Boys Doing Art: The Construction of Outlaw Masculinity in a Portland, Oregon, Graffiti Crew

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Abstract
Though academic discourse on graffiti often laments the fact that it is treated as a crime, such arguments neglect how the outlaw status of graffiti has been integrally related to its allure and how it is understood and experienced by “writers” (the preferred term of graffiti artists). Participant observation and formal and informal interviews of members of a midstatus Portland, Oregon graffiti crew reveal how graffiti reflects a particular version of masculinity and at the same time serves as a resource for constructing masculine identity and achieving status and respect among male peers. Partly because of its outlaw status, graffiti is a domain of visual art that reinforces, rather than undercuts, a version of masculinity that values daring, risk, rebelliousness, ingenuity, commitment, and sacrifice, as well as a flamboyant and edgy set of aesthetics.

Keywords
masculinity, graffiti, deviance, street art

Graffiti writers violate core American values by choosing to devote time and energy to an illegal activity that earns them no profit and general hostility

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from the public, whose property is scarred by their activity. They continue to write despite significant risks to themselves, both physical and legal. A growing body of studies has sought to understand the individuals behind illegal graffiti and why they do what they do (Austin 2001, 2010; Castleman 1982; Ferrell 1993; Miller 1996). The present study began with similar questions, focusing on how writers (the preferred term for graffiti artists among the Portland, Oregon crew we studied) became involved in graffiti, what they painted, and why. Although many interesting themes arose, masculinity, the illegal status of graffiti, and their interrelationship became increasingly salient during the course of our fieldwork and analysis. This study contributes to the study of both graffiti and masculinity by describing how graffiti serves as a resource for constructing a particular version of masculinity (Messer-schmidt 2005) that values daring, risk, rebelliousness, ingenuity, commitment, and sacrifice, while at the same time reflecting the particular aesthetics that have come to be appreciated among members of the graffiti subculture.

The term “graffiti” is used to describe a range of activities that include both the ubiquitous “tags” that are relatively simple and appear to be used to claim space (Docuyanan 2000; Miller 2002) and offend viewers, as well as the elaborate and artistically impressive “pieces” that have elicited greater sympathy from academics (Austin 2001, 2010; Halsey and Young 2006) and, sometimes, art critics and bystanders (Castleman 1982; Powers 1996). These pieces have been the focus of both academic and popular books (Kurlansky, Mailer, and Naar 1974; Miller 2002) as well as documentaries. They have made periodic forays into art galleries (Austin 2001; Lachmann 1988; Powers 1996) and are often used or mimicked in order to market products (a topic we will take up shortly). While it would be more enjoyable to direct our attention to the elaborate works of art represented by the pieces, it is important to recognize that graffiti crews often have some degree of affiliation with and sympathy for both kinds of graffiti. The origins of modern day graffiti include both pieces and tags, which are traced by scholars and graffiti writers to New York City in the 1970s (Castleman 1982; Ferrell 1993; Miller 2002).

Several studies describe the public response to graffiti during its development (Austin 2001; Dickinson 2008; Ferrell 1995). New York City spent many millions of dollars of public money, during a time of fiscal crisis, to combat subway graffiti, making rail yards less accessible, increasing surveillance, and quickly covering over subway graffiti. Dickinson (2008) argues that the public response reflected an effort to make New York City friendly to large corporations, making public spaces the domain of government authorities and corporations and cementing the neoliberal restructuring process that was taking place during the same period. Austin (2001) argues that the
authorities in New York City could have decided to accept the contributions of graffiti writers as part of urban culture, but instead chose to treat them as a threat to the social order and public safety. While those who lament the powerful and aggressive public response to graffiti (Austin 2010; Dickinson 2008) may be correct that there were other more desirable options for responding to graffiti, we argue that the outlaw status of graffiti had powerful consequences in shaping its development as a masculine-oriented art form, continues to add to its mystique, and has had lasting ramifications for the way that graffiti is done in the United States.

Most studies recognize that graffiti crews and individual practitioners are primarily boys and men (Austin 2001; Castleman 1982; Miller 2002), but few have focused on the gender dynamics associated with graffiti. Miller (2002) notes that in its early stages, the New York scene included a number of women, who managed to gain legitimacy. However, as the city increased its efforts to crack down on graffiti (Austin 2001; Dickinson 2008; Ferrell 1995), the scene became more male centered. Certainly, the individuals heralded as pioneers by both academics and graffiti writers are almost entirely men. Austin (2001) suggests that women left graffiti because of the risks posed by entering unsupervised areas in which other writers and thugs congregated. In any case, as graffiti developed, as it found its almost entirely male heroes, and as pioneers battled against the forces of social control, graffiti took on a masculine character that continues to include hints of violence, rebelliousness, and machismo. We argue that prior accounts, as well as the experiences of the graffiti crew we studied, show graffiti to be consistent with a particular version of masculinity. In addition, we argue that it is used as a resource for the construction of masculine identity among crew members.

Gender is both integral to larger structural patterns of inequality (Connell 1995) and an interactional achievement requiring ongoing maintenance and active construction by individuals (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Lorber 1994). In other words, individuals must “do” (Garfinkel 1967; West and Zimmerman 1987) or accomplish gender. Gender is not static, and can be employed differently in different situations to achieve particular ends (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Though often treated as a social control mechanism, gender can also be manipulated as a resource for resisting the dehumanizing aspects of service sector employment (Bourgois 2003; Contreras 2009; Tibbals 2007), and gender can be accomplished in ways that either reinforce or contradict existing patterns and structures (Messerschmidt 2005; Monto 1997). Like gender more generally, the accomplishment of masculinity takes place in institutional and situational contexts that shape how it is done and provide particular resources for constructing masculine
identities. For example, the public education system is shaped by the social agendas of groups promoting particular versions of masculinity (Connell 2008; Jordan and Cowan 1995), and in turn, it provides resources for boys to use as they construct their individual masculine identities (Jordan and Cowan 1995; Pascoe 2005). Sports do so as well (Connell 2008; Kreager 2007; Lance 2005). More germane to graffiti, crime also serves as a resource for constructing gender.

Messerschmidt (2005) argues that both masculinity and crime are structured action, activities situated in specific settings and recurring practices (Giddens 1989), and that crime provides resources for constructing masculinity (Messerschmidt 2005). Copes and Hochstetler (2003) describe how masculinity is an essential aspect of the decision-making process associated with criminal behavior among street thieves. They argue that these men are “expected to enjoy or at least not shirk, adventures ranging from street fights, to heavy drug use binges, to commission of acquisitive felonies” (Copes and Hochstetler 2003, 279). Further, participation in crime is essential in order for them to derive the benefits of friendship, belonging, and respect from their peers. Conversely, in some instances, masculinity provides resources for more effectively committing crimes, as Contreras (2009) demonstrates in his study of how drug robbers use the masculinity of drug dealers in order to victimize them.

Katz (1988, 9) suggests that crimes can be categorized according to the distinctive “criminal projects” that they accomplish, and argues that each criminal project incorporates a “path of action,” “line of interpretation,” and “emotional process.” Katz (1988) devotes a chapter of his monograph, Seductions of Crime, to the process through which particular men, over time, accomplish the identity of a “badass,” an outlaw masculinity characterized by being tough (unaffected by fear, kindness, or other weak emotions), alien (not of your world), and mean (unpredictable and willing to harm others for no reason). We aim to provide insight into the accomplishment of a different but related version of masculinity and the ways that graffiti both reflects and serves as a resource for its accomplishment.

A number of articles argue that the roots of graffiti are in the experience of poverty and minority status (Ferrell 1993, 1995; Miller 1996, 2002), and indeed, these associations are at the heart of its street credibility. However, other articles point out that white and middle-class individuals participated in graffiti from its inception (Castleman 1982; Lasley 1995). The crew we studied is mostly white, though several members have Latino or Native American ancestors. Some are from established middle-class families, but all are living separately from their parents and getting by on part-time or service sector jobs.
This research can add to our understanding of the ways young white men negotiate gender and masculinity amid a deviant subculture that values street credibility, an area of study that is sometimes taken for granted (Farough 2006).

**Method**

This article focuses on observations and interviews gathered by the second author during a concentrated and deliberate year-long (2008–2009) participant observation study of a Portland, Oregon based graffiti crew. In addition, we interviewed local officials and gathered secondary data from local newspapers, the internet, and the city’s Graffiti Abatement Program. The first author has long been curious about graffiti, and has had contact with local graffiti artists as well, though in a less concentrated and deliberate way. His responsibilities included reviewing interview transcripts and field notes as they were gathered in order to improve their quality, qualitative coding, and drafting the manuscript. The third author, a specialist in art communities, was invited to independently code the entire body of transcripts and field notes to provide a second lens for interpreting the data and ensure consistency in our interpretations. To be clear, the second author gathered all of the field notes and interview excerpts reported here. However, to avoid awkward and redundant sentence structure, we use “we” to describe our observations during much of this manuscript.

Because the majority of graffiti writers are loath to discuss their activities with anyone who might pose potential legal risk, it was necessary for the second author to begin research by aligning herself with a crew of writers known through preexisting social connections. This particular crew, known as TSA (meaning “This Shit’s Awesome,” or “Tomb Stone Alkies”), consisted of five members: OMEN, 2MUCH, ANGST, KAGE, and DEKOY. Over a period of weeks, she gradually established rapport with the writers, gaining their trust. Each informant was given a letter describing the study and informing him of his rights as a research participant. Informants were guaranteed confidentiality, and no information that could be used to identify them was collected. Participants verbally confirmed their understanding of these issues, as well as their awareness of our plans to publish the study with the use of their actual graffiti monikers, a process approved by a full review of the host institution’s Internal Review Board. To further protect the informants and the second author from potential legal risks, we waited two full years before submitting the study for publication.

Because the second author knew some members of the crew socially before she learned of their involvement with graffiti, the transition to
participant observer was relatively comfortable. Crew members talked openly with one another about graffiti while she was present and participated in formal recorded interviews with enthusiasm, though with varying levels of candor and depth. Rather than using a concrete set of questions, interviews were framed as conversations with “insiders” familiar with the subculture (Spradley 1979), in which some key areas of interest were explored, including how they became involved, what they painted, why they painted, what and whom they respected, how they interacted with other crews and writers, informal rules associated with graffiti, and their experiences with police and other forces of social control. The second author was “on call” day and night for gatherings, parties, or periods of hanging out, and accompanied the crew on “runs” to the store for beer and cigarettes, caps (spray paint nozzles), and paint. She often returned to photograph completed pieces and tags, and in doing so, met other writers outside the crew, most of whom declined to be included in the study.

We relied on members of TSA to direct us to other graffiti writers who might be willing to participate in interviews. The second author interviewed three writers who were not part of this particular crew. ICER, writing for KTC, was a good friend of TSA and often frequented their gatherings. SHARE, who served as a mentor for one of the members of TSA and was seen as an important figure in local graffiti, was interviewed by phone, as he had moved to Chicago. The second author encountered WAVE, a local woman writer, while photographing graffiti. Numerous attempts were made to contact other known writers by phone and email without success. This illustrates the intrinsic difficulties of studying a subculture based around an illegal activity, in which secrecy and anonymity are highly valued (Weibel 1990).

Since we focus on the relationship between masculinity and graffiti, it bears consideration that a woman gathered the interviews and observations that serve as the foundation for this manuscript. We recognize that gender shapes social interaction, but it does not determine the course of social interaction. A researcher of any gender is an active participant in negotiating gender within the research relationship (Mazzie and O’Brien 2009). The second author’s status as a gender outsider may have made the crew members more likely to explain their views to her and less likely to assume that she already understood. As the excerpts that follow demonstrate, she was highly successful in getting crew members to expressively describe their experiences and motivations. Another challenge in negotiating roles is that members of stigmatized groups often wonder whether researchers are “on their side” (Crowley 2007). While clearly curious and interested in their activities, our only assurance to crew members was that we did not have a graffiti abatement agenda. We made no guarantees that we would depict the crew in
positive ways. The second author’s clear interest in understanding the crew served as motivation enough for crew members to be candid, even enthusiastic informants in the project. We did notice that when the recorder was turned on, members were more self-conscious and sometimes less comfortable and open. Many researchers studying graffiti seem to be unapologetic advocates and sometimes even champions of the artists they study (Ferrell 1993; Miller 2002), such as Austin (2010), who sees graffiti as an historically significant art movement. While that research has yielded very important insights into graffiti, informants inevitably have their own goals and agenda. Jimerson and Oware (2006) argue that ethnographers, partly out of respect for their informants, often treat accounts as valid reflections of how things are. They argue for the inclusion of an ethnomethodological sensitivity to the ways in which accounts can serve to explain and justify behavior, and in doing so serve the interests of the informants. In analyzing the ethnographic record, we treated accounts with a degree of skepticism (Jimerson and Oware 2006), recognizing that the accounts, explanations, and stories we gathered are not only legitimate insights into this particular subculture but also serve to make sense of the experiences of the informants and accomplish particular ends. We recognize that our honest description of this particular crew may support some aspects of the crew’s agenda (Crowley 2007). However, we allowed ourselves to observe and report the less impressive, less consistent, and sometimes even embarrassing realities of the subculture and the crew.

The first and third authors coded the ethnographic record independently using a process described by Schatzman and Strauss (1973) in which the researcher identifies significant “classes” of things, recurrent events, themes, or topics, and then identifies the “properties” of those things. Examples of some of the classes we identified include conversations about graffiti names, their meanings, and the processes through which they were acquired, and statements about the commercialization of graffiti and doing graffiti for profit. Both coders allowed classes to emerge from the data through a process of “analytic description,” a strategy that promotes the emergence of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1999). From this foundation, we used scholarship on masculinities to frame our interpretations and connect our findings to larger sociological issues.

The TSA crew members do not consider themselves high status members of the city’s graffiti scene, and they defer to other locally respected writers. However, they do command a degree of respect in the area. ANGST is a talented artist, and OMEN, though a tagger and exceedingly modest about his abilities, has received a great deal of attention for his prolific and confusing “Paulrus is Dead” tag, the object of extensive speculation on the internet. In
addition, the members of the crew are connected to higher-status local writers, indicating that they are not seen as low-status “toys.”

To Rebel and Offend: Masculinity and the Outlaw Status of Graffiti

There have been a number of efforts to legitimize graffiti writing as art, some dating back to the 1970s, when City University of New York sociology major Hugo Martinez organized graffiti writers into something of a cooperative called United Graffiti Artists (Ferrell 1993) and managed to get subway artists into New York art galleries. Such efforts persist today, such as the first author’s participation in a project that brought the art of local graffiti writers into a local gallery. Both Ferrell (1993) and Austin (2001), when writing about the battles between NYC authorities and graffiti crews, argue that local authorities could have acknowledged the talent of early artists and accepted their contributions to urban culture instead of criminalizing them. Though there would likely have been better ways of responding to subway graffiti than expending effort on criminalizing it, preventing it, and removing it, we argue that elements of the appeal of graffiti, such as its authenticity and street credibility, are enhanced by its illegal nature. In addition, the outlaw nature of graffiti also contributes to its appeal as an expression of rebellious masculinity.

Masculinity, Graffiti Names, and Graffiti Lingo

The names graffiti writers choose for themselves often have mysterious or menacing qualities. Local artists in Portland, Oregon, the city that was the backdrop for our study, included OMEN, ANGST, ICER, BORE, EVAK, and PAULRUS IS DEAD, among others. Crew names are often downright alarming, with names such as GPK—“Garbage Pail Kids,” ADK—“All Day Killers,” WDK—“Wasteland Dreams Krew,” AIDS—“Art Is Dying Slowly,” BFC—“Battle Field Clique,” D2K—“Down to Kill/Krush,” PBSK—“Pacific Bombing Squad Krew,” KTG—“Keep them Guessing,” KTC—“Kut Throat Committee,” “Kut the Check,” or “Kolor the City,” NQD—“Not Quite Dead,” HODK—“Hand of Doom Krew,” TMR—“Tokin’ Marijuana Religiously,” TMR—“Toys Makin’ Ruckus,” and the infamous OUTLAWS. While these titles imply death, violence, destruction, and drugs, a closer investigation reveals that the only things in danger of being “krushed” and “killed” by most of these crews are city walls and the occasional fence. The extremely violent nature of this language is almost laughable, considering that the graf-
fiti world is far from a “wasteland” in which throats are cut and cops are murdered. Rather, these names appear to be invoked in something of a playful and figurative sense. The killer here is a can of spray-paint; the victim, urban space. Here DEKOY, a rather bashful, self-titled “naturalist,” demonstrates this metaphorical language in his explanation of the name of his former crew, D2K:

Originally it meant, Down to Kill, Down to Krush, Death to Kops. Down to Kill was the original meaning for it, which means down to kill the city. Down to kill, you know, I don’t want to take it literal because I’m not really a killer myself [laughs]. But I like to think of it as, Down to Krush the city. (DEKOY)

Dekoy’s discussion of this issue with the interviewer brings him face to face with the absurdity of the dangerous imagery of this name, from which he deliberately distances himself, and also demonstrates the malleability of these names and the negotiation involved in arriving at them. His transition from “Down to Kill” to the more vague “Down to Krush” distances him from the direct violence of the word “Kill,” but “krushing” a city certainly sounds violent as well.

A casual discussion between OMEN and DEKOY about the name of a different local crew provides another example of how crew names are often dangerous to the point of absurdity, and also reinforces the negotiation and play surrounding these names.

OMEN: Hand of Doom is probably the only thing I can think of that comes to mind that was one of their names. I think another one is Heroin or Death. [Laughing all around] No! I’m just talking about what HOD means. Things that I’ve heard that it means from people in HOD.

DEKOY: Oh, yeah. Heroin Overdose.

OMEN: Hands On Deck. As in, “All hands on deck.”

Although their familiarity with HOD marks both writers as insiders in the graffiti subculture, it is unclear from the excerpt whether either writer has actual connections with HOD, a respected local crew.

The language of graffiti provides a good introduction to how masculinity is associated with the scene. This point is reinforced in the excerpts reported in other sections of this article. Graffiti writers do not “spray paint” or “create art,” they “fuck shit up,” “bomb,” “burn,” “hit,” “kill,” “crush,” “tag,” with
“throwies,” “pieces,” and “mops.” Where the art world might speak of chiaroscuro, tone, or color value, writers discuss “fades,” “flares,” and “flow.” To be well known is to be “Up,” “Kings,” or “running sKit.” They don’t “doodle,” they have “black books,” sketchbooks that sometimes serve as blueprints for their larger public pieces. A group of graffiti writers is a “crew.” While we want to avoid implying any precision in our interpretation of these names, we argue that the machismo and vague references to violence in these names are employed to connect writers to a version of rebel or outlaw masculinity that is associated with nonconformity and violence.

**Commercialization and Co-optation: Challenges to Authenticity**

Predictably, commercial interests have taken advantage of the street credibility and authenticity of graffiti to market products. Other accounts (Austin 2010; Ferrell 1995; Halsey and Pederick 2010) suggest that many graffiti writers seem to enjoy the respect that has been given to their work among those who write about it or are interested in using it for profit. Though graffiti writers put great effort into illegal activities that make them no money, they are not, as a rule, antimonialistic. They like and need money, and many have been willing to put their talents to work in exchange for money. Still, that is clearly not the path to respect in the graffiti community, and Ferrell’s (1993) work indicates the ambiguity some graffiti writers feel about working for profit. Orend and Gagne (2009) find a similar dynamic in their study of tattooed individuals, finding that most are frustrated with the co-optation and popularization of tattoos, and convinced of the lack of authenticity of individuals who choose to decorate their bodies with the logos of favorite corporations.

After describing his distaste with how hip-hop artists are being co-opted and buying their way out of hip-hop culture, KAGE comments on community efforts to create hip-hop friendly spaces, including spaces for legal graffiti.

KAGE: They tried to get into it and it made it kind of stupid. Like they opened this little hip-hop cafe on Interstate, and there was break dancing, beat boxing, DJing and MCing. Legal graffiti. Half of these people didn’t even write on the streets. Some people did. But no graff writer that I respected or that was respected on the streets came in there and wrote. For the fucking sheer fact that it was a waste of fucking time.

Janna: So they were just trying to get them to decorate their place or what?
KAGE: Just for the sheer fact that it’s hip hop. It’s the new fucking thing, it’s graffiti, everybody should do it. It’s this new clean-cut, fuckinwrite on a fuckincard and send it to an internet site. It should never be on the internet. I think if it was on the internet it should be hard to fuckinfind. It used to be hard to fucking find.

KAGE clearly does not respect graffiti writers who don’t work on the streets, and his use of the term “clean-cut” as a criticism of legal graffiti emphasizes the way that respect in graffiti is tied to rebellion or nonconformity. KAGE’s antipathy toward the legitimization of graffiti is echoed by WAVE, the only female graffiti artist we interviewed, and one who recognizes her low status in the graffiti scene.

Janna: What do you think about attempts to put graffiti in galleries?
   And to have legal walls, stuff like that.
WAVE: Oh. That’s not real graffiti.
Female friend of WAVE: I don’t think its graffiti. It’s art.
WAVE: It has to be illegal.

Later, KAGE described his disdain for a local writer who had gone commercial, arguing that he made graffiti “look stupid” and claiming that his house had been “burned” (hit with graffiti, not lit on fire) by other writers many times. Some of the crew members were more sympathetic toward the efforts of other artists to profit from their graffiti. Even these members agree that commercial and/or legal graffiti lacks the integrity of outlaw graffiti, in which writers take significant risks and receive no compensation. The most highly esteemed writers give a great deal for their art. ANGST reinforces this point, while providing a more balanced perspective.

Janna: What do you think about efforts to mainstream graffiti?
ANGST: Oh yeah, I don’t like it. It’s not just the adrenaline, writing on walls, I’m consciously aware of the possible repercussions.
Janna: Would you ever put what you write on a shirt and sell it?
ANGST: Yeah totally, totally.

Interestingly, following the time since this data was collected, OMEN’s *Paulrus Is Dead* tag has been taken as the name of a local band and is being featured on a T-shirt line in the United States and the United Kingdom. A simple internet search of the phrase reveals much speculation about its origins. Stories and rumors abound, including one tying it to the Beatles, one
tying it to a local schizophrenic who does it for therapy, one tied to a bullied, acne-covered teen, and one suggesting it is a crass effort to market the band, none of which are true. To our knowledge, OMEN receives no compensation for the use of his moniker on T-shirts or by the band and has no relationship with either commercial interest. On the one hand, this means that others have taken advantage of the street credibility earned by OMEN through many hours of risk and effort. On the other hand, it means that OMEN has accomplished, not due to great artistry but due to incredible persistence and a little ingenuity, what graffiti writers claim to seek: “getting up,” known, and recognized (Brewer and Miller 1990; Castleman 1982; Powers 1996). TSA crew members are in on this inside joke, and it enhances their credibility as well. Even we, the authors, take guilty pleasure in our connection to the mysterious tag and our knowledge of its origins, which give us a slight feeling for the intoxicating joy of this illegal activity. That joy would be diminished if the tag was merely an effort by corporate interests to market a product.

Claiming Spaces: The Epic Battle over Urban Areas

Though members of TSA were not motivated by a clear mission or an articulated political agenda, it is evident that their participation in graffiti is partly a response to the mundane nature of living in a constrained and commercialized culture in which one is provided a limited array of opportunities for enacting an authentic or inspiring masculinity. Foucault (1975) argues that modern society mirrors Bentham’s (1785, 1995) “panopticon” model of prisons, in which human life is controlled through systems of power and knowledge, and increased visibility allows nearly constant surveillance. Graffiti’s outlaw status and the crew members’ lack of respect for commercialization reflect resistance to this type of constraint and control (Ferrell 1995; Orend and Gagne 2009). Because masculinity is often seen as a position of power, it may seem strange to conceive of any expression of masculinity as resistance, yet gender, whether masculinity or femininity can be selectively employed by individuals and groups as a form of resistance to social constraints that are experienced as oppressive (Tibbals 2007). Seen in this context, other authors imply that graffiti is part of an epic struggle to resist the rights of corporations and government to control and monitor urban spaces (Austin 2010; Dickinson 2008; Halsey and Pederick 2010; Halsey and Young 2006).

Our data do not allow us to go quite so far. Members of the TSA do not clearly articulate an awareness of these macro-social issues; however, their accounts often reveal their joy in circumventing surveillance and
successfully making their own little mark on the urban landscape. When we asked OMEN how he felt when he saw graffiti, he emphasized the curiosity he experienced personally, and which he also liked to inspire among others who claim particular urban spaces:

Janna: What do you feel when you’re out there painting?
OMEN: Exhilaration.
Janna: How so?
OMEN: The adrenaline rush. Constantly looking over your shoulder, afraid you’re gonna get caught. Then knowing that the next day, or how many days until it gets the buff, that people are going to be passing by it, and they’re going to look at that and they’re going to think, “Oh, I wonder what that means?” Or, “I wonder how long that’s been there?” Or, “I wonder what type of person would walk around in the middle of the street in the middle of the night with a can of paint and write that on a wall?” I like to get people thinking.

The battle to make a mark on public space is not merely an individual one. Though they also compete with one another, graffiti writers share membership in a deviant subculture that engages in a collective effort to alter public space. Here DEKOY describes his respect for SNORE, a less than talented artist who has had significant success in making his mark on the urban landscape.

DEKOY: Yeah, yeah! I mean, there’s cats that have gotten up by putting up thousands and thousands of stickers. There’s cats that have put up thousands of tags. You look at that cat SNORE? That fool, I mean I’ve probably seen a few throw-ups, a few pieces—but there’s a tag by SNORE everywhere. Literally, everywhere. And, the fact that he doesn’t like, piece, or put throw-ups that much doesn’t really mean shit for the fact that I have major respect for that cat because he’s put in major work with tags and shit. I love it when people have all aspects, but—if you really kill shit with one certain degree of things then that’s you doing your thing. I mean, it all comes down to personal expression and artistic expression, so whatever you want to do that’s part of the beauty of it.

Probably very few citizens notice the repetition of the SNORE moniker, but DEKOY notices it and certainly SNORE knows it. That ability to make a
mark on the controlled, owned, and monitored urban landscape means operating as an outlaw and playing a small part in resisting the larger forces controlling urban spaces. Below, 2MUCH is explicit in describing the joy he feels when people he knows have an impact on local public spaces:

Janna: You mention public space. What about it?
2MUCH: Umm . . . just interested. I don’t know. I don’t know. I look at letters. I look at everything. That’s kind of a hard question. . . . Depending on who it is and what it is, there’s some shit that I look at it and I’m like, “That’s fucking wack.” There’s some shit that I look at it and I’m like, “Oh that’s my homie that did it.” And then I’ll get excited and be like, “Oh shit! KAGE is up,” or whatever. And then I mean you know it just depends on what it is you know.

The ability of graffiti writers to mark and color particular areas implies that not every inch of the urban landscape is under the control of corporate or civil authorities. This message may be one reason that graffiti inspires fear and/or frustration among the general public. The idea that there are places inhabited by rebellious and unpredictable young men willing to break laws may also feel threatening to women, and may explain why few women participate. At the same time, graffiti provides a degree of comfort to young men frustrated by the constraints of mainstream society and wanting to make their mark on the physical world.

**Graffiti and the Rebel Identity**

The crew members with whom we spoke depict graffiti as an aspect of a rebel lifestyle; the masculinity it reflects is in-your-face and unapologetic. As the excerpts above indicate, they are happy to have people offended by their activities. This is interesting, because for some members of this particular crew, everyday life involves a much higher degree of conformity with mainstream cultural expectations. Several of the members come from middle-class backgrounds and hold regular jobs. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to review the many commentaries on the alienation, anomie, estrangement, or angst present on modern social life, some see our present milieu as superficial, constraining, or inauthentic. We did not ask our informants a great deal about their lives outside of graffiti, partly to avoid having identifying information become part of the record, but our informants clearly found graffiti to be a compelling contrast to other
aspects of their lives. To put it bluntly, our informants often explicitly described graffiti as the space that allowed them to be the assholes they wanted to be.

Janna: I was going to try and ask one more thing, because I know you keep mentioning it, but I can never get it on tape. You keep talking about how most graffiti writers are assholes.

OMEN: Yeah. It’s a dick-measuring contest. If you think about it, it all about who can go out and paint their name on walls all over town, enough so that people are like “I wonder who this guy is who is writing his name all over town.” And the graffiti community is just who can go out and write their name on everything. [Sounding Macho:] “Yeah! I got my name up. It looks goooood.” You ever notice, almost all graffiti writers are men. And I hate to stereotype like that, but most of them are.

Later on, Angst unapologetically makes a similar statement:

ANGST: You’re kickin’ it with some kids, you have a common interest, you get along . . . a lot of graffiti writers are assholes. I’m an asshole. My friends are assholes. So if you can find assholes you can hang out with, break the law with, and feel comfortable doing that . . . you’re all right, you know what I mean?

While the writers often discuss the aesthetic aspects of their work, and while some graffiti undeniably has artistic merit, the art is embedded in a masculine culture that values willingness to offend, rebelliousness, and risk-taking. Assholes are not nice people; they are not interested in following polite conventions; and they do not care what other people think. According to 2MUCH, “graff writers are a bunch of crazy motherfuckers. The whole ego-time involved in it. That’s definitely a big part of it for a lot of people.” When gathered together or when writing individually, these writers are able to live out aspects of their identities that aren’t acceptable in conventional circles. They are given a safe peer group in which they can flex their egos without sanction. Their accounts indicate a degree of joy and release, suggesting that this quality of being is part of a particular version of masculinity they can draw upon to construct their identities.
Risks and Thrills: The Seduction of Graffiti

Though there are different versions of masculinity, many involve a willingness to take risks, be brave, or test oneself in some way (Barrett 1996; Connell 1995). Criminal masculinities may be particularly likely to include the expectation that real men are expected to enjoy or at least go along with risky and illegal adventures (Copes and Hochstetler 2003; Katz 1988). People describe many motives for writing graffiti—some artistic, some political, some therapeutic—which accounts for writers who describe the thrill and excitement of successfully carrying out illegal capers (i.e., Castleman 1982; Halsey and Young 2006), sometimes describing the experience as a rush, a thrill, or a high.

Not surprisingly, accounts provided by TSA indicate that the rush or thrill of getting away with something that is risky and illegal is part of the appeal of graffiti. Our respondents reported consistently that they were drawn to graffiti because it was fun and exciting; that it gave them an “adrenaline rush,” or was like a “drug.” According to 2MUCH, “You know, you go out and you’re like, ‘Yeah! You’re a bomber. Fuckin’ getting up. And you got the adrenaline rush going. And you’re just like, ‘yes!’” The adrenaline rush is clearly tied to masculine identity as well, as 2MUCH’s “you’re a bomber” indicates, tying him to the vague but menacing concept of the bomber. We should note, however, that the “bombing” language, though found in other graffiti accounts, has become somewhat widespread in the metro area we studied, with local groups taking on the term to describe other unconventional activities, including “zoobombing” (riding children’s bicycles down the hill from the zoo at breakneck speed), “yarnbombing” (marking the world with public works of knitting—an unconventional but definitely not masculine or illegal activity). The adrenaline rush, as well as its link to a masculine identity is clearly incorporated into ANGST’s description below as well.

ANGST: I do it for me. I do it for other people. I do it for fuckin’ self-indulgence, for my ego, to feel cool, to just get it out of me, you know . . . adrenaline, you know what I mean? I do it ’cause I love it. I do it ’cause I can’t stop. I do it ’cause I throw up that capital A: ANGST!

The “adrenaline rush” is described by ICER, even days after the initial project.

ICER: It’s like a drug! I’m tellin’ you! It’s such a fucking rush! Like, there’s nothing like . . . I might be piss drunk the night before and
just write on a wall and just do a huge top to bottom tag, like 6 feet, just like a flare tag, just like a nasty-ass straight letter. But two weeks later I might be riding by there and I don’t remember doing it, and I see it and I’ll be like “Oh shit!” and I get this adrenaline rush and I’m like, “Yeah I was there, I did that shit! That shit’s fresh!”

The adrenaline rush described by these accounts and echoed in many others (i.e., Halsey and Pederick 2010) helps to explain the “magic of motivation” surrounding graffiti and other crime (Katz 1988.) On the one hand, the writer actively participates in the creation of the risky situation, and on the other hand, once created, the situation takes on a momentum all its own. VAC describes graffiti as having a “natural allure,” and continues by arguing that “it’s very seductive” and even “addictive.” KAGE ties in fear, arguing that sometimes “scared . . . is the only feeling you have” but still feels drawn to graffiti, describing it as “fucking sick,” “one of the best feelings that you can have,” and even “bliss.” The risky thrill of graffiti is clearly tied to the identities of the writers we interviewed and, we would argue, is one of the appeals of this particular version of outlaw masculinity.

**Boys Doing Art: Masculine Socialization and Identity**

Our observations of TSA indicate that the introduction to graffiti is part of a socialization process in which younger boys are introduced to the scene by older, respected boys. Lasley (1995) and Lachman (1988) describe a systematic process through which younger boys are actively recruited and groomed by more experienced artists who take them through something of an apprenticeship process before they are allowed to bomb. The accounts of TSA crew members and other ethnographic accounts (Castleman 1982; Ferrell 1993; Miller 2002) support the idea of socialization by older boys, but the process is organic and variable. We argue that this process not only socializes younger boys into the graffiti scene but also into the particular version of masculinity that goes along with it. The TSA members each told stories of their initiation into graffiti, often based on networks they had established through minor forms of deviant behavior.

Janna: And you were already pretty artistic?
ANGST: I was kinda—I mean, I wasn’t really. As a kid I wasn’t really very good at anything. But it sort of clicked in my mind, what my friend was doing and I thought was cool, what these guys were doing that were older than me, and I saw all around. I would see it
around town and it kind of clicked, “Ohh, right.” Like, that’s what
these cats are doing. That’s what tagging is, that’s what bombing is.
That’s what it means. So I don’t know, I started getting into it.
Janna: So, what was the first time you went out and did your first really
big piece?
ANGST: I remember the first time I went out. I didn’t know what
bombing was. I didn’t know—I just like to write on shit. I liked to
fuck shit up. Me and a couple of my friends ran shit. But this girl I
knew at the time, Emily, was datin’ this other kid—not gonna say
his name—him and his boys were in a crew that was around town,
MSY. Or whatever. It was CLUMSY. CLUMSY was the kid—he
writes something else now. It was him and BOZO and they were
like, “Hey! You know, you’re like a young kid, but we can show you
some tags and all this if you want to come out bombing with us! You
seem like maybe you have some promise.”

As ANGST’s account demonstrates, for the younger boy, graffiti provides
resources for establishing a masculine identity that may not be available in
conventional school activities. Imms (2003) argues that school art programs
have traditionally failed to provide a safe forum for exploring masculinity. In
contrast with other domains of the visual arts, which are often seen as the
domain of women and girls (Savoie 2009; Whitehead 1996), graffiti is a
domain in which boys can explore art in the context of a potent rebel mascu-
linity. Once involved in graffiti, crews can become comfortable points of
connection and community. Members share the bonds of having common
aesthetic tastes and common experiences with a set of risks and thrills. In
addition, they respect one another, learn from one another, and party with one
another, reinforcing a particular version of outlaw masculinity that is not well
understood by nonmembers.

The acquisition of a graffiti name is also negotiated through interaction
with other men. Miller (1996) argues that naming practices in graffiti reflect
the African and Caribbean cultural roots of the pioneers of the New York
graffiti scene. Whether or not this is true, the accounts of the TSA crew sup-
port Miller’s (1996) contention that graffiti writers sometimes have multiple
names, that names often have important descriptive connotations to the writ-
ers, and that the names can be changed. Graffiti names are rarely chosen
without careful deliberation, research, and a generous amount of experimen-
tation. The name or names chosen embody how the graffiti writer would like
to be seen by the rest of the world.
Often this experimentation with different identities means that a writer will have more than one name. Names may be tried and discarded if they “aren’t feeling it,” that is, if they do not feel the name accurately captures their personality. While the name must represent the artist in some way, name choice is subject to some other constraints, such as peer feedback and the ease with which the word can be written. OMEN writes his name as a member of TSA, but he and a friend outside of the crew comprise the “two man operation” responsible for PAULRUS IS DEAD. DEKOY began by writing NERB, then BALUE. ANGST will occasionally write an AMORE or LIAM piece. VAC experimented with SPOT, CRAZE and MENACE before stopping after his arrest for graffiti vandalism. Feedback from fellow writers plays a large role in this selection process. 2MUCH only recently picked his moniker, since the other members of TSA did not seem to approve of the first one, EEYORE. SHARE was asked to change his name from BOZO to SHARE at the request of his new crew. Ferrell (1993, 59) noted that graffiti writers in Denver, Colorado, typically developed their tags as “stylized references to their personal history and extra-subcultural identity.” Similarly, writers tended to choose names or particular messages with an idiosyncratic meaning. Often, these aliases related to their own insights from graffiti subculture, society, or an inside joke belonging to the friends or the writer. DEKOY’s experience of choosing a name reflected a process of careful deliberation and consultation with his cousin, a famous graffiti writer from San Francisco.

DEKOY: I started writing JOKE, and then I started writing KERS. Oh, and then I started writing BALUE. Cause my mom always called me Blue. B-A-L-U-E. So that’s how I got that name. My cousin ANGER was—well, I was talking to him and he was saying, “You know, I don’t really like BALUE.” And I was like, “Yeah,” I’m not really feelin’ it at the time either . . . at the time he was visiting us and we all went to this bar called the “Decoy.” That triggered something that he was thinking of and he was telling me the next time I talked to him, “You should start writing DEKOY, I’ve always thought that was a sick-ass name. And the fact that my dad always goes there, to the bar, you know—is something that I thought about.” So I started writing DEKOY, just like the letter schemes, and looked [decoy] up in the dictionary just to get a feel for the word. And it said that it’s something that gains attention, like a decoy, you know? So I thought that was pretty cool, that it could gain attention to the viewer’s eyes.
SHARE also revealed a very personal story behind his first moniker, BOZO.

SHARE: My first graffiti name was BOZO. BOZO . . . [I] was just into the silliness of it and, my uncle would always used to say “Bozo” all the time. So it was kind of like the original. He always called people “Bozos.” So I picked it up. . . . My Uncle had died a year or two before and I just never really dealt with it . . . he was kind of like, my biggest influence. Aside from my—because my dad wasn’t really like, you know, going out to play some catch with me, you know what I mean. He was a good dad, but it was a different type of relationship and my Uncle gave me like, more of that. So, he died and I never really dealt with it. I was really depressed and started painting graffiti.

The socialization process involved in entering graffiti, the testing processes involved in using graffiti names, and the social interaction with other boys and men that shape both the name and the act of writing, clearly situate graffiti as a domain through which these men develop and accomplish their masculine identities. It is a resource that provides them with access to versions of masculinity that may not be available in conventional institutional settings or other social contexts.

Honor among Thieves: Rules, Respect, and Status among Graffiti Writers

Although graffiti writers offend the public because of their lack of respect for property, the graffiti scene is full of “respect.” With the exception of “toys” who do not know any better, graffiti writers generally have respect for their art, the pioneers that helped shape contemporary graffiti, and higher-status members of their local scene. When asked, many of the TSA crew members described an informal set of rules as to when one can go over another person’s work. To go over anyone’s work without doing a better piece is a sign of disrespect, though such actions are relatively commonplace, and most of the TSA crew had been victims of such disrespect.

One of the things we found most striking about the accounts of the writers we interviewed were the stories of heroism and sacrifice they told, recounting their own experiences and the stories of the mythical heroes of the graffiti community. These stories tell of heroism and sacrifice, the willingness to pay a high price for their art. DEKOY described a number of famous writers who died in the act of doing graffiti, including BORE, and TIE, a San Francisco writer who “did major work, killed, absolutely crushed San Francisco.”
KAGE, a member of TSA with an unfortunate history with the police, describes one of his many adventures below. We pick up the action mid-story.

KAGE: . . . But yeah, a cop pulled up behind me and I was like, “Oh shit, I have to go. So I dipped out. Ran to the back of this gas station. Hopped a fence. Just started throwing my stickers and a cop came up on me. Fuckin’ pulled his gun out. Was like, “Stop! Freeze!” So I was like, “Whoa, whoa, all right.” Got on the ground. So, like 5 cops came up, beat the fucking shit outta me. Whole face was all fucked up, all scabbed over. They broke my arm. Fucked up all my fingers. Basically like, stomped my hands.

Janna: Oh my god, was that just for stickers?

KAGE: Well, I ran for a good three hours. Like, it was a chase. And after that they were just pissed. They only got me in one cuff. They said I was resisting arrest. So, they did the little thing where they push your arm in, and it was just “boomp” right there. You broke my fucking arm you need to get the fuck offa me! My arm was flailing around. They didn’t even fucking notice. And I was like, “You broke my arm.” He was like, “You deserved it, dude.” It’s kind of ironic because I write YDI, that’s my crew. That stands for, “You deserve it.” That’s exactly what he said to me, and that’s the sticker I put up.

ICER, a friend of TSA described a similarly violent encounter with his friend FUROR, who was either faster or less intoxicated than he was and ultimately escaped capture. Most of the crew had more limited contact with the police, but even they described many near misses that provide continued fodder for the stories, real and exaggerated, that enhance the mystique of graffiti. Of course, it is important that ethnographers treat stories and accounts not just as insights into the actual experiences of members but also as accomplishing particular things for the subculture. The stories we heard reinforce the idea that graffiti artists are true outlaws, willing to make great sacrifices for their art and unwilling to conform, despite significant risks.

SHARE, a friend and mentor of some of the TSA crew, as well as a high-status graffiti writer, reinforces the notion that to be truly respected in the graffiti world, you have to be willing to live a truly unconventional lifestyle.

SHARE: I mean, it’s art. It’s not necessarily visually—in order to like live like a graffiti lifestyle, especially a traveling one, it’s just like art in itself. You can’t really like be conventionally living, and like,
you have to be willing to—and that’s sort of a mild example. I know people that are a lot crazier than me and do it like way bigger. You gotta steal food, steal paint. I never had much money, you know? You gotta live on this little amount of money. Just like a bag of clothes. Maybe more paint than clothes you have. You gotta be willing to go to jail too, that’s one of the things about it.

Most of the members of TSA, and most graffiti writers more generally, do not live wildly unconventional lifestyles on the streets, constantly prepared for death or imprisonment. Perhaps for this reason, they will never consider themselves high-status graffiti writers, despite their talent and persistence. Their reverence for graffiti elevates a lifestyle that, if fully realized, would place them even farther outside conventional social life and deprive them of sources of stability that they still value. They benefit from their participation in graffiti because it connects them with an inspiring outlaw masculinity that can serve as a resource for constructing their own identities. ANGST’s commitment to graffiti, as well its connection to his identity, is clear in the excerpt below:

Janna: Do you consider yourself an artist? I mean, do you consider it art, not vandalism?
ANGST: Do I consider myself an artist? When I do graffiti? No . . . I mean graffiti is an art. But I’m not an artist.
Janna: But do you consider it art?
ANGST: No, it’s vandalism for sure. No, it’s fucking both, that’s what gives the art movement the power. That’s what makes it a more powerful art movement than . . . it’s illegal. It means that much to me.

To avoid oversimplifying the point, we provide excerpts from an interview with DEKOY, who has some ambivalence about the property damage he sometimes causes when he writes. Even his accounts indicate respect for artists who give their all for graffiti.

Janna: I’m personally curious, if there were legal walls around, would you paint on them? Do you think people would go for it?
DEKOY: See, I’m not like, an illegal type of person. I don’t do graffiti illegally. If someone opened up a legal wall, I’d paint it. For sure. People would hear me say that and spit down upon me, but I’m just being honest. I’m an honest type of person. I don’t rack (steal) my paint. I don’t do a lot of graffiti because I can’t justify morally doing
it, and that’s just me. Fucking I’m not that type of person. I come from a Catholic household. I don’t tag on a lot of shit. I try to listen to my conscious.

(LATER)

Janna: So, what do you respect in terms of the art and the artist?

DEKOY: Umm . . . I respect good art. I respect people who get up. I respect both of those qualities, people who get up and at the same time are putting up good art. I respect people who give their all, who give life and limb to do what they do. I respect people who don’t hop out of the game. Do it for life. Um . . . and I respect people who, that’s all they do, that’s all they know. [They] Grew up in the streets and that took them out of a bad life and they made something out of graffiti.

That DEKOY’s account does not line up perfectly with some of the others’ should not undermine the central arguments we are making about graffiti and masculinity. Subcultures seldom do us the courtesy of being entirely consistent or coherent, and efforts to describe them as such inevitably oversimplify things. DEKOY remains a graffiti writer, still respecting the sacrifice and artistry of his peers, still interested in greater artistic accomplishments of his own, connected to a group of deviant peers and to a subculture that emphasizes an outlaw masculinity that he can employ, to whatever degree he chooses, when accomplishing his own masculine identity.

**Conclusion: Masculinity and the Appeal of Graffiti**

This study is not meant to be a comprehensive description of the graffiti subculture. The TSA crew is one of many crews in Portland, Oregon, a region not particularly known for its graffiti. On the other hand, their high level of notoriety, involvement in graffiti, and artistry make the TSA crew credible members of the subculture. In addition, the mountains of interview transcripts and observations gathered over the course of this project contain some remarkable consistencies with other qualitative ethnographic accounts of graffiti writers from other places, at other times, and from other backgrounds (Castleman 1982; Ferrell 1993; Miller 2002). In particular, we argue that the outlaw status of graffiti, as well as other aspects of the lifestyle, serve as resources for constructing masculine identities among writers.

Katz (1988) argues that crimes can be categorized according to the distinctive “criminal projects” that they accomplish, and argues that each criminal project incorporates a “path of action,” “line of interpretation,” and
“emotional process.” As the accounts we highlighted demonstrate, the project of being an active graffiti writer involves both the accomplishment of a crime and the accomplishment of a particular version of outlaw masculinity. The path of action includes planning, writing, and the social interaction that surround graffiti. The line of interpretation includes competing for recognition or “getting up,” covering public space or “bombing/killing,” a sense of respect for those who sacrifice and take risks for their art, and being an asshole whose contempt for property rules is visible and in-your-face. The emotional process includes the thrill associated with accomplishing graffiti, the satisfaction that follows, and the bravado that goes along with recounting the adventure. Some aspects of the graffiti project have qualities in common with the “sneaky thrills” (Katz 1988) experienced by vandals and shoplifters, in which getting away with the caper produces an intoxicating sense of excitement and accomplishment. Other aspects have more in common with the “ways of the badass,” in which street thugs construct a particularly hard version of masculinity. While seeing graffiti as a particular type of “criminal project” is a useful framework, we devote the majority of the study to elaborating the dimensions of outlaw masculinity that accompanied graffiti for the TSA crew and the ways in which graffiti served as a resource for constructing masculine identities.

Although it is often used as a resource for exerting and maintaining larger systems of power (Connell 1995), masculinity is also interactionally achieved by individuals. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), in their defense of both the concept of “hegemonic masculinity” and the idea of a variety of “masculinities,” invite scholars to more fully explore the experience of accomplishing gender. A number of scholars acknowledge that graffiti is predominantly a masculine activity (Austin 2001; Castleman 1982; Miller 2002). Some even acknowledge that graffiti could be productively studied through Connell’s framework (Halsey and Young 2006). However, the existing graffiti scholarship has not fully explored its relationship to masculinity or explicated the qualities that characterize this version of masculinity.

If graffiti is consistent with a particular type of outlaw masculinity, what are its characteristics? The accounts we reviewed show the language of graffiti to be full of implied violence. Graffiti names and crew names also have hints of violence, aggression, mystique, and daring. That this violence is symbolic is readily apparent in this and other research on graffiti writers. There are few accounts of graffiti writers perpetrating actual violence. In fact, accounts are much more likely to describe writers’ experiences as victims of aggressive agents of social control, such as property owners, security guards,
or police. Nevertheless, being connected to violence and embracing it (symbolically), rather than avoiding it, are aspects of this version of masculinity.

In graffiti, writers participate in a rebellion against forces of commercialization, surveillance, and civility that shape and constrain behavior in contemporary society. They seek an authentic experience, unpolluted by the quest for money and the commercial forces that tend to shape so much behavior in contemporary society. Though many would be willing to profit from their art, there is deep skepticism about writers and graffiti that are geared primarily toward profit. Writers’ passion for their art is authenticated by the fact that they invest a great deal of time and effort to participate in an activity that is risky, illegal, earns them no profit, and is likely to have only a temporary impact. Although some of the men in our study came from middle-class backgrounds and could have access to pathways of conventional success, they still feel outgunned in the battle to control the urban landscape. Amid environments characterized by increased video monitoring and declining amounts of ungoverned space (Ferrell and Weide 2010), graffiti writers face a symbolic panopticon in which they dare to assert themselves (Docuyanan 2000). Giant pillars and beams, hard metal railcars, and heavy concrete walls, all devoid of color, constructed by forces that seem impersonal and detached, and protected by forces of social control, beckon as opportunities for the graffiti artists to empower themselves and make their mark, even in a small way (Halsey and Pederick 2010).

Some of the graffiti writers we studied claim to be assholes. Whether accurate or not, this claim lends credence to the idea that graffiti gives writers space to be free of some of the social constraints that they experience in their daily lives. Though little research on masculinity has explored the relationship between rebellion and particular versions of masculinity, other graffiti research has also emphasized rebellion (Ferrell 1995), and some graffiti even reflects clearly articulated political motives (Ferrell 1993, 1995). However, among the writers we studied, the desire to rebel and offend were not part of an articulated philosophy or larger agenda of social change. Rather, they are evidence of the ways in which graffiti serves as a resource for constructing an inspiring form of masculinity that provides a sense of potency amid larger forces that constrain social life.

One of the aspects of outlaw masculinity that appears quite often in research on graffiti is the thrill, high, or adrenaline rush (Halsey and Young 2006; Halsey and Pederick 2010) that is experienced when writing graffiti. In doing graffiti, boys and men plan or more spontaneously initiate minor criminal activities that carry an energy or momentum all their own. As Katz (1988) explains in his analysis of the sensual attractions of doing crime, people
construct situations, but once constructed, situations are experienced as though they have a momentum or power all their own. Amid the darkness that may or may not conceal the forces of social control, the sounds of the spraying paint that may or may not mask the sound of vehicles or potential rivals, writers create art or mar property, asserting themselves into spaces in which they do not belong.

Crime is a resource for constructing particular versions of masculinity (Messerschmidt 2005). For some men, who are unable to take advantage of the privilege of dominant or hegemonic masculinity, crime can bring material rewards, social status, and potential inclusion in networks of other men (Copes and Hochstetler 2003). The graffiti crew we studied does not fit conveniently into any simple explanation of the relationship between power, crime, and masculinity. Some, but not all, of the members of the TSA are middle class, and are theoretically able to take advantage of the privileges of conventional hegemonic masculinity, and may occasionally do so. At the same time, they participate in a crime that yields no economic advantage, exposes them to significant legal and physical risks, and threatens to neutralize the advantages their backgrounds could provide. We argue that graffiti was part of the socialization process through which the men we studied connected to other men and developed their identities. In institutional settings, where not everyone fits in and art is sometimes seen as the domain of women or girls, graffiti art provides access to an inspiring and exciting masculinity that feels somehow more authentic than the mundane, middle-class, white-collar masculinity that might otherwise be available to them. It means connection to both a network of friends and to the larger fraternity of graffiti insiders who have had the guts and persistence to make their mark on the urban landscape. The midstatus graffiti crew we studied can bask in the fame of the mythical graffiti heroes that have gone before them, the authentic hard core pioneers whose names are known and whose stories are retold. At the same time, their participation in graffiti can serve as a lasting resource for identity building after they have left the game. They have achieved a certain level of success and notoriety. They have created beautiful pieces or perplexing tags and were able to “fuck” with other people (Katz 1988) and get away with it. They have stories to tell that can be used as a resource for constructing their social identities, and they have memories, real and exaggerated, that can be used to construct their own self-conceptions, all infused with a particular version of masculinity.

As mentioned in the introduction, a number of authors argue that the experience of race was central to both the emergence of contemporary graffiti (Miller 2002) and the public response to squelch it (Dickinson 2008). There was scant reference to race by members of the crew we studied. We speculate
that one of the reasons TSA members do not claim to be an elite crew may be out of recognition that they lack the street credibility of racial and ethnic minority writers. Hip hop culture was mentioned in passing with respect; some of the members of TSA like hip hop music; and some of the local “kings” are African American, but race does not emerge explicitly as a significant theme in the accounts. We found this interesting, as members of TSA are aware that the roots of contemporary graffiti are tied to the urban experience of African Americans. Though there is little research on the salience of race among whites, we hypothesize that being in a predominantly white social environment may leave race less salient to members of the majority. At the same time, we do not wish to diminish the importance that race has in shaping the experiences of other graffiti writers.

A negative interpretation of this graffiti crew could identify them as mostly white, mostly middle-class men who get to have their cake and eat it too, who will benefit from their access to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity but still take advantage of this version of outlaw masculinity to construct their own identities and maintain a sense of authenticity. However, such a view oversimplifies and trivializes the experiences of this crew and their actions. Not all were middle class, and at the time of our observations, they were living with roommates in run-down housing; one lived a largely transient existence, crashing on friends’ couches. Others have been injured or arrested because of their participation in graffiti. Even the members who are middle class are young, live in a region of high unemployment and limited economic prospects, and are faced with futures that feel uncertain. Their middle-class status may benefit them, but they have not yet and may never embrace the cultural definitions of success that correspond to hegemonic masculinity. They represent a fascinating case study in the accomplishment of a particular version of masculinity and demonstrate the complex, nonstatic nature of masculinity, qualities emphasized by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005).

Our claim that graffiti is a largely masculine activity does not negate the fact that women have participated in graffiti from its inception and continue to do so. Dickinson (2008, 36) argues that the public response to graffiti, defining it as a war and waging an aggressive campaign to criminalize and eradicate it, resulted in an “erasure” of women from graffiti and served to “construct it in the popular imagination as a hyper-masculine activity.” However, women who can “get up” or “bomb,” including several contemporary women writers studied by Ashman (2007), still garner respect, and there are websites promoting women graffiti writers, such as lagraffitigirls.com. We argue that the presence of women in graffiti does not necessarily undercut the argument for the connection between graffiti and outlaw masculinity.
Decoupling sex and gender, there is no reason that the presence of women as legitimate participants in the subculture makes an activity feminine. After all, women, taking the same risks, respecting the same sacrifices, and participating in the same battles may also be doing masculinity (Miller 2001). Nevertheless, one can certainly conceive of ways in which a distinctively feminine graffiti could be accomplished, perhaps even a version of “outlaw femininity.” Gender is not static and is constructed and redefined during the course of its accomplishment. Though fascinating, a full exploration of women’s participation in graffiti or women-centered graffiti and its relation to the construction of gender is beyond the scope of this study.

We argue that the graffiti scene of today has been and continues to be shaped by its outlaw status. Though other scholars may lament the marginalization of graffiti by mainstream culture (Dickinson 2008), graffiti’s street credibility and popularity among individuals seeking an inspiring and potent rebel masculinity depend on its outlaw status. Graffiti is deliberately provocative, intended to offend mainstream citizens and violate cultural expectations, while at the same time attracting attention and sometimes appreciation for its artistic qualities. Graffiti names are masculine, often implying the threat of violence, though there is little evidence of actual violence in the graffiti scene. Graffiti, at least graffiti that is respected by members of the scene, is not done for profit. Indeed, efforts to commercialize graffiti represent a threat to its authenticity. Becoming a writer involves participation in risky adventures, amid a competition with other writers and local authorities, for control over urban spaces. Boys find graffiti through their relations with other, usually older, boys, and develop their masculine identities in the context of an unusual male-centered form of visual art. They share a brotherhood based on common experiences that are foreign and offensive to many members of mainstream culture.

We began this article by asking a version of the question that has served as an underlying component of many of the articles written about graffiti writers: why do people invest such effort and take such significant risks in order to participate in an activity that is risky, illegal, and likely to have only a temporary impact? We argue that one of the significant attractions of graffiti is that it serves as a resource for constructing an exciting and compelling version of outlaw masculinity that values daring, risk, rebelliousness, ingenuity, commitment, and sacrifice, as well as a certain set of aesthetics.

Though attempting to capture the range of experiences and understandings of any subculture is futile, SHARE’s reflection on the role graffiti has played in his life provides a poignant endnote.
I think it was just like for me, at the time, when I was really serious about it and really passionate about it, I just . . . I stumbled into it and was just like, “This is perfect. This is everything I want. I can go out and get famous if I want to.” If that’s what I want to do. And even if it’s just amongst a certain amount of people, and not only just famous, but I know for myself that I went and did it! You know? And it’s like a big feat. I’ve been to jail a bunch of times, and it’s a big sacrifice. If you want to call it a sacrifice. A lot of people have been hurt, killed, stabbed, shot. Got sentences, you know, years in jail. It’s just something that is unexplainably like. . . . For me, now I’m kind of like, graffiti I don’t think will ever be the same as when I was twenty-one, because I’ve figured a lot of shit out in my life and like. . . . Although I’m not into like, having a secure direction, I kind of have an idea of like, who I am, a little bit more and what makes me happy. You grow up a little bit, you know.

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