutions of learning. In one memorable chapter, she describes how introducing students to graffiti during an art lesson, enabled her husband, a substitute teacher in a remote Cree community, Mistissini, to build a relationship with some extremely challenging students who had decided to passively resist the educational system. It is clear that features of graffiti have the potential to engage disenfranchised youth no matter their background or geographic distance from the originators of this subculture. The strong reaction to graffiti

images and other components of Hip-Hop culture, by youth from every background underlines a fundamental dynamic of Hip-Hop's expansion and popularity: "its capacity to create, contribute to and disseminate a series of templates of identification on a transnational level... The dialogue created by graffiti between Hip-Hop community members and those outside of that group mixed with the media attention, causes their participation to become politicized" (Djerrahian, 2003, p.5). When law breaking is politically motivated, it becomes civil disobedience. For some of the writers the lawbreaking, while not overtly political, demonstrates that it is done thoughtfully and as a positive community directed impulse, as opposed to a destructive act.

By listening to the voices of youth who engage in graffiti *piecing* this study leads to better understandings of the links between youth civic participation, youth voice and youth-generated graffiti. In so doing, it also raises questions about other potential channels for youth civic participation.

Conceptual Framework Foundation: Graffiti and Visions of Citizenship

This research draws on a conceptual framework described by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) who looked at various education curricula and the kind of citizen the curricula were designed to produce. Based on their research, their framework situates "good citizen" activity on three planes (see Table One next page). The 'personally responsible' citizen, who obeys laws, follows directions and abides by civic structures; the 'participatory' citizen, who engages in collaborative ventures with community organizations and works with coalitions to address primarily social issues intended to benefit the whole; and the 'justice-oriented' citizen who looks for root causes of problems and when called for, advocates for those who are oppressed and "voiceless" to sustain the democratic ideals in society. Educators such as Rugg and Count (two educators who favored a justice-oriented civic curriculum) believed that "truly effective citizens needed opportunities to analyze and understand the interplay of social, economic, and political

forces and to take part in projects through which they might develop skills and commitments for working collectively to improve society” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004 p. 243).

Table One: Kinds of Citizens (From Westheimer & Kahne, 2004)

KINDS OF CITIZEN	PERSONALLY RESPONSIBLE CITIZEN	PARTICIPATORY CITIZEN	JUSTICE-ORIENTED CITIZEN
DESCRIPTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts responsibly in his/her community. • Works and pays taxes; • Obeys laws; • Recycles; • Gives blood; • Volunteers to lend a hand in times of crisis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts; • Organizes community efforts to care for those in need; • Promotes economic development, or clean up environment; • Knows how government agencies work; • Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes; • Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice; • Knows about democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change.
SAMPLE ACTION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contributes food to a food drive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps to organize a food drive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explores why people are hungry and acts to solve root causes.
CORE ASSUMPTIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must have good character; they must be honest, responsible, and law-abiding members of the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must actively participate and take leadership positions within established systems and community structures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To solve social problems and improve society, citizens must question, debate, and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time.

Although many youth argue that they are and should be considered full citizens, for all intents and purposes in today’s society they are seen as “not yet” citizens (Alderson, 1999, Smith, N., et al., 2005). Caught in “limbo” they are partial citizens of the present awaiting the political status of full citizenship once they reach adulthood (Roche, 1999). Although society considers youth and young adults “not yet” citizens, they still somehow expect them to act as “good citizens.” Based on a narrow and often ideologically conservative conception of a “good” citizen (which most closely approximates the description for a *personally-responsible citizenship*), youth who participate in graffiti *writing* fail to meet the criteria and are condemned,

or labeled civically disobedient or delinquent for their actions. Youth who engage in graffiti are developing skills and may have many reasons for participating. It can be argued that for every thoughtful, artistically inclined graffiti *writer*, there are likely many more “toys” (a term used in the graffiti communities to denote *taggers* who never produce large pieces and have little status, who use graffiti to do little more than deface and vandalize, public and private property).

However, I am proposing- and this study confirms - that in some cases, engagement in graffiti and other forms of Hip-Hop culture might be considered a form of purposeful activism. “Good behavior may be one aspect of citizenship; but so is activism, or taking action to improve the nation state, which is frequently not considered “good behavior” (Sherrod et al., 2002).

Improving the ‘nation state’ certainly may not be the stated, or the initial reason for youth involvement in graffiti and in Hip-Hop culture more broadly. Research based on the appropriation of other forms of Hip Hop culture, however appear to indicate that youth participation in any of the many facets of Hip-Hop can be both a form of resistance and an overt political choice. For urban youth, elements of Hip-Hop culture such as graffiti has the potential to, and in some cases may, be used as a vehicle for expressing “pain, anger and the frustration of oppression” as well as to “organize, inform and politicize youth about local and national issues” (Ginwright, 2004, p. 133). In this way, in certain contexts, graffiti has the potential to help youth to develop skills and attitudes that Westheimer and Kahne (2004) associate with the “social justice oriented citizenship”, including “the ability to communicate with and learn from those who hold different perspectives ... and ...effectively promote their goals as individuals and groups in a sometimes contentious political arena” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p.243).

The conceptual model as described above helps us to make more complex our analysis of how graffiti and issues of citizenship overlap. While it is easy to see the link between political graffiti and the social-justice oriented forms of citizenship, not all graffiti can be linked to issues

of citizenship. As *writers* themselves admit, some of it, especially the use of indiscriminant *tags*, is rudimentary (artistically) and in many cases is little more than vandalism. Using the lens of this conceptual model however allows us a richer view of the potential and range that artistic forms can serve in the development and expression of civic identity. It also provides us with a deeper understanding of the rationale behind the emotional response that the word graffiti elicits. It is clear that in any discussion about graffiti, there needs to be an understanding of the complexity of the art form and of its community.

Chapter Two- Methodology

I chose qualitative methods of investigation for this study because they have been found to produce rich and authentic data regarding youth dialogue and can provide voice to those who have traditionally had little opportunity to express their voice. It was important to be continuously conscious (as a member of the dominant culture) of the ways that research can quickly and unconsciously become value laden. "One of the key advantages of qualitative research is its ability to allow participants to construct meanings and insightful interpretations of their own experiences" (Harper & Museus, 2007, p. 2). Aside from the research questions I sought to answer, I also had a methodological question in mind when I planned my research: What are some of the benefits and limitations of using peer interviewers for research concerning youth? The answer to this question is discussed in more detail on page 38 and in the conclusion.

Research Participants

The choice of graffiti *writers* as research participants may be considered by some to be unworthy of deeper study. The dominant understanding of what is and what isn't worthy of serious study amongst mainstream society has sometimes failed to include "popular" cultural practices or art forms such as graffiti *writing*. I would argue that aspects of culture such as art, rather than being a source of academic controversy could also be 'a source of social cohesion and belonging' (Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram, & Tincknell, 2004, p.11). Art of most kinds (e.g. visual art, dance, music, writing) provides us with the means to take "us out of our own given reality" (Iser, 1978, p. 139) and those who create art "are seen to view things differently" (Greene, 1995, p. 97). The experience of being artistically engaged catalyzes the individual's imagination creating an environment, which "above all, makes empathy possible" (Greene, 1995, p. 3). In a similar way, Derrida in his 1967 work *aporia* explains the concept of multiple literacies, as an opening where doubt and questioning take place and where chaos, movement

and the transformation of multiple literacies occur (Masny, 2006 p. 10). The ability to see the world in richer detail, and to imagine the world in new ways, allows the graffiti artist or *writer* to "invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society" (Greene, 1995, p. 5); in this way art can foster what Rosenblatt (1994) describes as democratic values.

When Rosenblatt refers to democratic values she is referencing and borrowing from her affinity with Dewey who believed that it was the collective aesthetic experiences of society that are communally disputed and shared within a culture. As editor's Ball and Freedman, 2004 explain, "The image here is of a culture transcending individual experience, and of art as a civilization's embodiment and enduring transmitter of a culture's values form and content" (Ball & Freedman, 2004, p. 41). Whether graffiti can be considered a site where the world is being imagined in a new way, or where doubt and questioning takes place, depends upon the individual's "reading" of the "text," where text can be how the individual interprets and copes with their own environment.

By retrieving and analyzing the perceptions of graffiti *writers* I hoped to be able to provide more data on how they interpret their environment and how their response to the environment varies depending upon their individual perceptions. The goal for this particular study was to interview ten to twelve graffiti *writers*, to listen to their voices and to learn from their own words: who these individuals are; how they perceive themselves; their perceptions and their motivation for engaging in this controversial art form. From their confidences I hoped to be able to formulate new perspectives on how youth citizenship might be expressed.

Recruitment

The research plan was to solicit, from a sample of convenience, at least three reliable students, male and/or female, between the ages of 18 to 25. They were to be individuals who were themselves either part of, or on the fringes of graffiti culture in Ottawa. The youth research

assistants (YRAs) were to have been provided with several hours of paid training. Training included how to: a) ethically solicit interested candidates to interview; b) present the general interview process and overall research paradigm to the interviewee; c) conduct the interviews and how to capture the data using a digital voice recorder. The difficulties of recruiting interviewees and finding a common meeting time for the training posed problems for three of the four initial YRAs, who ended up withdrawing from the study due to work and school pressures. Attempts were made to provide individual training sessions and one of the initial YRAs did participate in this. Other reasons for dropping out included the common complaint that many of the individuals they contacted to interview did not want to be involved in a formal interview process. Other contributing factors included a previously unidentified conflict between two of the YRAs who held derogative views towards each other and their art and who had a history of previous negative encounters. After some discussion with the Initial YRAs, a new YRA (a female known to some of the interviewees) was recruited. After consultation the one remaining initial YRA elected to continue in the study as a research participant. The new YRA was able to engage five participants between the ages of 18-21 who were currently or had in the past actively engaged in graffiti 'piecing' in Ottawa. She gathered all contact information and consents and then conducted the 5, 30-60-minute interviews over an 8-week period. When it became clear that recruitment of participants was problematic, several individual who had been actively involved in the graffiti community but who were over 25 and thus no longer candidates for the study were contacted. These individuals, responded, one from Ontario (Matthew) and one from British Columbia (Ben). Both individuals followed through and quite graciously shared some their thoughts and offered some feedback one by e-mail and the other by facebook of a perspective of *writers* who were adolescents in the mid 90's before the Internet's wide influence on graffiti style and popularity. This additional data is included as the final two case studies. Although the

two *writers* were not part of an interactive in-person dialogue, their comments add to data and discourse, particularly as a contrast in perspectives between current *writers* and *writers* and *writing* in the '90's

Data Collection

The time limitations, both of the research and of the availability and access to the interviewees, influenced the decision to utilize the interview method. Interviewing has been a primary method of data gathering in qualitative research. Depending upon the philosophical basis of the research narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study can also be used (Creswell, 2007; Harper & Kuh, 2007).

Researchers typically are viewed as neutral persona posing questions and recording responses, and the interviewee is seen as a passive "vessel of answers" (Baker, 2004; Holstein & Gubriam, 1995). Holstein and Gubriam (1995) however, describe an ethno-methodological approach in which the interviewer and interviewee engage in the co-construction of data. Their approach has relevance in this particular study since a near-age peer research assistant (YRA), who was already interested in graffiti culture, conducted the interviews. This co-construction of data added another layer of rich dialogue to the interactions and more authentically situated the interviewer, creating a climate of trust in which an introspective process occurred for the interviewees.

A recent article (James, 2007) describes how on-line interviews are effective at supporting investigations in the construction of identity through narrative. Narrative, which is a term often utilized in education and the social sciences, is a process which allows an individual to examine his or her own situation, the situations of those close to them and the environments affecting their choices and actions through telling and hearing/reading stories (Sikes, 2002). Narratives have the potential to provide a realistic view of life based on real events, feelings and

conversations, as well as exposing those experiences, which might otherwise be left unexplored. (Clough, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Williams, 2000).

There has been good documentation that on-line research methods hold several advantages when it comes to practical constraints such as reaching populations that are hard to access as well as constraints in money, time and travel. (Jones, 1999; Mann & Stewart, 2000). The use of e-research also allows for geographically dispersed groups to stay connected with other similar communities. This access to like minded groups and/or communities provides researchers with a 'bounded space' within which it is possible to explore their lived reality (Henkel, 2000).

The MSN group interview process was a data gathering method that has had infrequent use, thus there is negligible data on its value. This process was chosen as the preferred data collection method because of its popularity with youth in the study's demographic, its frequent use by other known *writers*, because it provided an opportunity to have a multiple-way dialogue between the YRA, the researcher and the *writer*- participants and finally because it provides a format where all participants dialogue is easily captured.

Taped recordings of the interviews reduced the need for detailed note taking on the part of the YRA, who had little experience in data collection and it also provided a simple way of collecting data in a useable format. Thematic analysis, derived from grounded theory, a widely accepted method in educational qualitative research, which utilizes the process of coding and memo-ing to build categories and themes, was to be the primary analysis method (Charmaz, 2006; Emerson & Shaw, 1995; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Youth As Research Assistants

Using youth as interviewers has not been a common practice in past research. In fact, very little research exists as to the efficacy of using youth in the data collection process. "As a

population...adolescents have been engaged by researchers almost exclusively as subjects, respondents, and informants, but not as resources or partners in the discovery of new knowledge or the development of policies and programs” (O’Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlan, 2004). In the last decade, though, agencies and other structures are moving from a deficit model that saw only the negative perspective of youth, to a strength-based model that views young people as having assets and resiliencies that add to and should be nurtured within communities. The resulting increase in youth-led research data provides evidence that youth involvement may now be seen as both legitimate and important (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2001; Grover, 2004; Kirshner, O’Donoghue & McLaughlan, 2002, London; Zimmerman & Erbstein, 2003; Powers et al, 2004; Ungar, 2005).

My experience with youth research assistants (YRA) in this study demonstrates that it is possible for youth to be involved in many aspects of a research project. Their involvement in this particular study also provides the researcher and the reader with a richer understanding of alternate ways that civic participation is expressed and a more authentic reflection of the thoughts and emotions that go into the various choices graffiti *writers* make as they become full citizens. If being civically engaged means to feel that “one matters, has a voice and a stake in public affairs, and wants to be a contributing member of the community” (Flanagan & Faison, 2001, p. 5), then: “it is important for researchers to use person-focused analyses to investigate differences in both precursors and civic engagement outcomes between privileged and disadvantaged individuals” (Obradovic & Masten, 2007, p. 17).

Study Design

The participants were involved in two phases of participation. In phase one, participants were asked to provide non-identifying demographic information (refer to Appendix B), which was used to develop general profiles of the participating graffiti *writers*. The YRA made

arrangements to gather all necessary contact information and consents and then conducted 30-60-minute interviews over an 8-week period at public venues in Ottawa.

During the second phase of the data collection, participants had a choice between a focus group or the opportunity to meet and talk with other graffiti *writers* (previously interviewed participants) about some of the issues raised during the initial interviews. The second option of an on-line, MSN discussion (an internet chat format) in which all participants can talk anonymously using pseudonyms- online in real time, as a group, was the option that ended up being chosen because of difficulties coordinating a face to face meeting. The researcher, the YRA and as many participants as were able and/or interested in participating was coordinated and conducted by the YRA who facilitated the connection of the participants. The researcher was able to ask questions and clarify comments made by participants in the taped interviews. This second attempt at data gathering yielded only a small amount of data, as once again several of the elusive *writers* failed to participate at the appointed time. This format worked well with those involved and had there been sufficient time to organize multiple MSN “meetings” would have yielded significant data.

Assuring Confidentiality

Although the focus of the research deals with participation in an illegal activity the research was designed so that there would be no direct legal consequences to the participants if their anonymity were compromised. Knowledge of the individual’s true identity might increase the potential surveillance of the individual by enforcement, but police could only lay charges if they caught the graffiti *writer* in the act of painting on private property. The YRA signed confidentiality agreements (see Appendix D) and the data collected was maintained in a confidential manner so as not to expose information about the participants. To participate in the second phase electronically, it was necessary for the participants to provide an e-mail address

and pseudonym for electronic communication. There was a remote risk that someone involved in this on-line discussion could forward portions of the group dialogue to an individual outside the study. This risk was minimal with the use of pseudonyms and non-identifying e-mail addresses, in that, even with the dialogue, there would be no way to identify the group participants.

Research Validity

To provide an assurance of research rigour, two additional strategies were explored using the technique of triangulation (collecting data through a variety of methods to reduce the risk of forming a systemic bias and to allow a broader understanding of the investigatory issues (Maxwell, 2005)). Collection of basic demographic information through a handwritten survey, the taped, twenty-minute, face-to-face interviews between the participants and the RAs; the group discussion between the researcher, the interviewers and all interview participants in person or on-line and then the completion of a final evaluation of the process provided a variety of modes for a broad view of the issue.

Although the YRA and interview participants were recruited from samples of convenience the use of qualitative data collection methods provided valid data. Maintaining the formality of the individual interviews, obtaining the appropriate consents, promoting the use of casual language, non-judgmental comments and doing the interviews in a comfortable, setting achieved an environment that was conducive to reflective disclosure.

Since graffiti is an illegal activity, care was taken in the choice of interview questions (refer to Appendix B for the list of questions) to avoid including information that would necessitate significant or inadvertent disclosure about personal graffiti practices. Much of the discussion thus was confined to recording the participants' personal perceptions of the issue and their assessment of their own place and involvement in a prohibited activity. The issue of

participant anonymity was essential and reduced the risk of the consequences of the youth's identity being publicly tied to an illegal activity.

Although the ethics of an adult researcher giving tacit or blatant approval (by discussing or gathering data with an admittedly positive bias) to an activity that is illegal may appear problematic, the researcher did not actively encourage the participants to engage in the illegal activity, nor did the researcher accompany the subjects as they participated in the illegal activity. In fact there was no direct attempt by the researcher to influence the subject's views or participation in the activity. By maintaining an obvious distinction between discussion about the activity and a discussion about the consequences of engaging in the activity, sufficient professional distance was maintained to keep the process within the constraints of the standards promoted by the University Research Ethics Board.

Chapter Three- Case Studies of the *Writers*

The names used for the *writers* are pseudonyms created to protect their identity. Data collected from the interviews has been grouped into five main categories for each participant. Depending upon the nature of the interview or the individual, certain categories were not covered or there was insufficient data to gather into one of the areas, so some of the participants (notably Rhys and Quade) may have fewer than five categories.

The data gathered under the category *Influences*, looks at the people, experiences or events that may have affected both the development and the style of the *writer's* art. *School Experiences*, which is really a sub category of *Influences* refers to the *writers'* perceptions or references to their time spent in school and how they perceive that school affected them. The category *Motivation* includes suggested explanations or observations as to the impetus behind the participants' involvement in graffiti *writing*. *Community Beautification* is perhaps a sub category of motivation in that it refers to a rationale for some of the *writers* who frame their graffiti involvement as a way to improve their surroundings to make it reflect their preferred visual space. The issue of *Respect* resonated throughout the interviews with participants. Respect refers to interpersonal respect, both the *writers'* admiration for more experienced *writers* and also the lack of respect they encounter in competition for space with younger less experienced *writers*. The *writers'* own code of *respect* for certain public spaces is also captured under this heading. *Participant Constructions of Graffiti*: considers how individual *writers* define graffiti (usually in contrast to the way those outside the subculture define it).

Daniel

Figure One: Daniel

Figure One: JPEG image of aerosol paint on cement, graffiti created by "Daniel," used with artists' permission



Daniel grew up in the south-end of Ottawa. He was born in a Northeastern American city to middle class parents who had met as summer camp councilors at a camp for under privileged children in Ontario. His parents returned to Canada after Daniel's birth, and have lived and worked in Ottawa ever since. Daniel attended English public elementary and secondary schools and at the time of the interview was missing several credits for his high school graduation, after being expelled for various delinquent activities. Despite this somewhat jaded past, his insightful responses and his commentary indicate a strong intellect and a profound interest in the world in general but especially with the graffiti community. Daniel's *writing* is a blend of "New School" and "Old School" style since he did not limit himself to only doing word pieces. "Old school," or what Daniel referred to as "classic *writers*," were more rule bound and focused on adhering to stylistic renderings of letters and words. An articulate, white, 20 year old, he is of average height, with dark wavy hair, and a lean, wiry build. For the interview he dressed in a popular street brand of fitted denims, a fitted white t-shirt, high-top shoes and a black fitted cap. The

interview was held outdoors, sitting on the grass beside a baseball diamond at the far end of a suburban children's park with a wading pool. Daniel's response to the interview questions was unrushed and reflective.

Influences

The relationship between Daniel and his parents, as might be expected with someone his age, wanting to, but not yet financially able to be fully independent, appears to be somewhat strained. "They don't see me as an individual, they see society as a working machine. Where do you fit in? They don't see where I fit in." He and his mother in particular appear to have a tense relationship and he wryly observes, as though it explained everything, "My mom is a Republican, she grew up in Middle America." He described his dad, in the past, as having been "a huge hippy, hair down to his knees" and that he was "pretty laid back. My mum's pretty high strung."

Daniel couldn't remember a time when art was not in his life "I've always done art." He admitted that his entry to graffiti "was kind of by accident. Back then I didn't really understand what it was about. I started writing [an early penname] in Grade 8. It was the most ugliest shit." When asked how these somewhat inauspicious beginnings had got him to where he was now, a full-fledged *writer* and a respected member of Ottawa's graffiti subculture, his answer was simple and straight forward, "practice and determination." High school's art classes did not motivate or inspire him, "My art teacher was the slowest person. There was no spark to create any common interest."

School Experiences

Daniel's relationship with school was as rocky as his relationship with his family. Tested in Grade 4 and diagnosed with learning disabilities (which he was not told about until Grade 9), it is unsurprising that he was "self-medicating" to cope with the struggle of everyday. "I was

kicked out, for going to school on drugs. But it was a combination of the crowd I hung around with, skipping, getting in trouble.” School for Daniel was a battleground. He admitted to fighting a lot, explaining, “ It was a really racist school - clash in cultures. They kicked pretty much everyone out.” It is obvious that Daniel still felt conflicted about school, on the one hand acknowledging that it was “where I discovered who I was,” then just as quickly rejecting it, “f*# school!” as school appeared to have rejected him.

In a follow-up to the initial interview in a discussion about school and whether it provided any opportunities for civic learning and engagement, Daniel’s response shows a high degree of understanding of ways to engage students who are kinesthetic learners.

I totally agree that institutions should teach in a wide array of methods, visual – auditory - physical. I think I am more inclined to gain knowledge through spatial intelligence. I'm always aware of the environment around me.

His observations about the kind of experiential learning that worked best for him and the way that he connected his own learning style to the manner in which his civic class was taught, serves as a template for all who teach civics courses to kinesthetic learners:

In high school I had a social science teacher that absolutely changed the way I understood the function of society- politics class without falling asleep. We had field trips to city hall, and the Elgin courthouse, parliament hill, guest speakers. He tried to show how the effort of society is what keeps democracy moving.

In order for Daniel to have made the connection between what he was taking in school and its relevance to his own world, the teacher had to “show how” democracy worked. This visual kinesthetic approach, which shares many characteristics with Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004)

observations about justice- oriented curricula, is essential for learners like Daniel.

Motivation

When asked why he continued to engage in graffiti writing, or what he got from it, Daniel's response was vague, "I don't really understand why I do it. It kind of keeps me distracted from everything around me... I guess writing on people's property, it's my way of saying "f*# you". Instead of doing the same thing, instead of going to the same parties all the time, I would go out at night and walk streets, find alleyways." He later clarified, "It doesn't criticize me, it doesn't hurt my feelings, it doesn't hurt me, it doesn't cheat on me." When asked if he'd ever "fall off" (a term referring to someone who stops writing and withdraws from the graffiti community), he paused then replied thoughtfully,

I'll pretty much- I'll probably be doing it until I die. I like the whole feeling of going out one night and *crushing*² it. Going out at night and waking up the next day and taking the train. Doing something, then hearing someone talk about something I did, as we go by it - getting a public reaction.

Community Beautification

Daniel's interview demonstrated that he was very aware of his surroundings and was also very affected by them. He appeared fascinated with the work of Alan Weisman, a University professor in the US who uses pictures of Korea's demilitarized zone and Chernobyl as images predicting how the earth will look when people are no longer around and nature had taken back these spaces. It appeared that Daniel *wrote* as a way to counter the ugliness of the world that he saw around him:

I just don't like the concrete surroundings that we have.

Everything just looks really dull and really, really plain and ugly

and desolate. Everything just looks dead. You go down town and there are just all these, like, square and rigid buildings and there's no life. All the birds are all diseased and dying, and there's garbage everywhere. The streets are littered with vomit and gum and cigarette butts and rainwater that's full of oil and ugly shit-right?

And then for me to turn around and just paint what I want to paint, it's just my way to open up the space and make it look like how I want it to look. Not even, like I don't even really like all these elaborate murals and stuff that people try and paint. Like all these fuckin' super crazy figures and animals... I like throw ups and letters and tags. That's what I think should be up there.

Daniel clearly has a vision for his preferred environment. Since his reality does not reflect this vision he uses his own hands to effect change on the environment.

Respect

When Daniel was asked whom among his writing colleagues he respected, he had a simple answer, "Probably all the guys who have ever showed me what's up and not done it just for the sake of doing it." He went on to talk about many of the top graffiti artists in the Ottawa area and what they were known for and whether they were active *writers* now. "The graffiti circle it's kind of hard getting into. It's different than any other culture. It wasn't until I started getting noticed that I got to see what it's like on the inside."

Just as respect is given for those who mentor, respect is also shown for certain public spaces. There were limits to where Daniel was willing to *write*. "I'm not going to go to a child's hospital, I refuse to deface houses. Or a school park- I wouldn't deface a kid's play structure. As

far as public property, it's public property."

Participant Constructions of Graffiti

Daniel preferred to refer to his involvement as *writing* rather than graffiti. "I guess people label the wrong things graffiti, like gang graffiti. That's not even the same thing, that's like negative Hip-Hop - that's a gang marking up the beat they live in." He then proceeded to jokingly use a *Star Wars* analogy, "It's like, there's the *Force* - that's the good side and then there's the "Dark-side"... that's the dark side - gang graffiti. Gang graffiti is the *Sith* to my *Jedi*."

Daniel acknowledged that communication was inherent in the medium, "I've painted over people's shit... you leave messages even with tags." When Daniel was asked how *writers* made a judgment about the calibre of someone's piece, or what determined whether they were perceived to be good or mediocre, he explained:

Well there's like different things you can do. Some people judge it on just letter structure. Classic *writers* will only ever judge your work on your letter structure, like the build up your letters. The way that they stand, the way that they sit, whatever style you use. Style is a big thing. If you don't have style you're not a *writer* basically and...that can go as far as like, do you have style in your pieces but your tags suck or do you have style in your tags, your throw ups, your hollows, your blockbusters everything [see glossary on page 131 for graffiti terminology]. Do you have style everywhere? Do you excrete style in every thing you do or are you so limited that you can only paint the same thing over and over and over again and again?

Daniel's comments underline his understanding that the essence of the hard-core, classic

graffiti community is that *writing* is really is all about style.

Summary – Daniel

For Daniel, the world appears to be a pretty bleak place. This obviously intelligent, sensitive and talented young man sees the ugliness of the urban surroundings, feels the pain and anger of people and relationships, and yet with “practice, determination” has developed a skill and a knowledge that has given him access to a different world where he can “reject everyone’s reality and substitute [his] own” and where others have reached out to him and “showed [him] what’s up and not done it just for the sake of doing it.” Just as he saw in Alan Weisman’s images, nature ‘taking back’ Korea’s demilitarized zones, he perceives that he is ‘taking back’ the desolate urban surroundings “to open up the space and make it look like how I want it to look.” With his active interest in his surroundings, he is not leaving it to time or to others to make a change but putting himself and his *writing* out there to counter the “dark side.”

Although Daniel sees himself on the “Force” side, especially with respect to gang graffiti, an undercurrent of contradiction in his self-perception has to be acknowledged. He refers to it when he explains “I guess writing on people’s property, it’s my way of saying “f*# you.” This element of defiance, of fighting the status quo, is repeated in his references to his school experiences. It is clear that school, while perhaps initially a positive place where Daniel “discovered who [he] was” also brought great disappointment. In a battleground where he had to literally fight his way out, leaving school, literally saying “f*# school”, effectively put the controls back into his own hands.

Michael Ungar (2005) points out, that what some adults perceive to be delinquency, is often merely a misdirection of a very positive resilient response, where an individual seeks to obtain what they need from their environment. In Daniel’s case, through the graffiti community he was able to obtain some guidance, some acceptance, some control, a chance to demonstrate

and be recognized for his skills, as well as being provided with an opportunity to “change the world.” In this case graffiti provides an opportunity for ‘civic engagement’ with his chosen community, the graffiti community.

With Daniel, as with the other *writers* there are many inconsistencies between his statements. There is the contradiction of his relationship with school as mentioned above. There is an undercurrent of contradiction between the Daniel who wants to improve his environment “to open it up” to counter the ugliness of its concrete surroundings and the Daniel who finds that “people really annoy me” and for whom “writing on people’s property, it is my way of saying “f*# you.” Daniel’s understanding of his graffiti writing reflects the tensions inherent in the relationship of graffiti *piecing* to citizenship: “ the Force” and the “Sith,” the illicit and the creative.

Quade

Figure 2: Quade

Figure 2. JPEG image paint marker on wood. Used with permission of artist.



Quade, a talkative, white, 18 year-old, was in his final year at a local public high school. He had followed in the footsteps of a much older brother also deeply involved in the graffiti subculture. The brother was apparently a talented *writer* and a recognized member of a dynamic group of Ottawa graffiti artists who had become infamous in local graffiti circles in the '90's. For the interview, Quade was well dressed in a fitted light blue T-shirt, a popular street brand of denims, high tops and aviator sunglasses. The setting for this interview was in an outside café beside a busy Italian restaurant-delicatessen in the Byward Market (a popular cosmopolitan section of downtown Ottawa).

The clinking of plates, constant noise and continuous hum of voices created an exaggerated sense of urgency to the interview, although this edgy setting was rather humorously interrupted when a passing bird dropped his guano on Quade's shirt near the end of the interview. The YRA and Quade jokingly acknowledged that perhaps the bird was expressing his

negative views towards graffiti art. Quade's was the shortest of the five interviews; his speech was quick and decisive. While he had participated in graffiti *writing* for several years, it was clear that his interest and passion was beginning to sway towards canvas art.

Influences

Quade had artistic talent in his background, as he explained, "my father can draw, my mother not so much." His older brother (by ten years) is a graphic designer and in the 90's had been part of a well-known group of graffiti artists in Ottawa. His parents were aware of his graffiti involvement although, "My mum's a little more supportive of it than my dad is." His father had already lived through the ups and downs of dealing with a child involved in an illegal passion ten years before, whereas it was his mother's first time (Quade and his brother have different mothers).

Quade first became interested in graffiti during Grade 6. His brother had shown him one of Berserker's large pieces as they were driving around. BERSERKER was a well-known local graffiti artist and friend of Quade's brother. "It was like this big roller on the side of a big high-rise- it was so cool." On another occasion, at the grand opening of a small art gallery/ clothing store named Attic (now closed), on Dalhousie he got to meet BERSERKER and all his brother's *writer* friends and began to think that "hey I could really get into this." He started tagging on paper in Grade 7, took an art course at the School of Art in the summer before Grade 8 then "started to get into it from there." He often checked in with his older brother asking him, "is this cool, is that cool?"

School Influences

Quade attended a high school, which had a well-known and respected fine arts program. When Quade was asked if attending an art-focused high school had increased his motivation to participate in graffiti, he quickly responded that in fact it had not, since his involvement in

graffiti had resulted in a one-month school suspension. Quade's suspension had come about as a result of a disclosure by another student. Quade explained, "I was ratted on." His teachers had also noticed his *tags* in his notebooks and then the police were brought in.

In the past year the principal and vice principal had decided that graffiti in the bathrooms in the school had become excessive and had all graffiti painted over, including a lot of free style art and poetry that held a lot of emotional value for the students attending the school. As Quade reported it, "the VP and the Principal... said that visitors were scared when they went to the bathrooms in the basement because of the amount of graffiti there." The YRA, who had attended the same school a couple of years before seemed shocked by the news that they had also painted over the girls bathroom since she considered it beautiful. They discussed the history of the work in the bathrooms and administration's decision. Quade commented that he felt let down by the administrative response, "I was disappointed, I think knowing the kind of students, and the history of graffiti art that has arisen from the school, that they might have shown a little more tolerance."

When he was asked whether he believed that going to an art-focused high school had benefited him as an artist, Quade mentioned the benefits as far as networking, "to meet people it's a really good place because you make connections that will really help you in the art world in the future."

He added that there was a down side to the school, in terms of artistic encouragement, "they focus too much on academics, if you're an unbelievable artist, you shouldn't have to drop out of the art program because you can't maintain your mark in math."

Another criticism Quade and the YRA had of their experience with education had to do with guidance support or counseling. At the time of the interview, Quade had several final credits to finish but was not planning on going on to post-secondary studies. He and the YRA

discussed the attitudes of guidance councilors who only seemed focused on getting students to go to University and that as soon as they found out you had other plans they were disdainful or dismissive.

Motivation

Part of Quade's initial motivation for involvement with the graffiti community had been because of his perception of *writers* as part of an exclusive "cool" group. His brother's friends had achieved a level of notoriety in the '90's and the idea of being known as a top *writer* in his own generation, still held a certain attraction, "the plan for me was to get as up as possible [i.e. reach a high level of recognition from the graffiti community] then to stop. That's what I want - to be remembered by a generation." Unfortunately for Quade, over the ensuing 6 years the mainstream popularity of graffiti had caused such a large influx of would-be *writers*, that among his friends, "for every five *writers* there was only one who could do serious canvases [i.e. had sufficient artistic skills to be able to transfer them to painting on canvas]." Realizing that he was unlikely to distinguish himself in such a large group, he preferred the improved odds of becoming known because of the excellence of his canvases.

Quade catalogued the many additional factors, which had caused him to become less engaged with *piecing*. These included community attitudes towards graffiti, the competitive nature of the graffiti community and the transitory nature of the art due to the increased vigilance of the graffiti removers, "with graffiti, you're a delinquent, it's really competitive, I put time into it. A good piece takes so much longer, and then it could get buffed the next day." For Quade, the negative aspects of graffiti participation had begun to outweigh the positive and had led him to begin to withdraw from his involvement in that community.

Respect

Quade was forthright in his disdain for certain styles of *writing*: "Gang graffiti is

ridiculous. Why do you need to have yourself and 20 other guys all doing the same thing? You're more likely to get caught and it's stupid." He believed that a lot of graffiti participation was little more than testosterone-fuelled posturing. " Why do you think it's such a male dominated sport?" Quade asked rhetorically, "all that testosterone flying around - guys, wanting to get girls, wanting to get respect." *Taggers* with poor skills who were in it because of its "cool" factor frustrated him. He pointed out that for most of the graffiti *taggers*, "it's how you hold yourself, it's who you hang out with," that appears to determine the respect given to the graffiti *writer*:

For example, there's Alan [a mutual friend of Quade and the YRA]. He thinks he's such a big shot because he does so much of it. That's only because he's out drinking at night so much. But his technique sucks. Mine is so much better than that. I put time into it. I've been doing it so much longer. He just thinks it's about tagging, but there's so much more to it. It's the amount of time and dedication that's put into it.

Quade was very aware of renewed efforts to eradicate graffiti around Ottawa but he did not really care if any of the new stuff got *buffed*. He thought it was more of a loss if they removed older more established pieces "Old bombs, when something like that gets taken away it's a loss, but I don't give a shit if the new stuff gets buffed." He believed that " a lot of people hate graffiti because it wasn't around, it's a pretty new art form." He felt that although it was well known in the bigger cities like Montreal, Toronto and especially New York, most adults here in Ottawa had never really seen it growing up so they don't understand it. He pointed out that there seemed to be more of a tolerance for it in some cities, "I see so much more graffiti in Montreal but people don't mind it as much. I don't think they buff anything unless it's on a

government building.”

Participant Constructions of Graffiti

Quade considered anything related to *writing* to be graffiti, whether it was on walls or on canvas. When he was asked if he believed graffiti was a way of communicating issues he responded that, “I think that part of it is all a big statement.” He had never shown an interest in using graffiti for social commentary, “I’ve written quotes or made comments- I’ve never really tried to make a big statement.”

Summary – Quade

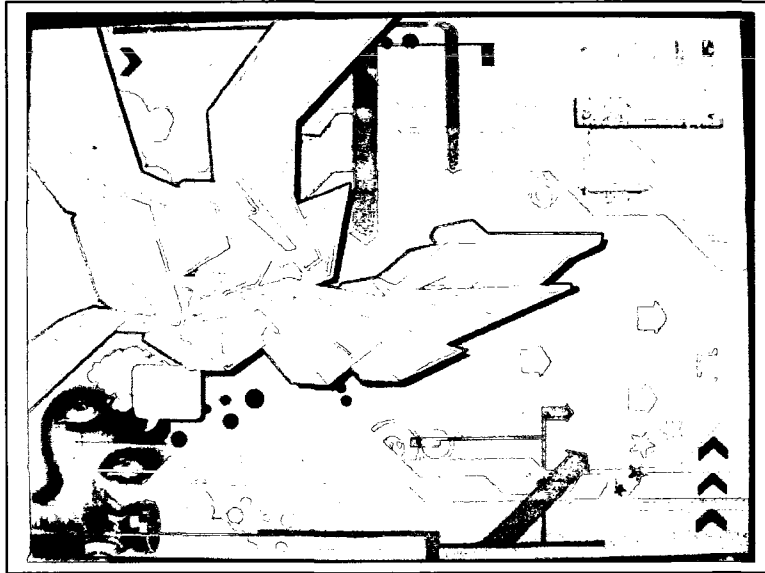
There is considerable contradiction in some of Quade’s attitudes towards graffiti, which reflect some of the same tensions, and contradictions seen earlier in Daniel’s. Like Daniel, Quade acknowledges the destructive nature of some graffiti activities, “You’re a delinquent,” he told the YRA, and “it’s really competitive” which contrasts with his own apparent interest in “getting up” and his wanting to “be remembered by a generation.” Overall, Quade provides us with the perspective of a *writer*, who approaches graffiti as someone might approach recreational sport, in a supportive player role. Quade appears to be, in essence a graffiti “player.” He appears to have the talent and the “in” into the graffiti subculture (both through his connection to his respected brother, and through his graffiti “contacts”), but he doesn’t really seem to embrace it. In fact he appears to distance himself from it. His immersion in the graffiti culture appears to be a superficial immersion. Although he appears to enjoy it enough to “put the time into it” he has “never really tried to make a big statement.” His allusion to graffiti as a male sport - “guys wanting to get girls, wanting to get noticed,” probably reflects his own ambivalent relationship with graffiti. Quade acknowledges that he puts time and effort into it, but his passion is saved, not for graffiti but to get “as up as possible” to win the game. More recently his passion has been for canvas art. It is hard to tell if he was being sarcastic when he talked about wanting “to

be remembered by a generation.” It is possible that this yearning to be renowned may be a form of sibling rivalry, a competitive response to having developed his graffiti skills in the shadow of his older brother’s talent and notoriety.

Sebastian

Figure 3. Sebastian

Figure 3. JPEG image of graffiti on canvas, created by *Sebastian*, used with artist's permission.



Interview three was with a thoughtful, articulate, almost 20 year-old, black artist, born in central Africa and raised in a South African city which is described as being close in size to Ottawa. The interview took place at popular coffee shop in a downtown shopping centre, before Sebastian started his shift at a trendy clothing store nearby. Tall and very slim, he wore black fitted jeans, with black Converse sneakers, a white t-shirt and a grey pullover sweater. His hair was formed into short dreads⁴ and he wore small metal-framed glasses.

Sebastian had come to the Ottawa area with his parents and siblings near the end of high school. While in Africa, he had attended a parochial school where the older brother of an “art-buddy” first introduced him to graffiti. When his parents moved to Canada a couple of years later he was registered at a local high school where he found some fellow graffiti enthusiasts in art class. It was during late high school that he was most active in the graffiti scene finding it both a

way to navigate the social challenges of a new school and also a way to make contact with the urban ‘scene’ in Ottawa. Now that he was in third-year university, in a Industrial Design program, he found that with the future and the career he was hoping to build for himself, *writing* in Ottawa’s highly restrictive climate posed too much risk for him to stay involved. In the graffiti cultures parlance he had instead chosen to *fall off*, remaining interested in the graffiti, and not ruling out his future involvement, but admitting that for now it was unlikely that he would be engaging in writing.

I’ve gone out a couple of times, just because... it’s a fun thing to do...but, well a) I’ve got to buy other things; b) a criminal record isn’t really what I need right now and c) the time aspect, you have to devote a lot of time to it and I’m trying to experiment with other mediums. In that sense, that amount of energy, affects other things in my life. If it came down to that, I’m an artist.

Sebastian’s self perception is first that of “an artist” not foremost as a *writer*. This differentiation, allows him the option of spreading his energies toward a wider range of artistic media. For him, graffiti is one of several kinds of art that he can employ.

Influences

Sebastian had several influences in the development of his art. He was born when his family lived in Zimbabwe and they moved to South Africa when he was five. He was introduced to art as a child. He and his father “would hang out and draw,” then later, “high school came along and everyone wants to hang out and do cool things so naturally there came graffiti.” Graffiti was also a passion for adolescents in South Africa. “ I had a friend whose brother was really into it and he would talk down on the kids and show them the ropes. I guess I thought - he’s cool he’ll think I’m cool.” When Sebastian started, the Internet was a big catalyst and he

could research the different scenes to find out what the rest of the world was feeling. He mentioned Art Crimes (www.graffiti.org), a popular site that he visited in Grade 9 when he started *writing* calling it the *Google*® of graffiti. Since he was already “into art” and graffiti was something that was “just around” Sebastian figured, “it was a cool thing for hip young teenagers to do and I wanted to be there like them too.” One of his best friends was “really into it” and he and Sebastian would swap sketchbooks. Then at age 14 he discovered spray paint.

Sebastian admitted that at age 14 there was a vandalistic aspect to his involvement. He described how, “every now and then, a couple of times it was late at night, had a coffee, just wanted to go somewhere. If there was a party on a Friday night we’d go out on the town - kick mailboxes, break windshields.” The YRA commented that she couldn’t picture him vandalizing as he was, “such a put-together guy” and Sebastian conceded that “there wasn’t much of that,” in his life. As in Canada, graffiti in South Africa was not well tolerated. In fact he went on to tell the story about another friend, a young *writer* who wasn’t as quiet about his activities and “within two days they found him, expelled him and he was never seen again.” Sebastian described the community he was in as being very similar to Ottawa, also a government capital and like Ottawa, a “not so hip, not so small” town. Unlike Ottawa, most of what was seen on the streets was “the work of the more experienced graffiti *writers*” and Sebastian commented on how much more graffiti, especially *tags*, there were here in Ottawa.

Just as in the other interviews, there were contradictory elements to Sebastian’s perception of his involvement in graffiti. He and the YRA discussed whether vandalism was inherent in graffiti:

I think in terms of the history of graffiti, the vandalism aspect is essential to it all. Graffiti is about being out in the city, no one else’s rules but your own. It’s expression. If you were to paint

according to the accepted rules, there would not be any growth.

You have to break the rules sometimes to get something out of it.

In his current post-secondary program, Industrial Design, “our professors are teaching the creative process, what you do with it. They like you to bring other experiences into it.” The skills he learned in graffiti have provided an alternate base for his current focus. “A large aspect of what I study is the context, that was an essential tool. Context is very important to both areas. There’s also a fun aspect to it, a way to speak out publicly.” Sebastian has been able to transfer the skills he learned in graffiti *writing* to his current academic pursuits. This flexible knowledge transfer demonstrates that the skills he gained through his graffiti *writing* were not frivolous and can complement his professional repertoire of artistic or creative responses.

Motivation

Sebastian mentioned several reasons that his graffiti involvement peaked in late high school in Ottawa. Although he acknowledged that starting in a new place with new people was somewhat awkward, it was “overcome quickly, new things to do, new faces, graffiti got me into the urban scene of Ottawa.” When he was asked what he liked best about writing,

From the very beginning I loved the art aspect of it, the painting with the spray paint, all the murals, all the colours and all those bright beautiful things. But then the other side you know was just - We’re here, we’re young, this is for us and not for you, you’ll be walking down the street and you’ll see the tag, you’ll know it was me. You feel like you’re part of something- because it’s really closed- every one who does something is part of the community- everyone knows everyone, you’re part of another community that’s exclusive. That’s the fun of it.

The original motivation however became insufficient to sustain his continued involvement as the place of graffiti in his life had changed. “I guess at a certain point in time it was a large priority, I had nothing else stopping me,” then as the end of high school loomed he became focused on “finishing high school trying to decide what I was going to do.” It not only became less of a priority but also a significant financial drain. “If we were going out to paint a *piece*, a dollar a can; a big mural anywhere from 4-10 cans, you’re constantly acquiring all this stuff and for how long is it up there - a week or two?”

Sebastian saw graffiti as an important step in an artist’s development. He believed those with an artistic background could see graffiti from a different standpoint than those who *write* without that artistic background:

I feel like people grow up and see the light... most of the people doing graffiti mature and grow out of it... or you continue to a less vandalistic more artistic approach for example Artguise.² The better Ottawa *writers* have left Ottawa and come back as artists. The edgy inspired guys... they tend to be like the older ones. There’s that artistic flair that gets you or you continue and eventually broaden, or you grow. Ideally you develop and in that experience you grow more aware of the artistic side of it, the danger of it too. I’m not a very dangerous person.

When Sebastian refers to the dangerous side of graffiti, I believe he is reflecting on both the inherent physical danger of writing on roof tops, bridges etc. but also the danger that being caught and charged would pose to his future plans.

Community Beautification

Sebastian was aware that graffiti in Ottawa had changed in recent years, “I’m interested

to see where it is going to go... in other cities it is a little more out there... now shop owners in Montreal who want to avoid having *tags* on their wall, commission a piece for their building.”

What was of more interest to him was the reason that people engaged in writing:

In all parts of the world there are people who break the rules, I'm not one to say what's right or wrong... it just comes down to that the majority has their say but there's always an underground theme that comes up as a defining theme, a resistance against the mainstream which has added up to the way of the world -these things I'm doing, my thing, you're doing your thing... I'm not going to change graffiti; it is not my mission. If nothing else you'll favour the furtherance of the art person.

Sebastian's "response" relates to the way people view their environment and to what sort of response they engage in. His words serve as an encouragement to others involved in graffiti, or in other acts of resistance. He's doing his "thing" (participating occasionally in graffiti and learning about Industrial Design), but by thinking about his involvement in graffiti and having an opinion on it, he is contributing to the discourse that provides a resistance to the "majority" who "has their say". His advice to those who see or participate in these acts of resistance is: "don't just react to it, you've got to think about it and have an opinion about it."

Respect

Sebastian had been well immersed in the Ottawa graffiti community and held a great amount of respect for many of the Ottawa *writers* who established names for themselves in the 90s.

I've met the guys and they're artists. *Maki*, he's magic.... His graffiti was very long ago. He's moved on to doing canvases, now

he's very environmentally aware. He will mix it himself to make it as eco-friendly as possible. That's an example where someone has grown and taken it and *Evoke*- similar stuff, a lot of bright, organic, *Berserker* – will sometimes make it out [i.e. will sometimes participate in group graffiti related events].

Sebastian has friends in other cities that are also were *writers*. He describes one friend whose life revolves around graffiti, "I have a friend who, you know, he works part-time, but the only other thing he does is travel to other cities to meet other *writers* there... it's like his job... I wish I was that passionate about it."

Respect for other people's property has become more important as his concept of where he may fit in to society has become more defined. He has become more introspective about his own past involvement, "We hit somebody's garage door- at the time I didn't care, but that's vandalism." As he has begun thinking about his own productions, he has considered how vandalism might affect him personally, "imagine one day I'm a big fancy Industrial Designer and I design a simple, plain, design work and the next day someone does a silly little tag on it. That would be pretty negative." While acknowledging the negative aspects of graffiti he was quick to point out the positives as well,

There's no graffiti on the parliament buildings. Graffiti brings people together. It creates a form of expression for people that aren't into others. A company like Montana [a spray paint company] has come up and made a lot of money. Hip-Hip and Graffiti they started hand and hand... graffiti is a huge part of the Hip Hop culture.

Participant Constructions of Graffiti

When Sebastian was asked how he would define graffiti, he explained, "it's such a young art form... I didn't register it as anything like an art form until high school." With his knowledge of and hands on experience with various art mediums he continued:

Like a movement in art, like there's cubism in the 20s and abstract expressionism later on, and graffiti is another one, it's just a particular group of people with a similar mind set and there's a style to it, that, you broadly or loosely follow, it has goals and ideals like any art movement it's very broad.

He didn't specifically judge graffiti by whether he thought it was good or bad but looked at it more as to how it responded to other art forms or from the orientation of the *writer*: "if you're a graffiti *tagger* - that's only about tagging and scratching into windows, but on the other hand, someone else who's a *writer*, a bomber, someone who throws up dedication, and technical skills-he's also all about that." When questioned about why he was involved in it, what was in it for him he clarified, "it's not about you're in it for something. I guess for me it was an in to urban culture, clothes, music art, the whole urban scene in Ottawa. Now I have that from other things." Sebastian has reached a point where he has sufficient self-confidence and social connections that he is not looking to find reinforcement through graffiti participation.

Summary – Sebastian

Sebastian appears to be a very sophisticated young man, both in his appearance and in his thoughtful responses to the questions raised during the interview. It was clear that he understood the very real "danger" that participating in graffiti at this stage in his life could pose. He was very matter-of-fact about his involvement as an adolescent and what it had brought to his development both as an artist and as a fledgling Industrial designer. In contrast to widespread

public sentiments that characterize graffiti primarily as vandalism, Sebastian describes graffiti as “a movement in art- like cubism...with goals and ideals” that provides a new paradigm for those who see graffiti as merely vandalistic in nature.

Sebastian’s involvement with graffiti has changed over time. Sebastian was able to describe his development from a young teenager into the self-confident young man he is now. He acknowledged that it was necessary for him to “break the rules” along the way. Indeed as he observes, “If you were to paint according to the accepted rules, there would not be any growth.” In order to grow as an individual and as an artist he had to experience something that perhaps scared him a little: “I’m not a very dangerous person,” he admitted. It is, however, the “breaking of rules “ that separates Sebastian’s citizenship from that of the ‘personally responsible’ citizen. It is clear that Sebastian has given a lot of thought to his involvement. He, perhaps more than some of the other *writers* has grasped the ‘justice-oriented’ aspects of citizenship, especially when he mentions that “it just comes down to that the majority has their say but there’s always an underground theme that comes up as a defining theme, a resistance against the mainstream.” Sebastian appears to see involvement in graffiti *piecing* as a form of ‘resistance against the mainstream’. It is not clear if this is related purely to its illicit nature, for its inherent commentary on the use of public space or the counter culture artistic medium it uses, or because it represents counter hegemonic artistic expression.

The dichotomy that is inherent in graffiti is that no matter whether you are creating beautiful *pieces* or vandalizing with low quality *tags*, you are breaking the law. The public tends to refer to both piecing and tagging as graffiti and there is very little discourse in the media about the difference between the two forms of expression. While Sebastian states that graffiti’s vandalistic nature is essential historically and to the art movement, in speaking with Sebastian and other skilled graffiti *writers* the *tagging*/vandalistic stage is usually a primitive early stage of

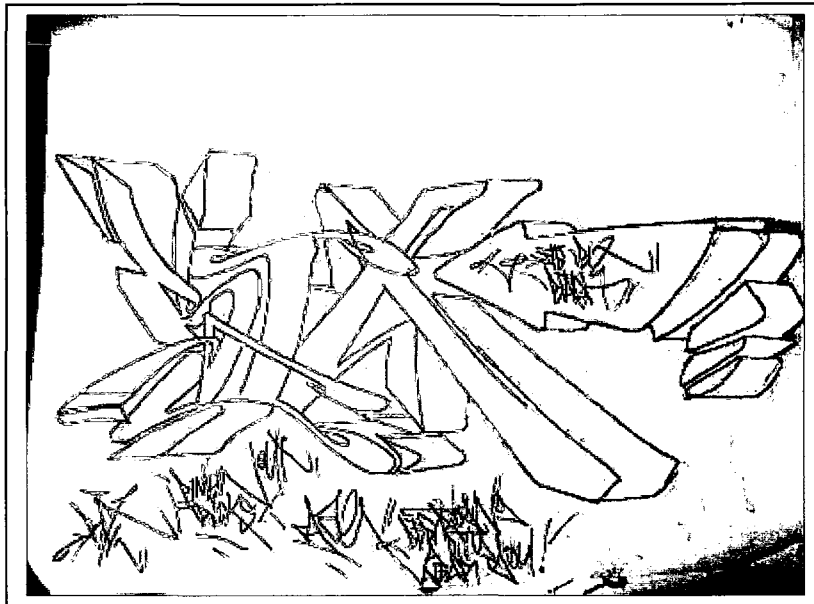
an individual's graffiti development. As the *writer* gains skill and understanding of the time and energy needed to perfect their product, the destructive energy becomes channeled into the creative process. The rush of initial freedom and rebellion which Sebastian described so visually "we're here, we're young, this is for us and not for you, you'll be walking down the street and you'll see the tag, you'll know it was me" - gives way to the aesthetic rewards or "the art aspect of it, the like- painting with the spray paint, all the murals, all the colours and all those bright beautiful things" and the growing knowledge that, " There's that artistic flair that gets you or you continue and eventually broaden, or you grow. Ideally you develop and in that experience you grow more aware of the artistic side of it."

In Sebastian's case, involvement in graffiti writing has played an important role in his personal, artistic and his civic development. Far from causing him to become a delinquent and to be lead down a criminal path (as many parents might fear), it appears to have provided him with a somewhat "safe" testing ground to be a little "dangerous." It has also proved to be an important influence in his post-secondary studies, "A large aspect of what I study is the context, that was an essential tool. Context is very important to both areas."

Nathan

Figure 4. Nathan

Figure 4. JPEG image in pencil, ink and highlighter on paper. Graffiti sketch created by *Nathan*, used with artist's permission.



Nathan, a white, 18 year-old had lived in Ottawa all his life and was the only participant who was able to speak French in addition to English. A tall (well over six feet) slim, dark-haired young man he dressed in an oversized purple T-shirt, baggie jeans tied at the hips with a string, Lakai skateboard shoes and a designer cap common to others in the Hip-Hop community. Although one of the youngest participants, he was the only one of the participants living independently and had been since the age of 16. Both his parents had been interested and involved in different forms of art and had introduced him to graffiti as an art form at an early age. It was clear that he participated in and gained great solace from a variety of art media although he preferred to write by himself so that he would not have to listen to the judgments of his peers. The interview between the YRA and Nathan appeared to be emotional and at times verged on the argumentative as they agreed or disagreed with each other about facets of their

discussion. The YRA and Nathan had known each other previously and obviously felt comfortable expressing their personal opinions more openly than a more formal interview with two strangers.

Influences

Nathan described his early and frequent exposure to graffiti as a young child, “At a very young age I was exposed to it through my father’s work in group homes.” Both his parents were quite artistic “so art in general was always a big part of [his] life growing up.” He described being taken by his father to Tech wall on Albert Street “to stare at all the artists and to watch them paint.” Although he started doing graffiti in Grade 6 or 7, it was not the first kind of art that he created: “My dad taught me how to draw and sketch when I was younger.” After a family tragedy early in his adolescence (which is not discussed in the interview), Nathan turned to art, his friends and the street, to work out the enormity of his loss. After winning the Grade 8 Art Prize, he was accepted into an arts-focused high school. The loss of his supportive elementary school combined with the loss of his reputation as one of the top artists at the school came at an unfortunate time. His transition to high school was not successful. In the intervening years he experimented with other art mediums, “besides graffiti of course. In school and in my free time I’ve done photography, painting, watercolours, charcoal, pastels everything. Because every way of art, kind of expresses your opinion, in a slightly different way.”

School

Nathan’s relationship with organized schooling, as mentioned previously, was not a successful one. As he wryly observed “high school did not accelerate my artistic values.” He was discouraged by the structure and the constraints of some of the art mediums he had to participate in. He explained that, “It was just that art was something that I loved to do as a hobby and because I had to do it ten hours a day it became a chore.” He felt that his “pottery teachers

were very open-minded” but he resented the amount of “instruction” involved in his visual art classes where he felt that he was being told how and what to draw when he felt that he already had his own established style.

Nathan did not finish Grade 9, however at the time of the interview he was attending an alternate program and was close to finishing the required credits to enter an apprenticeship program at College. He talked about perhaps teaching art some day, but that he had chosen the “other love of my life – cars and automotive airbrushing.” During the interview the YRA asked him what it was about high school that he couldn’t deal with. Nathan’s response demonstrates an insight into the distance he has traveled, both in time, maturity and in self-knowledge from the disenchanted 14 year old that abandoned his formal studies to the thoughtful, practical 18 year old who has found the motivation needed to make a path for himself:

I didn’t like it. I didn’t want to conform. I didn’t need it. I didn’t feel I needed it. I still feel that I didn’t need it, but now I’ve found something that I want to do and it’s so close that - why not go back to school? It’s only going to stump me later in life. Life is filled with things that you hate and you’re still going to have to do them. Learning to like them is probably one of the biggest accomplishments you can do.

By leaving school in grade 9, Nathan effectively excused himself from having to conform to the culture and constraints of school. His decision to return to school was successful only after he was able to recognize and accept its relevance to his future.

Community Beautification

Like several of the other study participants, Nathan felt that graffiti added positively to the aesthetics of his environment. He expressed annoyance at “all these ads that are crammed in

our face.” He questioned, “Why do I have to look at all these billboards? I’d rather see artwork walking down the street.”

Unlike many of the *writers* interviewed, Nathan preferred to paint alone. He explained that he did not take part in graffiti crews “the art that I did and the stuff I painted were mostly by myself.” Whether it was from a lack of confidence, or a desire for privacy he explained that he “didn’t really want people recognizing my art... I’d rather people see it and not know whose it is and respect it for the art.” He did acknowledge that he had “gone out with people painting before - but never was I the one painting. I would go out with them and watch them do it.”

Motivation

The YRA was interested in why someone as private and as drawn to the individual pursuit of art would be interested in *writing*. She commented that, “graffiti is very public so it’s open to interpretation and criticism. Have you chosen that art form because it is so public? When you go out and paint is it for a purpose?” Nathan responded that, “it’s for me.” However when asked if he communicated through his writing, he explained “it’s a message from the streets towards the public.”

In contrast to some of the other *writers*, Nathan was not interested in “networking” with others in the graffiti community. In fact he felt that the networking had a competitive nature, “I wish people valued it as art not popularity. Why do you need to network to go to a wall and paint it? That’s the destruction of art if it’s just about competition. If it becomes just a popularity contest than how is it still art? Graffiti is an art form, I’m just saying that I just wouldn’t support art turning into a big popularity contest.” When the YRA suggested that networking was possibly the reason graffiti had spread so far globally, Nathan disagreed and suggested that, “Art will always find a way to influence different cultures - and who wouldn’t want to try graffiti if you were an artist? I don’t know too many kids who are involved in art and haven’t tried graffiti.”

For Nathan, the private aspect of art was what attracted him to the nighttime pursuit, “I just found that art was something peaceful to me. I didn’t want other people’s opinions or other people watching me. I don’t care what people think. I can always do my form of art.” Along with the possibility of pursuing an anonymous art form, he found it had an intrinsic freedom:

It’s a reflection of your personality, kind of. It can really express your true feelings. It’s just street art. It’s art that’s outside. It doesn’t have any limitations to the art. It has no context. You take something so simple as a word and you have to completely transform it but keep it understandable. There’s no limit to it. You completely express what you want to express no matter how you feel, no matter when you want to. Whether you contradict yourself or not, your only real art critic is yourself.

Although he engaged in graffiti he did not *write* with the intention of communicating specific messages or commentary because “I’m not confident that my opinion is correct.” He suggested that specific messages needed to be significant and the location of the message needed to be equally significant, therefore he asked, “where can I paint that my opinion is important enough to be on someone’s property?”

Respect

The YRA suggested a scenario where someone might be motivated to deface the War Museum or a war monument because of his or her attitude towards war. Nathan responded:

I think that’s wrong. You shouldn’t be painting on a national monument. It’s disrespectful to spray paint. It’s not fair that I’m being discriminated against because these idiots are going around spray painting on a monument. You should not spray paint the war

memorial because these people fought for your right to do graffiti.

The YRA persisted, “ But what if it’s a method to get attention to encourage the government to stop the war?” Nathan continued to disagree, “It’s not right. It’s a poorly chosen method of getting a political message across.” Explaining that he had certain limitations as to how far he would go in his writing:

I will not in any way deface someone else to try and get respect for my art. It seems like you’re not worthy of it then. I won’t do that. If they wanted to shove it in someone’s face, towards the war or something like that, spray-painting a war memorial is not a good way to reach people. There are so many better ways. Rent out a gallery. Hold a gala. That [vandalizing] is just going to branch out into so many other things. It’s not going to change anyone’s mind to spray paint the War Museum.

The YRA suggested that economics might be a barrier to other forms of protest, pointing out that it is harder to get people to listen to you when you’re poor. Nathan disagreed:

My father held art shows for free and sold his works for \$30. You can see something beautiful for free...If you are fighting for something, try and get it advertised in the news. The Cube Gallery held an anti-Steven Harper event. That was a positive way to get across an important political message that was supported by graffiti artists.

Nathan held strong views as to what was and wasn’t acceptable as far as graffiti, vandalism and political statements. His passionate defense of national monuments and the freedom for which veterans fought, indicates that his emerging civic identity already includes

passionately held opinions on matters of civic citizenship.

Participant Constructions of Graffiti

When the YRA asked Nathan what he considered to be graffiti, still focused on the vandalistic nature of graffiti, he responded, “I don’t care what is graffiti. I would never spray paint a person’s personal property.” He asked if the YRA knew that if a business was spray painted, “the businesses have to pay someone to clean it off within two weeks or they get fined.” He seemed legitimately concerned about the small businesses and the dilemma that graffiti removal caused them.

The YRA persisted in questioning Nathan’s definition of graffiti and his way of judging what was good or bad graffiti. Nathan responded, after some prodding that, “I can’t judge graffiti as good or bad, because it is someone’s artistic expression. I guess anything that someone does that is your personal feelings that are painted on public space (not businesses or homes). The definition of graffiti is like along the borders of ‘anonymous, random pieces of art on public property.’” He went on to comment that “to the man” everything is vandalism.

The YRA was interested in why some *writers* copy artists that are widely recognized among the graffiti community. Nathan seemed to be quite sure as to their motivation. He believed it was:

Because they’re looking for a false sense of recognition from the rest of the art community. They’re looking to be accepted. They’re looking to be recognized as one of the greats. Which is exactly what I was talking about at the beginning of the interview. It shouldn’t be a popularity contest because people wouldn’t be doing this. People wouldn’t be going around looking to be the best. If they were going around looking to be the best, it would be for their own personal

benefit, their own sense of personal accomplishment “Wow I created something so amazing that I was recognized as one of the greats” instead of “oh wow I can’t do anything”.

Nathan’s observations about why a graffiti writer might feel compelled to copy other artist’s styles, demonstrated his understanding of the complex culture of graffiti, which included fierce rivalries, and changing levels of respect based on a network and other’s knowledge of *writers* within that network.

Summary- Nathan

Nathan provides an interesting contrast to someone like Quade. For Nathan, graffiti is the “peaceful place” where he goes “for me.” His motivation is not to “get up” nor to gain personal recognition, but rather to have his art recognized and respected for its calibre. He shows some humility when he acknowledges that he lacks the “confidence to know that what I say is correct” and yet also exhibits insight into what motivates other groups of *writers*. He sees copycat *writers* “looking for a false sense of recognition from the rest of the art world. They’re looking to be accepted.” He appears to empathize with their search for acceptance. However for Nathan, art and graffiti are more about freedom than acceptance: “There’s no limit to it, you completely express what you want to express no matter how you feel.”

Nathan suggests that since he has been out of school and on his own for several years, he probably “knows more about himself “ and understands what he wants to express with his art and his graffiti “more than the average person that just works or goes to school.” He does appear to show an acute understanding of the creative process when he refers to the discipline of “expressing yourself every day” in order to “look inside yourself” to create from “an original place.”

As with most of the other *writers*, there is tension and contradiction in Nathan’s

perception of his graffiti involvement. On the one hand, he disapproves of indiscriminant vandalism and states that he “will not in any way deface someone else to try and get respect for my art. It seems like you’re not worthy of it then.” He argues that, “you should not spray paint the war memorial because these people fought for your right to do graffiti.” He appears concerned that small businesspersons may incur costs for having to remove graffiti and he rationalizes that he would “never spray paint someone’s personal property.” Interestingly, this sense of concern and his the moral or civic boundaries that he appears to have defined, when it comes to what he considers public space, shares some characteristics with the goals of the programs that emphasize the ‘personally responsible citizen.’ The personally responsible citizen, according to Westheimer and Kahne (2004) is guided by a desire to solve social problems and improve society. The personally responsible citizen tries to achieve this by acting responsibly.

The YRA attempted to demonstrate the discrepancy between Nathan’s stated avowal never to vandalize people’s property and the fact that his “bombing” in fact involved vandalizing buildings and other venues. Nathan, however didn’t seem to see the inconsistency. Perhaps to Nathan, these larger buildings represented faceless corporations or “the government” as opposed to “personal property.” This aspect of what constitutes public versus private versus personal space is a fluid concept among *writers*. I discuss this further in Chapter Five.

Rhys

Figure 5. Rhys

Figure 5. JPEG image of interior graffiti wall in acrylic, used with permission of artist.



Rhys was one of the oldest full participants in the research. He worked a couple of part-time jobs although he was still living with his mother, stepfather and infant stepsister. He came from a musically artistic family who had nurtured his creativity. A few credits shy of his high school diploma, at the time of the interview he had not completed Grade 12. He appeared to be in no hurry to go back to school, instead indicating that he might pursue tattooing as a career. Although he at one time had been deeply involved in Ottawa's graffiti scene, after several costly run-ins with City of Ottawa Bylaw Officers and Ottawa Police and harassment from other *writers* he had stopped doing all forms of art for a year. He sounded disillusioned about the local graffiti community and mentioned several times that other *writers* had lost their sense of respect. The interview took place at a Chinese restaurant on Somerset Street. Rhys, tall and lean, was wearing expensive raw denim fitted jeans, a black fitted shirt with writing on it and he kept his winter jacket on throughout the interview.

Influences

Rhys explained that he had not been involved in the graffiti community for over a year:

It's just not a part of my life anymore. I think it was because I was thrown in jail. So I guess the system works. A lot of being out in the streets is being really cocky and shit and because you're young you feel invincible. I lost touch with being an artist- it was all about 'getting up'. The thrill of doing graffiti is throwing up art on a wall, and then it turned into just getting my name out.

About the same time he became more active in street art, he also began promoting his canvas work more,

Canvas work turned into making money and I took a step back and realized that. There was a loss of passion. I do art now but I took a year off. All last year I took a year off. It started being all about money. I didn't want to do art to make money. I'm still painting.

Sometimes you need to do that. I'm trying to do tattoo art.

Rhys had the misfortune to be somewhat recognizable because of his physique and his painting style so he was targeted frequently by bylaw and law enforcement:

I've had many run ins - about six or seven times, I talked my way out of it, although my last time I was fined. I got the call on my nineteenth birthday for \$800. I swear they probably waited until my nineteenth birthday to drop this fine on me.

The court process was drawn out but ultimately ended in Rhys having to perform community service in lieu of the fine or jail time. He described the process, "I had to go to court all the time. Probably every few weeks I would go in to court. They finally settled on community

service. I was a janitor at the Bronson Centre.” A mutual acquaintance of Rhys and the YRA had a similar sentence: “He walked around and buffed graffiti off mail boxes. He’d go around with this red paint and paint off all the tags and leave only one really good one so it really stood out [Rhys laughs].”

The YRA wondered if Rhys’ experience with graffiti would influence his tattoo art. “I think that styles always translate into other venues into everything you do. Graffiti art has very much affected my [canvas] style just as painting on canvas affected my graffiti art.” One of the biggest influences on many *writers* is their experience in school. However Rhys and the YRA never discussed school either positively or negatively.

Motivation

Rhys indicated that he still had some motivation to continue in the graffiti community:

I think you always have that itch. If I ever go back to graffiti, no one will ever know. I wouldn’t tell a soul. Because then it could all be just about me. I wouldn’t want anyone to know it was me. Then it wouldn’t be about me. If people know who you are, it turns very personal. They start crossing me out, just because of who they think I am. I was being crossed out because they knew what I looked like.

Respect

During Rhys’ interview the issue of *respect* was mentioned several times. It was clear that gaining other people’s respect and having people respect both him and his *writing* were both very important to him:

I believe that graffiti has a lot to do with respect. For the artist it’s about respect. No one is respectful anymore. I think that respect is

lost because of the small area we have to work in, where it does become a popularity contest.

He also spoke of various legal and illegal walls in the community:

The work at House of Paint [the City of Ottawa's only legal wall, under the Dunbar Bridge on Bronson], it sucks. Some artists do go there, but Tech wall is not technically a legal wall. I imagine that it has a lot of history. If you get too many legal walls then you might go and just think that any guy can go pick up a paint can and paint there. Tech wall has huge respect, only the big guys go to paint up there to be honest.

Rhys had never painted anything on Tech wall "I wouldn't want to put mine up there unless it was really good."

Rhys and the YRA discussed the issue of graffiti's effect on a community:

I'm certainly conscious of where I'd paint. I'd never paint on someone's house or a church. I wouldn't paint on a small business truck. I'd probably do more government owned. As far as privately owned stores, all these places are privately owned, but you wouldn't go and paint on their windows, you'd find a blank spot on the side of the wall.

Rhys' explanation about finding a blank spot on the wall to minimize his impact when he *writes* on a small business's wall indicates that while he empathizes with the plight of the small business owner, it is insufficient to deter him from *writing* on the business owner's property. During a discussion about Rhys' plans for the future, which included owning a tattooing business, the YRA asked him how he would feel if someone painted a *piece* on his store. Rhys

believed that he would welcome it, if it was well done and he'd try to get the city to let him keep it. He observed that, "this city is a very government city. It's such a political city. It really does make a difference [as to how graffiti is viewed]. In reality, it's not really that badly of a vandalized city."

Participant Constructions of Graffiti

The YRA attempted to clarify the multiple terms that Rhys had used when discussing *writing* so she asked him how he defined graffiti. His response was "It's a really loosely based word, to be up on a wall. It has to do with a certain kind of style." When she asked him how standard graffiti was distinguished from a *piece* he explained a little more, indicating that a *piece* referred to work that involved time and colours:

It's a certain kind of style if it's *off-street* (if it's on canvas).

Graffiti is graffiti. If I go *tag* a wall, that's graffiti, if I go *bombing*, do a *throw up* that's graffiti. If I go on this wall and do a mural - that's street art.

Rhys tried to explain the difference between works of street artists such as MAKI and more traditional graffiti works:

One is the lettering and is an evolution of calligraphy, and one is more... they're subcategories, street art can contain messages, like OBEY [a well known graffiti writer]. He's like the original person who started pasting and making messages. He thought there was media brainwashing so he would counter stuff on billboards.

The YRA wanted to know if the graffiti community viewed the use of stickers positively. Rhys replied, "it's the same thing as food, it's purely subjective." The YRA commented on the numbers of little fourteen-year-old "s*#heads" running around with a marker, but Rhys was

tolerant of them, “everyone starts that way, I was a little s*#head when I was fourteen. That’s the whole thing. You have to pay your dues. I think it’s cool when it’s not taken seriously.”

During the interview the YRA brought up the names of mutual acquaintances involved in graffiti. One individual they knew, regularly exhibited his canvas art in local art galleries:

He’s a good graffiti artist for what he is. He’s not a good *piecer*, more of a good *bomber*. I think he’s stopped too. [stopped doing graffiti] I think it’s all how you progress in your teen years. Either you’re going to keep on doing it [graffiti], or you don’t think you can get any bigger, then you should just give up. They end up doing graffiti art as opposed to graffiti *bombing*.

During a discussion about the negative side of graffiti the issue of gang graffiti came up. Rhys didn’t believe gang graffiti and racial graffiti was real graffiti, although he and the YRA joked that if it was done up all bright and beautiful like a *piece* it might qualify. The reality for Rhys was that there were several negative aspects to graffiti, “You can’t be a graffiti artist without being a vandal. Its part of the culture, the threat of going to jail, that’s a negative aspect, losing respect for the art form on a personal level that’s negative.” For Rhys, the negative side of graffiti began to outweigh the positive side. Or perhaps, as he mentioned when discussing his acquaintance that exhibited in art galleries, he decided he wasn’t going to get any “bigger” doing graffiti and “just gave up.” Either way, his involvement with graffiti had affected both his art and his life choices.

Summary- Rhys

At the time of this study, Rhys was a young person whose sense of his role in society was in transition. According to Eriksson (1968), one of the key developmental achievements of adolescence is the identification of one’s individual role in society. If a young person is

unsuccessful in identifying what they see as their role, or where they fit in, this results in a conflict, in Eriksson's words, a role confusion, which prevents them from launching successfully into the next developmental phase, which Eriksson referred to as Intimacy vs. Isolation.

The identity that Rhys had created for himself as a *writer* had led to disappointment and hurt as he experienced rejection from "people who don't even know who I am." The danger and cost of his past involvement in graffiti, made him realize that *writing* was not an activity that he could afford to engage in on a long-term basis. The satisfaction that he thought he might obtain from selling his painted canvases was not realized when he came to understand that he was not motivated by money, "It started being all about money. I didn't want to do art to make money." This left him in limbo. Doing art was what he was good at and what he loved. It was during this time of uncertainty that he was drawn to a novel art form, tattooing. He had quickly embraced it and at the time of the interview both of his arms were heavily tattooed. Although fairly commonplace in youth culture, tattooing has still not been fully accepted in mainstream culture. Rhys appeared to have rejected many aspects of the mainstream already and this form of self-beautification appealed to his artistic sensibilities. It's possible that in the art of tattooing he might very well discover an occupation and a clearer identity since he has both the required artistic talent and an affinity with other individuals drawn to novel methods of self-expression. Rhys' experience with graffiti has been a journey of self discovery, whose lessons have taught him less about making a statement or responding to his environment and more about self-knowledge and personal growth. While his identity is still in transition, Rhys' focus has been, on situating himself in a supportive community. Once he confirms his place in that community, his sense of conflict should be reduced and his ability to contribute to that community will demonstrate his engagement.

Ben

Figure 6. Ben

Figure 6. JPEG image, spray paint and paint marker on cement block wall, created by *Ben*, used with permission of artist.



A good friend who had extended family on the West coast brought Ben to my attention. When she heard I was trying to recruit participants and was encountering some difficulty, she made contact with a family member and when Ben was located and he agreed to speak with me by e-mail, she shared his contact information with me. When I explained the basic structure of my data collection, I suggested that perhaps the simplest way to discuss things would be for him to respond to the same questions that the participants were asked. He was quite generous with his comments and I believe as open as he could be with a stranger. His age put him outside of the formal research participant group but his contributions have been included since they enrich, supplement and offer another insider perspective to this elusive subculture.

Influences

Ben came from what he described as a loving, caring upbringing. He had traveled, worked as a mural artist, residential/commercial painter, chef and a few other odd jobs, and was currently in his third year towards a BFA in painting. He stated that he,

First became aware of graffiti in about 1993 at the age of 12. One thing you have to understand at that time, graffiti as a whole was extremely different, from what kids were doing locally to the types of styles that were being produced. The advent of the Internet has permanently altered graffiti and the art form can never be as pure as it was back then. That's what a lot of the younger generation doesn't understand.

Ben had a wide exposure to other forms of art and continued to be interested,

I am involved with many other forms of media. I have at least dabbled in most of them, including pottery, sculpture, printmaking; photography, filmmaking and grafftic [sic] design, but find myself the most comfortable working with oil and acrylic paints. One thing I like about the intimacy of painting canvas is that the final outcome is somewhat preserved, and you can place it up on your wall and look at it when you please, where as the bulk of graffiti, no matter how intimate the experience is, is bound to get painted over within the year and sometimes even the week.

After being involved in the graffiti community for 15 years, Ben had reached a point where his experience with a broad range of art media allowed him a choice. At an age when he had to support himself, finish school and focus on a future, the personal costs of remaining active

in the graffiti community were too high. The intimacy and the longevity of oil and acrylic on canvas were more attractive to him at this point than the rush that he got from doing street art.

School

Unlike today's crop of young *writers* who are attracted to the 'cool' aspect of the subculture that the media has appropriated, graffiti was virtually unknown so "we were made fun of and thought to be doing "little kid stuff" by many at the school that I was in at the time."

Motivation

When he was asked why he thought so many youth were attracted to graffiti, Ben had a variety of rationales:

I guess I would say that it differs for everyone. I could only assume that people would be attracted formally by the bright colours and bold lines...Also, people of a young age might be lured by the rebellious aspect of it as well as it providing a slight amount of fame amongst peers. But when I began, the whole "graffiti is cool!" thing wasn't around. It wasn't in Sprite™ ads or made into video games.

When Ben was asked what part graffiti played in his own life, how important it was to him, he replied that:

It's hard to answer the next question because it's not as though I wake up anymore and think, I have to make "graffiti"!! And the word graffiti has so many different meanings for different people, but I would say that making art in general is very important to me. At a certain point it simply becomes a way of life and in my case just goes hand in hand with my life, so it's basically a tool used

throughout life as a means of understanding and in turn putting a piece of yourself out there for others to receive in which ever way that may be.

Community and Graffiti

Ben believed that graffiti could have a significant effect on a community:

In my opinion graffiti does have an effect on a community, whether or not it is anything more than a visual impact remains to be seen. Take for instance a community like plateau, in downtown Montreal. This community is completely covered in graffiti both legal and illegal, and the citizens of the community don't seem in anyway to hate life or their surroundings. In fact the community is vibrant and positive.

Ben was aware of the downside of graffiti involvement including the effects of long-term exposure to the chemicals contained in the spray paint. He observed that communities that welcomed or at least tolerated graffiti appeared to be vibrant and positive places.

Respect

Ben appeared to have some of the characteristics of the Old school or classical *writers*. He felt that the younger *writers* had the benefit of advanced technology in the spray cans, nozzles and access to design ideas:

It could be the old man in me, but I believe 85 to 90% of the stuff being done today is horrible. With very little originality and a brand of paint that makes it easier than ever to get clean lines, there are a lot of young kids with big ego's floating around out there.

Ben valued creativity and innovation, both of which he claimed appeared to be lacking amongst the new crop of writers. These “young kids” had technology (special drip-less paint and purpose built spray caps) on their side and could pick up inspiration from pictures of graffiti art on the Internet.

Participant Constructions of Graffiti

Ben felt strongly that there were differing calibres of *writers*:

In my opinion there is definitely good, bad and mediocre graffiti. Most of it these days in my opinion (by way of the internet) is bad. You see lots of styles these days that look like the guys down in LA or New York invented it. And with the addition of Montana paint over the last 8 years or so, it allows for kids who have not put in the time in getting their "can control" perfected, to pick up a can and be able to pull of a somewhat likeable piece.

As an older *writer* he could see the negative aspects of graffiti:

There are many negative aspects of graffiti I believe. First of all, there's the health aspects you have to consider, many *writers* in there middle ages have gone through list's of complications that in some cases cause the artist to have to wear diaper's in there 50's. Not fun... There are things you can do to aid in the prevention of these things happening but sooner or later your bound to catch something. Also, there's the illegal consequences if you are doing illegal graffiti, which causes many older artist's such as myself to put their efforts towards legal graffiti that has a chance in making a positive impact in communities amongst all inhabitants.”

Summary-Ben

Unlike the other participants, I have never seen a photo of Ben, but I have seen a web-link to some of his murals (provided by my friend). The legal pieces he has done range from elaborate, cartoon-like political commentary to inspiring decorative art murals. Ben uses bold strokes and beautiful colours to showcase his artistic talents. Although he admits to having dabbled in over six different media, his current interest is with painting oil and acrylic on canvas. One of the negative features of graffiti *writing* was that there was no way to preserve the images he created. Since they were posted illegally they would often be removed quickly. The fact that canvas art can be savoured well after the art production process has passed means that he is able to enjoy them much more easily than he could enjoy his graffiti *pieces*.

Ben started doing graffiti fifteen years ago, prior to the mass appropriation of graffiti into popular culture. Although he may have been ‘laughed’ at by other students who were unfamiliar with what he was doing, his passion for ‘painting without permission’ took hold and as he says “it became just a tool fused throughout (his) life as a means of understanding”. He says that he was vaguely aware of the links of graffiti to Hip-Hop culture at the time he started but that was not a prime motivator for his involvement with the medium.

Ben’s list of occupations provides an example of the likely trajectory in terms of jobs and education that some of the featured *writers* may go through in the years ahead. The varied job background, which he describes, suggests that he may not have finished high school in the standard time. He now appears to be engaged, focused and in control of his learning. He mentions that he clearly moved away from bombing to producing legal murals because of the “illegal consequences” which become more relevant once one is in the working world and has to compete for income with others who may not have a criminal record.

It would be interesting to see if Ben is representative of others who take time away from

traditional schooling then return to school and their artistic roots, as they get older. If this sort of cyclic approach is commonplace with students who have a high degree of self-agency, it would be a reassuring finding. After seeing some of his work on-line, reading his political commentary and having read his responses to the study questions, it is clear that Ben is a thoughtful, intelligent and independent-minded citizen. He is still using his art as a tool for understanding the world, but he is intent upon preserving the “text” of his discourse now that he has the confidence to share it with others by “putting a piece of [himself] out there for others to receive in which ever way” they care to.

Matthew

Figure 7. Matthew

Figure 7. JPEG image, spray paint and marker on brick. Created by *Matthew*. Used with permission of artist.



I had seen this writer's name on various facebook wall posts and discussion boards on local graffiti sites and in some graffiti-related articles in newspapers in several Ontario newspapers. His work with youth and with municipal councilors exhibited both a love of graffiti and a desire to educate both youth and municipalities about the difference between vandalism and graffiti art. During my participant recruitment phase, several local businesses and youth advocates had suggested that I should speak with him. When I was able to track him down he was quite willing to speak with me. His professional work took him out of town frequently and he was involved in many volunteer initiatives, so it was agreed that we would try to communicate electronically since it was unlikely that he would have sufficient time for a face-to-face interview. His responses, which arrived at the very end of my data collection time frame are included using the same format as the younger research participants and the experienced *writer* from out west.

Influences

Matthew grew up in loving middle-class family in a small rural town in southern Ontario. He was not aware of graffiti until his family moved into a nearby city and noticed tags on street signs and murals on alleyways on his way to school. He has been *writing* now for ten years and is part of at least two graffiti crews. He got to know the other *writers* in the community and was introduced to the craft by hanging out at a local graffiti store which he referred to as a “writer’s “bench”, where *writers* would come and chill out, exchange pictures, read graffiti magazines and talk about their latest chase stories.” His paid work is not in the art world and “other than graffiti I don’t really dabble in other art forms...I’m not a naturally born artist, it takes a lot of effort and time for me to create.”

School Experiences

Matthew appears to have had a reasonably positive experience in school, although this is an assumption based on the fact that he doesn’t speak about his experience directly or relate any negative stories. He believes that “schools are around to give people the knowledge to succeed in today’s life.” He commented about the rising cost of post secondary tuition and his concern that this would limit “who can learn and who gets stuck in dead end jobs.” Although he appeared to acknowledge that formal education was a factor in life success, he commented that formal education was not a factor within the graffiti community, “I know people that are doctors that still paint graffiti, as well as people that shovel horseshit that do it as well.” In another part of his communication he comments that he believes that “Graffiti can and is done by all walks of life. The common misconception is that it’s a “quality of life crime”, which is nonsense.” When he refers to “quality of life crime” I believe that Matthew is referring to crimes, which involve youth from impoverished backgrounds who are engaging in illegal activities because they have no access to alternate activities due to their socio-economic level (quality of life).

Motivation

Matthew was aware of a variety of reasons for *writers* to get involved with the graffiti community,

Some people use it as a tool to broadcast political beliefs (mainly in war torn nations, but [it is] seeming to be more popular in N.A.[North America] in the Bush era). Some people paint as an outlet from their life that may not be going so well with problems at home, not many friends, etc. Others paint solely to piss people off and rebel against things that they don't see as fair or right.

When he got into *writing* as a teenager he says that he did it because, "I was already into art, and graffiti seemed like a good way for me to create and speak, without physically being the centre of attention." Matthew describes himself as a quiet person so he felt that, "graffiti gave me a voice, whether or not I had anything to say at the time."

Community Beautification

Matthew's introduction to the community and his motivation for joining the graffiti community appeared to have been triggered by his love for creating art and because of his curiosity about the techniques and participants who created graffiti. From these social and artistic beginnings, his involvement has grown to where he now sees graffiti as. "a tool to help people and bring some positivity to the world." His involvement with volunteer organizations and in youth advocacy for legal mural production is his form of civic participation in which he tries "to give back to the community with the skills that I've acquired."

He spoke with a sense of wonder at a recent event that came about because of his graffiti involvement. He described a trip to the US in which a graffiti canvas he did in the southern US was used as an ad for an agency in another large American city.

“I was put up in a posh hotel, treated like a king, and I kept telling myself, “graffiti gave me this”. Its pretty crazy that graffiti has brought me this far and I think it is important to stay inspired to create, to put smiles on people’s faces and to help good causes. I have a skill that most people admire, so I have to use it for something good.”

Respect

Matthew refers to the competitive nature of graffiti when he says, “Graffiti is a very cut throat hobby, not in the literal sense of course (at least in Canada), but it is almost like a high adrenaline sport and you have to keep up. ” Since he is no longer involved in the competitive aspect of “getting up” he doesn’t specifically discuss the issue of how respect is earned in the graffiti community but he acknowledges that he has, “ a skill that most people admire.” Although he clearly respects the work of good *writers* he doesn’t appear to be looking for or to be motivated by achieving respect from other *writers*.

Like many other of the more experienced *writers*, Matthew shares a sense of respect for the placement of graffiti in the community “Some writers think its their right to go around tagging whatever they want, I don’t agree myself.” In responding to questions related to civic institutions such as schools and the police force and by laws, he acknowledged that, “you think that you don’t need these services when you are younger because like most teens you think you know it all, but once you grow and get out on your own, you realize we need these services to keep a healthy balance.” Now that he is an adult he believes that, “if everyone was free to do whatever they wanted with no structure, I think that we’d still be knocking rocks together to make fire and that there would be great unrest.”

Participant Constructions of Graffiti

Matthew believes that graffiti will never be legal, but that legal or illegal it will still always be around. He believes that, “It’s peoples natural longing to leave their mark. Modern graffiti is just an advanced version of what the Egyptians, and other ancient races did.” In his experience, “typical graffiti tends to follow certain rules. If you’re looking to do a textbook piece, its all about flow and letter structure.” Although tags don’t involve significant skills, the process to create a *piece* is, “almost like being an architect. There is a lot of math involved, getting the letters to flow into the next, while developing your own style. It takes years.”

Although he is involved in the legal aspect of graffiti now and working with the community in positive ways, he acknowledges that there will always be a large negative side to the art form. This is because he sees the vandalistic side as a training ground or a developmental process in the growth of the street artist, urban muralist. He sees the *tags* as on a continuum that progresses to *throw ups*, to *pieces* to murals. He acknowledges that for him to progress to being able to paint graffiti murals that people can appreciate he had to “ get his name out there and work on the basic parts of graffiti like tagging and bombing to hone in on [his] skills.”

Even though there is a growing trend towards legal murals and trying to give graffiti a better name in society’s eyes, Matthew pointed out that “ there is still, and always will be a large negative side to the art form. This is because “people need to understand that there are two sides to graffiti, that most writers do both forms for most of their careers.” Although some keep doing ‘pieces’ that are recognized within the graffiti community, others move on and turn graffiti into “urban masterpieces for people to admire.” The dichotomy of art and illegality, inherent in graffiti production continues to pose a challenge for those, like Matthew who advocate for youth and for art in the community.

Chapter Four – Cross-Case Data Analysis

In sorting the interview data, I created several categories for analysis. These include: the *writers'* personal and artistic *Influences*, references to their own *School Experiences* and the *writers'* *Motivation* for engaging in graffiti. Commentary that refers to the *writers'* relationship with their own environment and community is collected under *Community Beautification* or in some cases *Community and Graffiti* (this includes *writers'* views on what constitutes public space, and where they feel free to paint). Another category is the concept of *Respect*. This category includes *writers'* respect for individuals within the graffiti community, respect for well-executed graffiti *pieces*, the respect that *writers* give each other, the respect that *writers* show towards individual property owners and certain public institutions. The final category *Participant Constructions of Graffiti* includes the way each *writer* defines graffiti, including the *writers'* views or judgments about what is or isn't "good" graffiti. Table Two, on the following page (90), provides a visual snapshot of the similarities and differences between *writers*.

Influences

Five of the seven writers were males between the age of 18 and 21. They all had attended public high school at some point. Five of the seven were employed either part-time or full time. Four of the five were living at home and six spoke English only. Most of the *writers* appeared to have come from fairly liberal family backgrounds. Most had other family members who shared their artistic talent. All the *writers* had been introduced to the art by an older male, either a family member, the older brother of a friend or an older respected graffiti *writer*. All writers mentioned being attracted to the visual, aesthetic nature of the colourful pieces that they first saw as young adolescents or children. All the writers spoke of the excitement created by the inherent danger of participation and of being out at night after dark in a group or alone. For some the illicit nature of the activity was somewhat of an attraction as they were drawn to the rebellious

nature of participating in an illegal activity.

Table Two: Cross-Case Data Analysis

CATEGORIES /WRITERS	DANIEL	QUADE	SEBASTIAN	NATHAN	RHYS	BEN	MATTHEW
INFLUENCES:	Web Graffiti Community	Family Member Art School Graffiti Community	Family Member Web Graffiti Community	Family Members Web Graffiti Community	Family Members Web Graffiti Community	Graffiti Community	Graffiti Community
SCHOOL EXPERIENCES	Not yet graduated HS	Not yet graduated HS	HS Grad Univ	Some HS	Not yet graduated HS	HS Grad Univ	HS Grad Univ
MOTIVATION	Aesthetic Self Expression	Competition	Social Artistic	Aesthetic Self Expression	Competition	Artistic Comm.	Social Comm.
COMMUNITY BEAUTIFICATION	Community Beautification	Distancing	Alternate Art Experiences	Environmental Beautification	Withdrawing	Comm. Beautification	Comm. Beautification
RESPECT-PUBLIC SPACES	Certain public spaces	N/A	Only certain public spaces	Only certain public spaces	Only certain public spaces	N/A	Only certain public spaces
RESPECT-INTRAPERSONAL	Positive intra-writers	Negative Intra-writers	Between writers	N/A	Negative Intra-writers	New writers-lack creativity	N/A
PARTICIPANT CONSTRUCTIONS OF GRAFFITI	Style	Vandalism	An art movement	Street Art	Art & Vandalism	A tool used to understand	A natural longing
PARTICIPANT'S AGE	20	18	20	18	21	27	27
EMPLOYMENT/SCHOOL ENROLLMENT	Part time-No	Part-time Yes HS	Part-time Yes-UNIV	Part-time Yes-Alt HS	Full-time-No	Part-time Yes-UNIV	Full-time No-Graduate
GRAFFITI ROOTS	North-Eastern Ontario	North-Eastern Ontario	North-Eastern Ontario	North-Eastern Ontario	North Eastern Ontario	Western British Columbia	South Western Ontario

School Experiences

A common factor that I believe is extremely significant and also of great concern is that four out of the five of the younger *writers* had not (at the time of the interview) completed high school in the standard time frame. Various discussions on graffiti in those four interviews led to individual references as to some of the reasons for the participants' school deviations. All of the four were suspended at one time or another from school for delinquent activities. All had come in conflict with school authorities for behaviours, which varied between individuals, but which included skipping school, tagging school spaces, and using drugs. All had struggled

academically, had missed significant amounts of school because of suspensions and had ultimately ‘dropped out’ or been asked to leave. Superficially, it would be easy to categorize these individuals, as merely juvenile delinquents whose departure from school was evidence of the competence of the schools’ senior administration at maintaining an appropriate moral tone in the school.

Students and school situations however, are rarely simple. School responses to defiant, apathetic or absent students typically include suspending students. This arises from the belief that attending school is a privilege. This approach however (aside from being rather counter intuitive for students who skip classes), fails to identify the real source of students’ apathy or anger. For someone who feels criticized, unwelcome and/or isolated, what privilege is there to continue to attend? It is my belief that some of the participants were in fact exerting their agency⁶ (however misguided we might think it to be) in their decision not to return to school. This topic is discussed in more detail under *Implications*.

During Quade’s interview he and the YRA discussed the value judgments schools (and society) make towards academic subjects versus non-academic subjects such as Art and Physical Education. At Quade’s high school, if you do not keep your academic marks up to 75 percent you will not get to participate in the arts discipline that you feel most comfortable and most passionate about. I believe this does a disservice to youth like Quade who do have artistic talent, but who aren’t perhaps as academically strong. It is unlikely that talented mathematicians would be told they would have to drop out of Math if they don’t bring their English mark up (although some might argue that they would be a much more balanced student if that was the case). The school is effectively using the preferred subject as a bargaining chip. While I understand that the rationale for this approach is to encourage diligence and to ensure that the students have a sufficiently broad education base, it is also about control and power and

differences in voice between adults and children and between teachers and students.

It is clear that at Quade's high school, the voices of others, including visitors, have more power than students (given administrations' rationale for the "beautification" of the basement washrooms). I believe this use of power teaches students that only by putting aside their passion, can they expect to "win the game" or in this case, even stay in the game. Its other message could be interpreted even more strongly, that school is not a place where youth voices are welcome. If this interpretation is wholly evident to an outsider, how jarring it must be to students who spend hours each day within that kind of school culture.

The stick versus the carrot approach is a question of pedagogical debate, administrative style and school culture. No doubt there are creative educators within the system using students' passion for their own interests and talents as springboards and bases for other subjects. How much more empowering for these students if they could do Math and English projects which have relevance to their artistic passion. This kind of approach might encourage more engagement in learning in other subjects. This approach, sometimes referred to as experience based learning (EBL) has been found to be extremely effective with students who have been marginalized due to race, learning differences or other characteristics which mark them as "different" (Andresen, Boud & Cohen, 1995). Schools in the second millennium contain a much broader diversity of students than ever before. As our youth populations decline the pressure to retain all students will become ever more increasingly important.

Motivation

What is it about graffiti that would encourage bright, sensitive, artistic individuals to get involved? Why would they be interested in a community that much of society has written off as delinquent, to participate in a practice which is widely understood to be illegal and which carries with it both physical danger but also potential financial and civil penalties? The answers to these

questions, reflect the unique natures of the 7 individuals in this study. It is likely though that they also reflect the motivations of other young *writers* in the community.

For some *writers* it is the obvious aesthetic attraction for graffiti art that motivates, “From the very beginning I loved the art aspect of it, the like, painting with the spray paint, all the murals, all the colours and all those bright beautiful things” Sebastian. For others it represents an individual and personal connection with art creation,

Other *writers* revel in the inclusive, collaborative, kinesthetic nature of the graffiti community, “It brings people together, it creates a form of expression for people that aren’t into reading” (Sebastian). The sense of belonging that the graffiti community provides can be a powerful motivator for youth who for many reasons may feel “different” and who may never have felt that they “belonged” to any previous community. This inclusive community, although is difficult to gain admittance to, “It’s different than any other culture. It wasn’t until I started getting noticed that I got to see what it’s like on the inside” (Daniel). Once an individual is accepted into the community, “you feel like your part of something- because it’s really closed, every one who does something is part of the community, everyone knows everyone, your part of another community that’s exclusive. That’s the fun of it”(Sebastian).

Competitive *writers*, may experience stress around judgments made about the calibre of their *pieces*, since these judgments determine their level of “getting up”. However, for others who may not be as extraverted, competitive or who are perhaps less confident, the anonymity of the pastime can be attractive. “There’s no limits to it, you completely express what you want to express no matter how you feel, no matter when you want to. Whether you contradict yourself or not, your only real art critic is yourself” (*Nathan*). In a similar way, the anonymity, or creation of an alternate identity through use of pen names, allows the young adolescent to develop a “voice” without drawing direct attention to themselves at a stage in life when insecurity is

highest. As Matthew explains, “I was already into art and graffiti seemed like a good way for me to create and speak, without physically being the centre of attention. I have always been a quiet person, so graffiti gave me a voice.”

Writers are attracted to graffiti because it creates a “space of identification” by allowing them to speak about their issues (Ibrahim, 2003) and allows them to feel that they are not alone in having to deal with feelings of anger, grief, disappointment and confusion about the state of their lives. “Graffiti is probably the most - it doesn’t criticize me, it doesn’t hurt my feelings, it doesn’t cheat on me, it doesn’t judge me it doesn’t... it gets me away from my parents” (*Daniel*). At the same time, the self-expression that is afforded by graffiti provides them with an unconditional source of emotional safety where they can be themselves and at the same time anonymous and not subjected to people’s judgments, “I just found that art was something peaceful to me. I didn’t want other people’s opinions or other people watching me. I didn’t care what people think. I can always do my form of art.” (*Nathan*).

It has to be acknowledged that some of the participants’ interest in graffiti relates to a desire for involvement in a forbidden activity, its illicit quality, (some might argue its anarchistic characteristics) “But then the other side, you know, was just like- we’re here, we’re young, this is for us and not for you, you’ll be walking down the street and you’ll see the *tag*, you’ll know it was me,” and the thrill of getting a response, any response from their actions, which are illegal: “I like the whole feeling of going out one night and “crushing” it and going out at night and waking up the next day and taking the train doing something, hearing someone, getting a public reaction” (*Daniel*). While a desire to engage in illegal activities, may signal socio-pathic tendencies, the act of testing the boundaries and pushing back against rules that feel restrictive, can also be seen as natural part of the learning, developing and maturing process for young risk takers and kinesthetic learners.

Community Beautification

The *writers'* relationship with their own environment and community plays a large part in how they utilize graffiti within their community. Four out of seven of the *writers* approach graffiti with a community beautification perspective. Essentially I use this phrase to label those writers who see their artwork (their graffiti) as a positive element that will add something of aesthetic value to the community. Evidence of this is very clear when we look at how the participants perceived their surroundings versus how they imagined or wanted their surroundings to be. In this rather bleak description, one of the *writers* paints a stark picture of what he sees in the urban landscape:

I just don't like the concrete surroundings that we have. Everything just looks really dull and really, really plain and ugly and desolate. Everything just looks dead. You go down town and there are just all these like square and rigid buildings and there's no life, all the birds are all diseased and dying, and there's garbage everywhere, the streets are littered with vomit and gum and cigarette butts and rainwater that's full of oil and ugly shit-right?

This *writer's* answer to this ugly depressing world that he sees around him is to create an alternative:

For me to turn around and just paint what I want to paint is just my way to open up the space and make it look like how I want it to look. Not even, like I don't even really like all these elaborate murals and stuff that people try and paint. Like all these fuckin' super crazy figures and animals... I

like *throw ups* and letters and *tags*. That's what I think should be up there" (*Daniel*).

Another *writer* objected to the commercialism that he was confronted with in public spaces:

Look at all these ads that are crammed in our face. Why do I have to look at all these billboards? I'd rather see artwork walking down the street. (Nathan)

In general the *writers*' perception was that "We've strangled the life out of certain areas." And in order to either cope with it, or to take action against it the *writer*'s response is "I reject everyone's reality and substitute my own." These *writers* are "envisioning the world in a different way" and then "taking action to create" their own kind of world. While simplistic, it could be thus considered a form of activism. A desire to contribute to community or environmental beautification albeit, their own version of community or environmental beautification, appears to be one motivation for this form of activism.

Yvonne Bynoe (2004) describes three distinct types of engagement as advocacy, diplomacy and direct public action. She indicates that direct public action is often used by groups or individuals who have tried everything else or for those who have been excluded from the process of making decisions. For young people in general, and for these specific young *writers*, many decisions have been outside their control. In effect they have been excluded from the process of making decisions by the very nature of the civic structures that they have come in contact with. Turning to direct public action thus is an obvious response to their circumstances. Until recently though, very few of these young people have had, either the skill, the motivation or even the knowledge that they might possess the capacity to "change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time" (*ibid*).

Stephenson, (2007) described the experience of “contagious social networks” in the Daniel River area of Virginia in which arts-based civic dialogue led to widespread acceptance and “an environment for social change at the grassroots level”. In a similar way, graffiti *writers*’ contextual experience with public space puts them in a position to influence others, providing them with the potential “to solve social problems and improve society” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Unfortunately their potential role as change agents is currently limited because of widely held negative attitudes toward graffiti. These attitudes are reinforced through studies such as a recent one in Norway in which areas with graffiti were perceived to be of greater disorder, which consequently influenced people’s moral behaviour (Keizer, 2008). That particular study further perpetuated the stereotypical representation of graffiti as a sign of urban decay. To truly reflect reality and avoid a hegemonic judgment based on limited opinions of what is and isn’t art it is important that an alternate view of graffiti art becomes part of public discourse.

An alternate discourse is beginning to happen albeit slowly. Sgt. Scott Mills, a Toronto Police Services employee and lead in the Toronto Crime Stoppers Program has demonstrated in his work with urban minority youth that graffiti murals have the potential to bring people together and empower youth to make positive choices and become successful citizens. Part of his work has been demonstrating to youth how working together in the community, mutual goals can be met. As Feldman and Westphall (1999) observe, political strength is not only based on relationships with politicians and bureaucrats. Community groups and even graffiti *writers* can gain power through local protests and other everyday grassroots activism.

It is clear from the interviews in this research that the *writers*, as with most bright young people, make a habit of, “questioning and debating”. As Sebastian succinctly summarizes it, “In all parts of the world there are people who break the rules, I’m not one to say what’s right or

wrong... but there's always an underground theme that comes up as a defining theme, a resistance against the mainstream". Youth who opt out of school systems, or traditional pursuits and who are typically more difficult to engage in traditional civic practices can see for themselves that their form of 'resistance against the mainstream' which is an inherent developmental stage of maturation and also an inherent part of graffiti practice can be a skill that they can use to be successful in other parts of their life.

Respect

Sebastian commented, that it is necessary to sometimes break the rules to progress artistically or personally. His rationale is similar to the rationale behind civil disobedience in those individuals who engage in their communities from a justice-oriented citizenship perspective. In justice-oriented advocacy it is the end result, the extension of social justice for example, that justifies the citizen's involvement in an illegal activity.

This link between civil disobedience and graffiti should not be ignored. BANKSY an incredibly talented *writer*, well-known around the world for his political commentary once painted a mural, which referenced the cave art at L'Escault in France. In his mural he showed an individual whitewashing over the cave art just as present day graffiti removal companies paint over graffiti in our cities. It is important that more discourse be centred around what constitutes vandalism, which most agree should be promptly removed, and street art, which I would argue, should be preserved as a reflection of our societies understanding of and appreciation for, alternate forms of art expression.

Participant Constructions of Graffiti

The participants, who ranged in age from 18 up to 27 years, demonstrated that there was a changing importance of graffiti in their day-to-day life as they get older and their life circumstances change. While graffiti continues to be a passion and they continue to be involved

in its production, it takes a back stage to other priorities in their lives.

The down side of graffiti for this group of writers is its competitive nature, “If you get crossed out, it’s such a bad feeling; it’s totally competitive; it’s how you hold yourself, it’s who you hang out with” (*Quade*). Although not as concerned about his own feelings, Nathan felt that it was to the detriment of Art if it became focused on the competitive aspect.

But it’s the destruction of art if it’s just about competition.

If it becomes just a popularity contest than how is it still art? It is an art form. I’m just saying that I just wouldn’t support that. I wouldn’t support art turning into a big popularity contest. (*Nathan*)

Rhys’ experience with the competitive climate of the local graffiti scene was so negative, that it caused him to stop writing altogether for over a year:

I just lost my passion for it. It got to be where it was all about “getting up”, not about the art. It got to the point that people were crossing me off because of who they thought I was. It had nothing to do with my art, my style; they just had heard something about me and crossed me out. No one’s respectful anymore. (*Rhys*)

There are differing opinions about graffiti’s rise in popularity and the effect of the Internet. The ‘old school’ or “classical” *writers* who gained skills over 10 years ago look down on many of the *writers* today:

Most of it these days in my opinion (by way of the internet) is bad.

...I believe 85 to 90% of the stuff being done today is horrible.

With very little originality and a brand of paint that makes it easier than ever to get clean lines, there are a lot of young kids with big ego's floating around out there. (Ben).

It is somewhat ironic that even within the graffiti community where many youth are able to find acceptance and “community,” there are countless subgroups, defined by their *writing* style, their artistic influences, their skill level and their ability to or interest in, adhering to the graffiti community’s codes of conduct.

Chapter Five: Research Discussion and Conclusion

In contrast to the superficial assessments of those who condemn all graffiti *writers* as nothing more than criminal delinquents or vandals, the case studies of the seven *writers*, presented in this study, show that many of those who engage in this creative, yet illegal pursuit are thoughtful, intelligent, creative and contributing citizens of our communities. At a stage in their life when they are unsure of their civic identity, where they fit in the community, and who and in what to believe, these *writers* are out in their community, creating visual representations of their questions, and their observations. They also actively seek and provoke responses and answers to their questions. In this context, they are participating civically.

A Revised Conceptual Framework

As previously introduced, the conceptual framework for this research was based on Westheimer and Kahne's 2004 research on citizenship education and their investigation into the different visions of the "good" citizen that different civics curricula engender. By analyzing the interviews provided by the seven study participants, the framework helps us to make more complex our analysis of how graffiti and civic identity overlap. Society can benefit from any and all of the three portraits of citizens that Westheimer and Kahne describe: the personally responsible, the participatory and the justice oriented (see Table One) citizen. In practice however it is not so easy to categorize the *writers*, because their behaviour and their perceptions do not fall easily into one category. The reality is that not all graffiti *writing* has civic inspiration - some graffiti writing is destructive vandalism. However, this conceptual model provides a lens through which to look at the youthful participants of this study, and to investigate their own understanding of their participation in graffiti '*piecing*' and their perceptions of the many aspects to being civically engaged.

It was initially suggested, based on the political history of graffiti and of Hip-Hop culture that the rationale for a *writer's* participation might have been to change the hegemonic use of public space and to promote a more democratic choice of urban aesthetics rather than those reflected by the dominant culture. Hegemonic in this context refers to the dominant perspective and discourses of those in positions of power. In North America, these have traditionally been white, socio-economically advantaged, middle-aged males who have been, and still are the principal political decisions makers in society as a whole. It would be inaccurate to assume that there are no hegemonic forces or patterns of injustice when it comes to uses of urban spaces in general. As far as graffiti and public space in the local context, the municipality, largely hegemonic in its structure, initially aimed to remove all legal graffiti walls. It was only through the impassioned appeal to council by Sabra Ripley, a female graffiti advocate, and others like Mike Young of Communitas Advancing Valued Environments (C.A.V.E.) that this “public space” was preserved. The initial hypothesis of changing the hegemonic use of public space, was clearly supported by at least two of the participants Daniel and Nathan. It is not however, the main or the only rationale for their participation.

In a 2001 article of *The American Behavioral Scientist*, David Snow and Michael Mulcahy suggest that urban space can be considered across at least three domains: the value the space has for its use by residents, the value for what it can be sold or rented for by entrepreneurs or landlords and finally its political value. They also speak about three kinds of space: prime space, which is essentially public space used by residents; marginal space, which has little value to most residents and transitional space, whose use is blurred or ambiguous. There are fairly clear divisions in the minds of *writers* (at least in the minds of the writers interviewed in this study, that, generally speaking, they will not write on most areas of “prime space” (private houses, churches, hospitals, children’s playgrounds). There is minimal outcry when graffiti is

done in marginal spaces (since the vast majority of the public do not see it). The most negative public discourse on graffiti appears to occur when *writers* utilize transitional spaces, as this leaves them open to negative judgments from all three groups of the dominant culture, “the public”, the politicians and the entrepreneurs who have their own agenda for the use of transitional spaces.

Bylaw and municipal graffiti eradication policies, which attempt to control marginal and transitional spaces without sufficient input from stakeholders do trigger some justice-oriented responses from *writers*. *Writers* are *defacto* stakeholders no matter their age, employment or schooling, since this “space” is an important part of their community and of their activities. Municipalities need to consider that by instituting their expansive dictates they ultimately restrict and constrict human creative experience. The transitional spaces that are being restricted could instead be considered “opportunities to playfully explore, freed from the fetters and limitations imposed by material existence and the normative structuration of experience” (Williams, 2004).

The means that humans use to carve out spaces for non-traditional uses is of particular concern in today’s culture. As Williams observes, “possibilities for ontological engagement and creative fulfillment are dangerously limited by the depersonalizing, rationalist discourses of post-modern culture where creativity and expressivity are forfeited in the interest of instrumental, utilitarian values” (Williams, 2004). By positioning graffiti writing as only destructive, hegemonic forces ignore and silence one of the key realities of graffiti culture, that of creative, positive civic engagement.

In fact, research on graffiti in the literature, almost overwhelmingly demonstrates that for most writers “Graffiti is a positive, pleasurable experience ... on the whole, unrelated to deliberate, ‘anti-social’ or negative motivations” (Halsey, 2004, p. 182). For many writers “there is a kind of pleasure generated through the act of writing that is not exclusively bound to, nor a

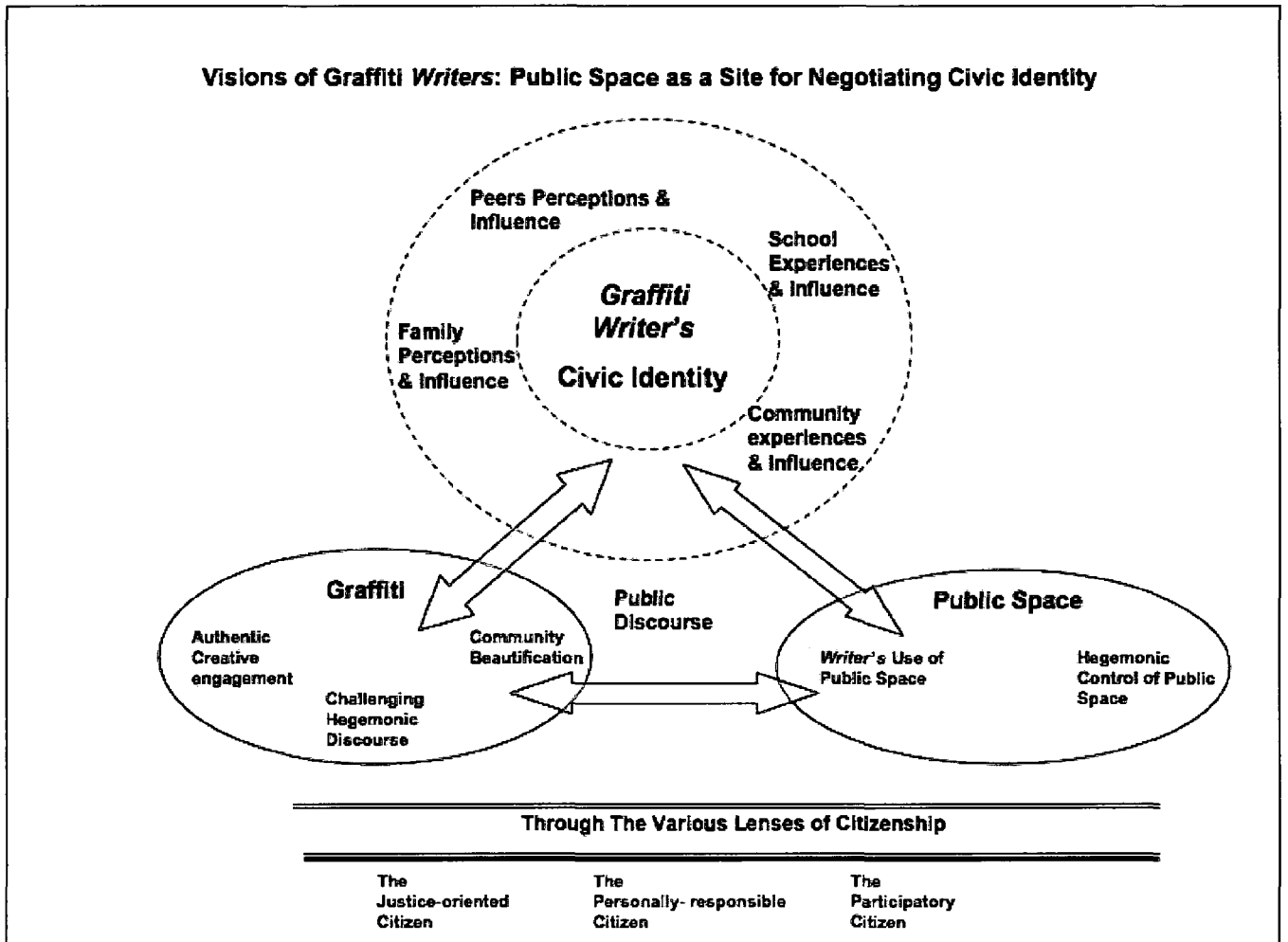
function of transgression” (Halsey, 2004, p. 292). Some participants in this research did admit to having engaged in vandalism at some point, but their primary intent as *writers* was not the criminal aspect of vandalism. The *writers* that were interviewed for this study have a way of describing their approach to writing that has almost nothing to do with destruction or aggression, and more to do with a desire to express their skill, their exuberance and to improve their lived environment. As Daniel explained “for me to turn around and just paint what I want to paint, it is just my way to open up the space and make it look like how I want it to look.”

The act of writing connects the writer to the city: “[g]raffiti writers connect themselves to all the possible reactions the city can muster with respect to a particular image or set of images produced over time” (Halsey, 2004, p. 278). Civic identity is confirmed and fully realized through each *writer*’s negotiation of public space. To revisit our foundational conceptual model, Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) three visions of citizenship, suggest different “ways of being” within civic society. Listening to the voices of our young *writers* helps us to see how their civic identity is negotiated through their interactions with public space. The diverse data from the participant interviews which is filed in Chapter Two under the categories of Influences, School Experiences and Motivation, are moderating characteristics that affect the writer’s negotiation of public space. Other direct catalysts are their perceptions of those who sit in judgment of their participation and their actions. Judgments in the form of negative media, banning of legal graffiti walls, fines and arrests, as well as the criticisms made by their peers of their graffiti skills and creativity (when they are “painted over” by other *writers*) affect the *writer*’s response and engagement in graffiti. Under the influences of these many interacting pressures, young writers claim their space in their community, through legal and illegal means, in the manner that feels most natural to them, through their visual art. By practicing and perfecting this skill they can beautify their community, voice their opinion, counter their peer’s criticisms and create a civic

identity, which counters the negative perceptions of superficial judges.

Diagram One: Revised Conceptual Framework

Diagram One: Visions of Graffiti Writers: Public Space as a Site for Negotiating Civic Identity



The findings from this study suggest that, rather than serving as helpful strategies to reduce municipal crime, restrictions on the use of contested spaces in cities can lead to increased conflict and criminality. The crime of *writing* becomes an act of resistance to cultural forces caused by the *writer's* need to “break through the restraints, a realization of immediacy and a reassertion of identity and ontology” (Hayward & Young, 2004, p. 267). In essence then, it is possible that the municipality is creating an environment, which will sustain the criminal element

by restricting all public space. As Williams observes:

Practices of cultural resistance, edgework, and pseudo-aggressive confrontations are illustrative of the ways in which human beings routinely carve out alternative, sometimes illicit, spaces for creative engagement with the world. The interplay within these experiential spaces is phenomenologically akin to play – a period of temporary abandon and creative experience that dissolve boundaries and offers a moment of freedom from the oppressive encumbrances of order, regularity, and rule (Williams, 2006, p.185).

Using Williams’s analogy, the study participants, who are engaged in questioning and debating the use of public space, by participating in this controversial medium, end up enriching their civic identity through their interactions with civic space. The data from the interviews seems to support this direction although not clearly and not overwhelmingly.

The core characteristic of the justice-oriented citizen, as described in Westheimer and Kahne’s model, includes: “questioning and debating issues with the goal of changing established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time.” Data from this study indicates that a tendency towards defiance and questioning the status quo seems to have been a part of most of the participants’ natures from an early stage. In fact, this tendency appears to have created problems for them at school, within their family structures and has contributed (for some of them) to their exclusion from mainstream acceptance in the art world. One of the key difficulties they have encountered is that not everyone shares their passionate ideals. Just because they may be young and oppositional however, does not mean that there is no basis for their defiance. In truth, young people have been excluded from participating in dialogue and decisions about what our cities should look like, how our schools should be run and what is considered

beauty and art in our society. Youthful participation in *writing* in this sense, when it is focused on changing community aesthetics could be seen as a legitimate response to the injustice of not being included in such civic discourses. Evidence from the interviews includes: Daniel describing the ugliness of the concrete world that others have created and how his actions “create his own reality” and “open up the space” and Nathan objecting to the number of ugly billboards and messages that he is confronted with as he walks around and explaining that he would rather see art and beauty. These previous examples link closely to the assumptions of Westheimer and Kahne’s justice-oriented citizenship in which citizens “question, debate and change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time.” It is in their resistance that the *writers*’ civic identity is developed. As Simon observed, it is individuals’ responses to an issue or priority, their ability “to think about it and have an opinion about it” that creates “a defining theme, a resistance against the mainstream.”

There is contradiction though, even within the culture of graffiti that makes further analysis difficult. It is clear that in most cases, the *writers* who were interviewed were not indiscriminately *bombing*. They had clearly given a lot of thought to their involvement in graffiti. They had considered its risks and benefits to themselves and others. In fact they had formed a quite complex way of rationalizing the contradiction between their desire for participating in this passionate art form, and improving the aesthetics of their community, with the illicit nature and vandalism inherent both in their acts of *bombing* and in their development from *tagger* to *bomber* in graffiti culture. They appeared to do this by creating set boundaries, boundaries within which to practice. These careful caveats appear to have much in common with the boundaries set upon behaviour by the *personally responsible citizen*. *Writers* will *write* on big business or government buildings, but not on private homes and only judiciously on small business venues. They disapprove of nihilistic tagging and vandalism but acknowledge that it is a

phase through which many of them pass to learn their art. They are *writing* without permission, but have never given permission themselves for ugly buildings to be created or consumer messages to be posted.

The boundaries that *writers* set for themselves are usually learned from the community that they have been “adopted” into. Most members of the graffiti community choose to abide by specific internal rules at the same time that they violate social norms (and sometimes laws) established by the larger society. Many see the blatant “disobedience” of graffiti *writers* as open opposition to civic values. Those who employ a simplistic analysis of graffiti writing often only see the disobedience. This study has demonstrated that because of their complexity both graffiti and graffiti writers need to be analyzed through a more complex lens. When viewed through the lens of justice-oriented citizenship, it can be argued that disobedience in civic matters is not always a bad thing, especially if it is done thoughtfully and with intention. In this light, the relationship of the writers’ art to civic engagement becomes more evident.

Historically we Canadians have had a reputation of being more deferent to authority than our American counterparts. Edgar Z. Friedenberg’s 1980 publication, *Deference To Authority. The Case of Canada*, highlighted this national tendency. In the decade after his book was written, research showed however that this deference, at least to non-governmental organizations such as churches, schools, and political authorities declined significantly more in Canada in the last 40 years than in any other western country (Roberts, Clifton & Ferguson, 2000). Given that many young adults today were raised by parents whose own attitudes towards authority and obedience challenged this deferential tradition, it is not surprising that graffiti has been taken up with such enthusiasm by a younger generation. It is also not surprising that their grandparents tend to oppose it.

American attitudes towards authority have traditionally been more assertive, making the

result of a recent American experiment (Berger, 2009), which replicated Stanley Milgram's infamous experiment (Milgram, 1962) on 'obedience' even more shocking. Berger's experiment (containing some bias due to its funding sources) demonstrates that a large number of young people in today's society would cause someone pain just because they were told or encouraged to by someone in authority (Berger, 2009). A healthy level of defiance is a necessary part of democratic society, as well as an important component of human nature. The courage, or daring or risk-taking that artists employ to "break the rules" may be the passion that distinguishes good art from great art. In a democracy, that courage can mean the difference between taking action or no action when governments make immoral decisions. As Edmund Burke noted in the seventeenth century, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." There is no way of knowing whether graffiti *writers* might have responded differently to Milgram's experiment than other young people have. The rule-breaking that *writers* engage in can be seen to be another concrete route to developing critical thinking skills. Questioning and breaking the rules can lead to discoveries about one's self, and about others' reactions, about how systems work, about cause and effect., "Graffiti is about being out in the city, no one's else's rules but your own, its expression. If you were to paint according to the accepted rules, there would not be any growth. You have to break the rules sometimes to get something out of it" (Sebastian).

In essence, this study demonstrates that all the participants, just as their peers participating in other more traditionally accepted civic practices, are in fact grappling with who they are and what it really means to be a "good citizen". This is age appropriate, essential work in the creation of one's civic identity. Putting out the garbage, paying taxes and voting may be recognizable characteristics of a "good" "personally responsible citizen", but the presence of those characteristics in no way ensures that the individual is a truly 'good' citizen. Conversely,

the fact that the young people interviewed, participate in *writing* which is an illegal activity does not make them truly “bad “ citizens. In fact depending upon their experiences with graffiti, their experiences may encourage them to become more actively engaged members of society advocating on behalf of social justice issues. All humans (*graffiti writers* included) bring unique skills, and add immeasurable benefits to the complex recipe necessary to create a democratic society.

There are as many explanations for youth being involved in *writing*, as there are writing styles. The results of this small study demonstrate that for some *writers*, belonging to the graffiti subculture provides them with a place where their resilient approach to learning, to expressing themselves, provides them with a sense of belonging and a structured, bounded community to work through their feelings of anger, exclusion and disappointment, in a relatively positive way. Rather than condemning them for participating in an illegal activity, we could instead commend them for finding a creative, rather than a purely destructive outlet for their inner turmoil, for being resilient in seeking out solutions for their particular growth needs. Personally responsible citizens who might criticize and condemn young writers need to be reminded that there are many more damaging outlets (damaging to themselves, others and society) that exist in the world today. As Sebastian explained to the YRA:

In all parts of the world there are people who break the rules, I'm not one to say what's right or wrong... it just comes down to that the majority has their say but there's always an underground theme that comes up as a defining theme, a resistance against the mainstream which has added up to the way of the world.

(Sebastian)

Limitations of the Research

Despite a lengthy recruitment phase and several initially enthusiastic, possible participants, the actual participant response was lower than hoped for. Efforts to recruit included speaking with store management and circulating flyers with staff members at two key stores in Ottawa frequented by *writers* (where they can buy spray paint and exhibit some of their work). The researcher circulated invitations on various pro-graffiti websites and spread the word through acquaintances within the graffiti community, on several local graffiti websites and through the assistance of a handful of local community graffiti advocates. After those broad recruitment attempts, only five participants in the planned age range were located to interview in Ottawa. *Writers* are a group of youth that are traditionally very private and harder to access than traditional adult participant populations. Anecdotally though, it appears that the municipality's strict clamp down on graffiti has caused many of the more proficient and prolific *writers* to leave town, to "fall-off" or to go so far underground they did not want to risk discussing their art for fear of being targeted by law enforcement. If more time had been available, it is possible that I may have had better success at recruiting participants in Montreal whose climate and tolerance for graffiti is much higher:

"Take for instance a community like Plateau, in downtown Montreal. This community is completely covered in graffiti both legal and illegal, and the citizens of the community don't seem in anyway to hate life or their surroundings. In fact the community is vibrant and positive." (Ben)

The small sample size of participants cannot be and is not meant in any way to be representative of the perceptions of graffiti *writers* as a whole, nor even the perceptions of the graffiti *writers* of Ottawa as a part. Unfortunately because of the difficulties in recruiting

participants, the individuals interviewed were not really representative of the diversity present in the Ottawa area graffiti community. In terms of the data collection methods, the familiarity of the research assistant with the subject matter and in some cases the participants meant that the content of the data collection sometimes extended beyond the parameters initially set by the researcher.

One fairly glaring limitation of this paper and the data that it is based upon, is my (the researcher) limited experience with, and knowledge of, discourse analysis. The dialogue between the YRA and the five participants who had face to face interviews was examined from what the researcher referred to as a critical theory perspective, however there are a considerable number of forms of discourse analysis that could also have been utilized. Some of these approaches include: conversation analysis (CA), interactional sociolinguistics (IS), pragmatics/politeness theory, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and discursive psychology. Depending upon the kind of analysis used, very different data may have been constructed.

I consciously did not choose an intensive analysis method such as true conversation analysis because the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to over an hour. To look at features like pause lengths, overlapping speech and turn-taking would have proved extremely time consuming and complex and appeared to be impractical for the length of transcription that I was required to do.

To utilize an IS or a DP approach I would have looked at issues such as the gender and/or the power relationship between the interviewer (the YRA) and the participant. The fact that the YRA is female and was younger than three of the participants, whereas she was older than two of the participants undoubtedly affected the nature of the discourse in the interviews. The fact that it was a female interviewing a male about an activity that has tended to be gender biased heavily towards males, again has implications for the kind of data that was collected. The interviewer's

familiarity with the participant undeniably can influence the nature of the interview. This was commented on briefly in the “argumentative” style apparent in the interactions described in the interview between the YRA and the participant Nathan. These issues were not discussed in any detail in this master’s level thesis. This is primarily because of the necessity of limiting the scope of this exploratory study. The nature of the power dynamics between near-age peers in peer by peer interviewing warrants further investigation.

If I had been using Politeness Theory in my analysis I would have commented on actions within the interviews such as complaining, disagreeing, criticizing, making requests or offering apologies, which might have affected whether the YRA or the participant felt threatened or experienced either positive or negative face. I instead felt that since the YRA was a confident assertive young woman that she would not be intimidated by asking questions and speaking with males close to her in age, about a subject that she had some familiarity with. Other than realizing that an interview between the YRA and the participants and I would be less comfortable because of the generational and inherent researcher bias I had clearly not thoroughly considered the tensions between interviewer and interviewee which might have been compounded by gender and power issues. I also did not consider the situation from the participant’s point of view, that they might be intimidated by the YRA herself, (since all the participants appeared to be quite able to resist the status quo it did not occur to me that there might be a power differential involved in the interviewing process).

Clearly these are omissions that were made in part because of the short timelines of this research project. The thesis research and analysis deadline came at the end of four years of part-time course studies and after completing several extension requests. In reality, because of the underlying political issues that are examined, a critical discourse analysis was the most appropriate research approach to utilize. In fact that is what was attempted, but has not been

broken down microscopically, other than to ensure that main issues, such as setting, questions, and interviewer were controlled to eliminate as many power differentials as possible. In conclusion, a more in depth analysis would have provided additional data, but given the scope of this thesis, may have also resulted in an overabundance of themes, which would have necessitated additional time and skills that were not available to the researcher. As Stubbe, Lane, Hilder, Vine, Vine, Marra, Holmes & Weatherall relate in their 2003 article on multiple discourse analysis, when it came to this particular analysis “no transcription can ever be a neutral or complete rendition of a spoken text. The process of transcription is inevitably selective, and therefore involves a certain amount of interpretation and analysis,” (Stubbe et al, 2003, p.353). Perhaps future research based on similar subject areas can address the gaps mentioned here.

Implications

There are several possible implications that can be drawn from the data collected in this investigation. I will deconstruct them into three key areas: implications for community development; implications for civic education and implications for schools as civic structures.

Community Development

The information gleaned from this small research study appears to indicate that many youth who are involved in graffiti ‘bombing’ do have a sense of belonging or ownership towards their community, but do not see themselves reflected in the “concrete jungle” that others have created. The data collected and the academic research behind the phenomenal popularity of anything related to Hip-Hop culture indicates that the elements of Hip-Hop Culture are an untapped source of academic debate and research (Richardson, 2006, Alim et al, 2008) that may lead to some concrete strategies for community development. The fact that students in a northern Cree community can be turned on to learning (Rahn, 2002) by participating in an art form that arose from African-American resistance demonstrates its appeal to youth from other

cultures and thus its potential for global application. As Canada becomes increasingly pluralistic, maintaining a broad, community level understanding of democracy and ways to maintain and promote democracy are essential.

The work of C.A.V.E., Scott Mills in Toronto, and Mike Young's efforts here in Ottawa serve as templates for a similar kind of community involvement. The use of a concrete, visual technique such as graffiti or street art/ mural production as a way to demonstrate community collaboration can produce important dividends. Including youth, who up until recently have been marginalized by their participation in an illegal activity and focusing on the assets and the leadership that they can bring to this form of community collaboration may provide a concrete but not contrived form of civic participation and might build on their own motivation to make their world more visually appealing. Being part of and having a "say" in what their community surroundings look like, can also increase their identification with and feeling of membership in 'their community'. This form of 'community service' is not something that would necessarily appeal to all students but instead should be something saved for those students who have a special interest and connection with visual art and community beautification.

Civic Education

It was fairly clear from discussions with the small group of youth in this research study that issues of civic participation and citizenship are not foremost in the minds of young adults. Although all of the participants should have had some exposure to compulsory high school level Civics courses at the grade 10 level, only one participant spoke about how his in-class experience affected his understanding of what democracy really means. His teacher used "guest speakers, lots of field trips to places such as the Elgin Street Courthouse" to show this student "how the effort of society is what keeps democracy moving." It is clear that for civics lessons to be sustained, especially for less traditionally academic students, it is necessary that they have more

active, hands on experience. The kind of curriculum that Westheimer and Kahne (2004) identified as encouraging a justice oriented approach to democracy appears to be particularly appropriate for the action-oriented developmental stage of adolescence and for many artistic students and also for students whose personal learning style favours a more kinesthetic approach (Gardner, 1983; Kahne & Sporte, 2008).

Schools As Civic Structures

It is common knowledge that schools are not the most democratic of civil institutions. Although mutual respect does exist between many students and their teachers, disrespectful treatment by adults and vice versa is not uncommon. Many teachers and senior administrators in well-intentioned attempts to socialize their students in preparation for mainstream society – inflexibly enforce dress codes, and behaviour codes that further alienate students. Many students feel that being themselves will leave them at risk of harassment from their peers and sanctions from their teachers. In this unwelcoming atmosphere, Mollie Blackburn, an assistant professor at The Ohio State University, believes that “withdrawing from school, whether that withdrawal is emotional or physical, is also a way of asserting agency” (p.109). She points out that schools “need to recognize such moves as strategies that accomplish real and valuable work for the young person, not just as a failure to achieve in school.” (ibid).

Unfortunately, although they may be exhibiting agency by withdrawing or being asked to leave, they risk further alienation and economic marginalization. As Evans explains “dropping out of high school reduces a young person’s opportunity to achieve independence and the ability to cope successfully in society later in life” (Evans, 2005, p.1). In his 2005 Canadian Policy Research Network (CPRN) report, Evans points out that, “our young people deserve more and better options” (p. 7). For a large group of students, especially those with learning disabilities, those dealing with family crises, with addiction and mental health issues, and even for those

whose nimble minds question their education curriculum and the status quo, the supports they seek are difficult to locate in today's school system.

“While young people who quit school are likely to experience social exclusion and a corresponding segregation from full citizenship status, exclusion can also exist within the school system itself.... The in-school presence of racism, as well as discrimination-based-on-ability, is well documented, having the effect of isolating young people who are deemed “different.”

(Beauvais, McKay & Sneddon, 2001 p. 19)

It is clear from speaking with the research participants that they all possess an artistic awareness and a desire for authentic self-expression. It is also clear for several of the participants that they did not find this at school. It is incumbent upon teachers and administrators to work with students to find out what it is about school that they are resisting, fighting or removing themselves from. As Blackburn encapsulates “it is [our] job to tap into their agency for the good of the students and to create school communities that allow students to be themselves and work for social change” (Blackburn, 2005, p.110). If we do not, these young people with such potential, risk sinking into economic insecurity and even social exclusion. Clearly, to ensure democracy is maintained, our education system needs to identify solutions so that these individuals can become full citizens contributing to and enjoying the benefits of democratic society (Zyngier, 2008).

Recommendations

The following recommendations are merely suggestions, drawn from a broad body of the literature reviewed for this study. Municipalities, schools and youth need to work together to create the kind of environments that support, reflect and nurture all of us.

Municipalities

Municipalities should continue to remove vandalistic and vulgar tagging, but also work with schools, social and recreational agencies to provide redirection, education and mental health support instead of focusing on punitive responses for youth who repeatedly vandalize. Instead of primarily providing economic incentives to businesses for buying paint that makes graffiti easy to wash off, work with businesses to create opportunities for collaboration between youth *bombers* and community groups. Be cognizant that a heavy handed response to graffiti *bombing*, the indiscriminant removal of *pieces* and the enforcement and incarceration of *writers*, risks alienating these youth and thus forfeiting the chance to recruit their passion and creativity in the service of legitimate civic causes (Callinan, 2002; Community CAVE, 2008; Graycar, 2003; Mills, 2007; L'Amour, 2005).

Schools

Schools need to ensure that all students from an early age have access to hands on experiential learning about civic processes and why they are important. Teachers need to look for opportunities to involve students of all ages in discussions, petitions, and communications with all levels of government, field trips and guest speakers on events, issues and agencies in their community. The agencies need to share information not only about what they do, but also about why they do what they do and what civic actions support their goals.

Students who show an interest and a talent in sketching, drawing, and tagging could be provided outlets or locations within the school and/ or community where it is allowed. They could be provided with encouragement by allowing them to use their special passion or talent in other areas of the curriculum by studying the history of the genre, by writing about their experiences and the experiences of others who have used graffiti in positive ways, by using their mathematics skills to look at the costs of graffiti production for themselves, the cost and effect of

its removal on small businesses and the affect of these costs on the taxes paid by their families.

Collaboration between elementary, high schools and post secondary institutions could be encouraged, so that all students have the opportunity to find an older youth or adult who can provide them with mentoring and encouragement (Anderson, Broud & Cohen, 2005; Joselowsky, 2007).

Youth

Your participation is crucial if you ever want to see change in any of the systems that you touch or that touch you. In order to ensure that your voice is included in public debate:

- Continue to speak out about those issues that you perceive to be unjust.
- Continue to participate in the things that you are most passionate about but look beyond your own experience to how your participation affects others in society.
- Learn as much as you can about how systems in education, in law and in politics work and how this might affect you.
- Seek out as a friend or mentor, an older peer or adult who has skills, qualities and beliefs that you share.
- Learn what your rights and responsibilities are as a citizen.
- Stay involved and believe that you really can make a difference.

Conclusion

This exploratory study of a small group of youth who participate in graffiti *writing* does not lead to black and white answers or startling revelations. *Writers* are not all motivated by justice-oriented visions of changing civic structures and practices that promote injustice; neither are they nihilistic vandals intent upon destruction of public property. They are, in the case of the seven participants in this study, creative, artistic individuals, seeking a means of self-expression,

hoping to make their mark on society and to register their frustration with their lack of power and voice in life and in civic processes. Meanwhile they are exhibiting aspects of their civic identity. This identity has been formed in part by their interactions with the civic structures that they have encountered upon the way. Who they are as democratic citizens will ultimately be reflected in the choices they make in the years ahead.

When I started this research I was looking at a methodological question as well as several general research questions. Although very little research evidence exists in which youth themselves take on a researcher role, my knowledge of developmental psychology, my experience with youth-led health promotion and risk prevention in my professional life and my observations and experience with youth in the community and with friends of my own children, led me to believe that communicating with the graffiti *writers* would be facilitated by the use of youth research assistants (YRAs). I believe that the calibre and the richness of the data that the YRA was able to obtain from leading the interviews with the *writers* confirm my initial hope.

Benefits of using peer interviewers include: a shorter timeframe for developing a rapport with participants; a greater comfort level and trust between the interviewer and the participant; an ease in the use and comprehension of vernacular and graffiti-related expressions and terminology with which an older more academic interviewer might be less familiar. Limitations to using YRAs include the researcher's lack of control over the consistency of interviews from participant to participant and the collection of irrelevant data when the YRA creates their own questions. The Researcher also misses out on developing a one to one rapport with the participants and misses out on the visual cues that inform qualitative information. Some of this can be captured by careful note taking on the part of the YRA, but it is important to build in pieces that allow the main researcher to gain some contact with the participants too.

The seven *writers* profiled and others like them, reflect our hope for the future. With the

right kind of encouragement these *writers* could continue to nurture a civic identity concerned with ensuring that they utilize the powerful artistic voice that they are starting to develop. That voice could be used to effect change for more marginalized members of society and to encourage our public leaders to create the kind of public spaces and communities that they wish to be part of. Some of the values the graffiti community engenders: the mentoring of talented new members, the absence of greed and materialism, the concern for the impact on their environment. are all positive traits that our society could learn from. These particular youth have special gifts, a unique way of envisioning the world and reflecting it in their art. If we ignore these gifts by labeling their actions anti-civic and by grouping them into categories which further exclude them from our national civic discourse, we will have lost important voices and visions that might lead us closer to creating and maintaining the truly democratic nation that we seek. We cannot know without further research, whether other young writers share their characteristics. Undoubtedly there are many youth involved in graffiti because of its illicit nature. Of those, some of them may go on to become engaged in civic matters. They should not be “written off” however, because of their initial involvement in an illegal pursuit. While graffiti will not be a route to civic participation for most youth, it may offer an alternate site for youth who need the space and freedom to put their questions and observations up for public scrutiny in public spaces.

This exploratory research study has used Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) conceptual model of the three planes of ‘good’ citizenship activity to examine case studies of young graffiti *writers*. It examines the *writers’* perceptions of their actions, the meaning and motivation for these actions, and what kind of citizenship their actions reflect. The review of relevant literature including Hip-Hop cultural studies and the analysis of the interviews collected in this study, confirm that youth, especially young graffiti *writers* bring many strengths to their chosen community involvement. This study provides concrete evidence that supports the growing body

of literature that focuses on youth ‘assets’ (the strengths that youth bring to their experiences) (Benson, 1997; Scales & Laffert, 1999; Ungar, 2005). Judging by the data provided by our seven *writers*, these *writers*’ have considerable assets. It is these assets that are needed to meet the challenges of the democratic, socially just society that we are building for the future.

Writer’s perceptions of themselves and their community and their passionate engagement with community affairs (albeit a different community) share characteristics with Westheimer and Kahne’s descriptions of ‘participatory’ and ‘justice-oriented’ citizens. Using their conceptual framework as a lens through which to look at young graffiti *writers*, helps us to analyze the complex overlap between graffiti and citizenship. Graffiti *writers* belong to a newer genre of visual artists but they share the traditional visual artist’s ability to “envision the world in different ways”, or more concretely, to spot or create innovation. Their tendency towards questioning and debating issues, and their contextual experience with public space puts them in a prime position to influence others. These abilities may not necessarily be reflective of ‘personally responsible’ citizenship, although their behaviour code with respect to what constitutes public space, reflects some characteristics of personally responsible citizenship.

This new vision of democratic citizenship reflects a new paradigm where *writer*’s potential as change agents offers society alternate routes for civic engagement. By envisioning increasingly diverse conceptions of what constitutes community for youth in alternate circumstances, municipalities, schools and youth can participate in a new civic discourse. These new conceptions of community and alternate conceptions of civic identity can help us define, invite and engage a wider range of individuals to expand our narrow conception of the “good” citizen so that our democracy truly reflects the voices and the beliefs of all, rather than only those who are part of the dominant culture. In conclusion, Sebastian’s words say it best,

“In all parts of the world there are people who break the rules, I’m not one to say what’s right or wrong... it just comes down to that the majority has their say but there’s always an underground theme that comes up as a defining theme, a resistance against the mainstream which has added up to the way of the world.”

Footnotes

¹See glossary page 131

² Ottawa has four school boards, French Catholic (CECLFCE), English Catholic (OCSB), French Public (CEPEO) and English Public (OCDSB).

³Crushing it- graffiti terminology to paint graffiti excessively or in a large format.

⁴ Dreadlocks- interlocked coils of hair, either braided or twisted together, sometimes fused together with black wax.

⁵Artguise – a local art gallery run by former graffiti artists which showcases emerging artists

⁶Agency- the capacity of an individual to make choices and decisions, to act (Bandura, 2001)

Glossary

B-Boying – break dancing

Blockbusters - Big, square letters, often tilted back and forth and in (usually) two colors.

Bombing- To paint many surfaces in an area

Buff- To remove painted graffiti with chemicals and other instruments, or to paint over it with a flat color

Crushing It- To paint graffiti excessively or in a large format.

D-Jing – Turntable music

Free Style- Rapid, free form graffiti painting

Getting Up- the term implies the process of tagging repeatedly to spread your name.

Hollows - also referred to as "outlines" and "shells," a piece of graffiti that contains no fill (i.e. the inside is not painted in).

M-Cing – rapping

Off-street- term used to describe painting done inside or on canvas

Piece- a large and labour-intensive graffiti painting.

Tag- short stylized signatures of a writer comprising letters and/or numbers normally done in one colour

Throw-Up- sits between a tag and a piece in terms of complexity and time investment. It generally consists of a one-color outline and one layer of fill-color. Easy-to-paint bubble shapes often form the letters. A throw-up is designed for quick execution, to avoid attracting attention to the writer. Throw-ups are often utilized by writers who wish to achieve a large number of tags while competing with rival artists.

Toy- Used as an adjective to describe poor work, or as a noun meaning an inexperienced or unskilled writer

Writers- common name used to refer to those who create graffiti by others in the graffiti community

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Appendix A: The Interview Process:



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Interviewers will:

- **Describe the research project to the participant.**
- **Describe the interview process to the participant.**
- **Provide project proposal and consent form for signature.**
- **Ensure data recorder is in place and functioning.**
- **Ensure interviewee has something to drink and is comfortable.**

Interview Questions

Tell me a little bit about yourself ?

Tell me when you first became aware of graffiti?

What do you think attracts people to graffiti?

Are there negative aspects to graffiti?

How important is creating graffiti to you?

Are you involved in other kinds of art, other media, other forms of communication?

In your opinion is there a difference between good graffiti, and mediocre or bad graffiti?

In your opinion does graffiti have an effect on a community?

Questions that were asked during the focus group sessions (In person and MSN):

- 1) **What do you believe is the purpose of "School(s)"? (i.e. what it was for you vs. what it should be).**
- 2) **When people talk about a democratic society they usually think of it containing standard Public Civic Institutions (Police, Social Services, Health Care and Schools): Do you think these institutions are important to maintain?**
- 3) **Would graffiti exist if it was legal?**

Appendix B: Consent Form



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Title of the research: **Writing on the Walls: Graffiti as civic participation.**

Thesis Advisor: Joel Westheimer, Ph.D., Faculty of Education
Lamoureux Hall, Room 486
145 Jean-Jacques Lussier, Ottawa ON K1N 6N5
(613) 562-5800 x4161; joelw@uottawa.ca

Graduate Researcher: Michelle Parks

Dear Participant,

You have been invited to participate in the research study entitled: *Writing On The Walls. Graffiti as civic participation* conducted by Michelle Parks who is a Graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa.

Why you are being asked to participate:

Your participation in this study will contribute to information on how graffiti *writers* see themselves as individuals within society, what role they see for themselves and whether graffiti *writers* believe that participating in forms of graffiti writing, have the potential to bring positive change to communities.

Your participation will consist of:

1) A twenty minute, face-to-face interview with a youth research assistant who is knowledgeable about graffiti, during which, you will be asked questions about your perceptions of urban graffiti, its relevance to you personally and to society and whether graffiti has relevance for youth in

today's society. The interviews will be scheduled at your convenience and will take place at a location agreed upon by you and the research assistant. So that the research assistant does not need to take written notes, the interviews will be recorded using a digital tape recorder.

2) You will be asked to fill out a general demographic survey (anonymous) at the time of the interview.

3) Several weeks after the initial interview, you will be invited by e-mail or phone call to participate in a one-hour focus group with several other graffiti *writers* to discuss some of the issues raised in the face-to-face interviews. This focus group will also be digitally recorded.

4) When that is completed you will be asked to fill out an evaluation of the process that you have taken part in.

Compensation: Pizza or Submarine sandwiches and soft drinks will be available for the participants at both the interview and at the focus group.

Confidentiality: The information that you share will remain strictly confidential. The data collected will be reviewed and analyzed for inclusion in the Masters thesis and could also form the focus for any papers based on thesis. Your confidentiality will be protected completely since we will not ask for your name on the evaluation, you will not be asked to identify yourself by name on the interviews and the researcher will give great attention to the confidential conservation and handling of the data that comes out of the interviews and focus group.

Anonymity: The only place your name will appear is on this consent form. Any dialogue from the interviews that is used for the thesis will contain pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

Conservation of data: The data collected through the survey, interview and focus group process, (both hard copy and electronic data, digital tape recordings of interviews, transcripts, on Compact Discs, demographic questionnaire, notes, etc.) will be kept in a secure manner in a locked file at the researcher's residence, so that only the researcher will have access to it, until the completion of the research. A copy of the thesis will be submitted to the Professor and the thesis committee and if accepted will eventually be available electronically in the university database of on-line dissertations. Once the thesis is completed the thesis advisor will keep all interview paperwork and other information collected, securely for at least 5 years.

Voluntary Participation: You are under no obligation to participate and if you choose to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences.

Acceptance:

I, _____ agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Michelle Parks with the Education Faculty, under the guidance of Thesis advisor, Dr. Joel Westheimer. I understand that by allowing me to participate I am in no way waiving my right to withdraw from the study.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the professor or the grad student at the numbers/email mentioned above.

If I have any ethical concerns regarding my participation in this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 159, (613) 562-5841 or ethics@uottawa.ca.

There are two copies of the consent form to sign. One copy of the signed consent form will be mine to keep.

Participant's signature:

Date:

Research assistant's signature

Date:

Researcher's signature:

Date:

Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire



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Please check all that apply:

I am:

- A student
- Working full time
- Not currently in paid employment
- Not attending school
- Working part-time

I have completed:

- Grade 8
- Some high school
- High School
- Some college
- College
- Some University
- undergraduate degree
- post-graduate degree

School(s) I attended was (were) :

- French Public
- French Catholic
- English Public
- English Catholic
- Private
- Home Schooled

I currently live:

- with family members
- with non-family members
- alone
- in an apartment
- in a house
- other (specify) _____

I speak

- English
- French
- Other (specify) _____

Appendix D: Participant Evaluation

PARTICIPANT EVALUATION					
Please indicate with a check mark ✓ your agreement or disagreement with the following statements:	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The research assistant clearly explained the consent form to me.					
The research assistant helped clarify any questions I had about the research process.					
Being interviewed by someone close in age to me allowed me to express myself comfortably.					
It was helpful to have a research assistant who knew something about graffiti conducting the interviews.					
I understood why the digital recorder was being used					
The interview location was private enough for me to answer questions comfortably.					
I participated in the focus group discussions.					
I participated in the MSN discussions.					
I felt my views and opinions were listened to during the interview process.					
I felt my views and opinions were listened to during the group discussions (Focus group/ or MSN).					
I feel confident that my responses will be kept confidential.					
I would participate in this form of research again.					
I would be interested in participating as a research assistant in other research on this topic.					
I would like to receive information about the research results.					

Appendix E: Facebook Recruitment Sample

I'd like to get your thoughts and opinions on graffiti 'pieces' for a Grad student research project with University of Ottawa. Complete confidentiality and anonymity. Free food involved! If you are a graffiti *writer*, between the age of 18-25, who participates in the production of 'pieces' and would like to give your point of view please text your non-identifying contact info to or e-mail to

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Appendix F: Mini Flyer Recruitment Handout



I'd like to get your thoughts and opinions on graffiti 'pieces' for a Grad student research project with University of Ottawa. Complete confidentiality and anonymity. Free food involved! If you are a graffiti *writer*, between the age of 18-25, who participates in the production of 'pieces' and would like to give your point of view please text your non-identifying contact info to e-mail to

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