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## Ain't Nothin but a G(raffiti) Thang

Ciara Edwards-Mendez  
*University of Puget Sound*

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Ciara Edwards-Mendez

Andrew Gardner

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## **Ain't Nothin But a G(raffiti) Thang:**

### **An Oral History & Collection of the Criminal Artists of East LA Graffiti Gangs**

This research creates an oral history of graffiti by assembling recollections from former graffiti artists that lived in East Los Angeles in the 1990's to mid-2000's, when they were affiliated with various Latino graffiti gangs. At this time, the urban environment of East LA was defined by the racial and ethnic segregation as well as hostilities along those same lines <sup>1</sup>. This hostility and subsequent territorialization was a remnant of the Los Angeles riots of 1992. Latino gang members were labeled as *cholos* in Los Angeles, although graffiti gangs rejected that moniker (they did at times have alliances with *cholos*, however). In that context, these marginalized communities began establishing territories and reconfiguring urban space in East Los Angeles. Gangs rose in prominence, and graffiti was a means of marking turf, territory, and community.

The simple dichotomy between art and vandalism, therefore, inadequately captures the social realities of the graffiti writers in urban environments. The limits of these conceptual categories are especially evident in seemingly contradictory descriptions of graffiti as “nuisance street art,” “crimes of style” and “beautiful crimes.”<sup>2</sup> Both terms — art and vandalism — describe the same product of distinct but simultaneous social process<sup>3</sup>. Graffiti gangs were a new creation during this time, and while they were still sometimes connected to other gang activity, their identities were largely constructed by their autonomous

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<sup>1</sup> Davis

<sup>2</sup>Davis

<sup>3</sup> Ferrell

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tagging (the nickname for graffitiing).

### ***Background/literature***

When we classify graffiti only as vandalism, we dismiss the complexity of the multifaceted relationship between the walls, the urban landscape, ethics, and artistic expression in East Los Angeles. Graffiti is also an art form. It is connected to the social movements of America's lower classes and their attempts to have a voice, reclaim public space, and denounce property and ownership. In this sense it has the unique duality of being both an art and a crime. At the same time, it has also been used to convey threats of violence, mark urban territory, and signal to others/communicate messages. For East LA graffiti gangsters of the 90s and 2000s graffiti was a pledge of allegiance to their territory and the legacy of their community they remember. This is the focus of my research.

To continue, there is specific vocabulary to establish names and nicknames in the graffiti lingo that is vital to understanding my research and the culture. Taggers mean people who graffiti, usually they graffiti only their tagger name (moniker) which is their tag. Their tag is their logo and name. For instance, Doner. Doner is not his real name but his tag. Think of it as what you use to sign a check or sign a receipt, it represents your identity while also showcasing what your style is. The tag are the graffiti writers name and is the most famous and recognizable embodiment of graffiti. A writer is someone who pushes the limits of tagging, involving more artistic elements on their piece. People in graffiti crews or gangs can label themselves as taggers or writers. During the 90s, most branded themselves as taggers when referring to themselves or people who were a part of their crew or gang. There is a significant difference between graffiti gangs and crews. Gangs were members who only used graffiti to rep and throw up their gangs name, while graffiti gangs were involved in gang activity while being solely based around

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graffiti. They were not gangs who graffitied to exhibit their existence or mark territory, they were gangs that claimed territory based on their graffiti. With this, comes just as much violence as gangs as graffiti gangs in the 90s rose to both prominence and popularity.

“They're confusing gang taggers with regular taggers "writers.” I know the difference because I was one of these kids. I grew up in Southern California in the 90s as a teenager. You can tell the difference in the writing style. Gang tagger/graffiti artist. Generally graffiti artists, "writers", don't carry guns. Being a Graffiti writer is taking chances and shit. Take the risk, take the arguments from the police, the people your own mom, from your friends. I was a tag banger in the 90s. This is a trip. Looking back I also got jumped in 3 times for each letter in the crew's acronym. I was more of a lone Wolf when I went out but I was in a crew. I used to scratch the windows on a crowded bus while people sat right next to me. Nobody said a word. I risked my life for some spots too. Got arrested a handful of times. Today I'm a professional artist and sell my art in galleries. Concrete and brick look more interesting and give kids something to do other than violent crime and drugs.”

-Over

Most of my research focuses on archival news and one central piece that focuses on graffiti gangs in the 90s. I was able to integrate the use of creative outlets as research resources in my research. In the 90s, people were using cam corders almost as diaries. I was able to acquire some personal tapes to integrate myself more into the time and the culture. Most of the literature I found focused on New York or the 70's style of train tagging.

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### *Methods*

There is no central question posed in my research. This is a historically-focused oral narrative of the subjects' life within the graffiti gangs, and their perspectives of that time. This research explores a multitude of different topics and social themes, such as poverty and violence, as well as investigating these artists' experiences along social, cultural, and political lines. The contributors discussed the process of creation/rules of graffiti itself within the era. All participants in the research are ex/reformed graffiti gang members and have been removed from gang activity for at least a decade. All my interviews were facilitated through a personal connection to someone who was involved in these graffiti gangs in the 90s. With this connection, I had access to a universe of connections to interview and network within. As interviews progressed and themes began to emerge, some questions were added or changed slightly to acquire more information.

Those participating in interviews were strictly from the East Los Angeles area. I conducted semi structured and unstructured interviews (Bernard 2006) using a topic guide. My subjects include four participants; Doner (43), Ricky Don't Stop (RDS, 41), Over (40), and Big Jim (43). Each participant is born and currently in Los Angeles. The Participants' identities are not kept confidential, as is customary with oral histories, this research uses their moniker graffiti names for identification. All participants signed a waiver, indicating they are aware that their name and identity is public, and that their words will be publicly accessible.

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*Theme: Territory & Identity*

Territorology was a main component to the taggers. There was a unanimous pattern of the subjects saying “my” when referring to the space or community they belong to. When does property become territory and who gets to establish ownership of an area? Legislating illegality of an urban space is vital component for why the graffiti gangs tag.

“I grew up in a Mexican American household. I was born in the late 70s and 80’s next to the Los Angeles River in Highland park. I grew up then split between there and El sereno. This is what people would be calling the ghetto areas and shit, not how it looks like now. You put all these kids in these areas that are fucked up, poor, and mostly only people of color and you feel like you already know what your life is set up to be. Tell me why it’s so bad to tag and give kids a meaning. All my life I was told I was shit. Wouldn’t you rather I did this than use drugs or push drugs? The rich people are fucking up the planet but we are prosecuted for painting on the walls and being in gangs. Maybe they should think about what they did to us before they arrest us and say we are the vandals and the bad people. I had to be in a crew for my people and for my community. I had to protect when the people we pay to protect us lock us up. Why does that have to be illegal? Maybe they should be questioning why we do it and help our communities instead of incarcerating us. They know what we are doing and we know what we are doing so why are we the bad ones when they do way worse shit? We have violence all around us and you expect us to be peaceful? Having a spray can is the only way to [physically] show them we are here and our community is here. We don’t even tag in their areas, so why [are] you controlling my area?”

-RDS

Since Graffiti is solely produced without the permission of the property owners and is illegal, authority and society perceives it as vandalism. The authority and media worked

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relentlessly to depict graffiti artists in general as disrespectful and vandals. Yet, graffiti gangs were committing crimes to make their gang more well known

“Gangs were big in the hip hop breakdown era of the 80s were gangs were cool. LA took on the whole gang banging scene. My brother left graffiti altogether and just started gang banging. I told him I could do both. It was violent, to start a war a gang would cross out your name.”

To start a war, taggers would cross out a name, physically with spray paint over your tag. This was a warning. If you were crossed out it meant that their gang or members were going after you. This could be for numerous reasons: your tagging was reaching peak popularity, you were out of your territory, you disrespected another tagger, your rivals, and so on.

“From the point of view of the gang, crossing out is a way of marking territory. It’s like fence or walls around except its done with graffiti. This is a warning to members of other gangs that this is not their territory or turf. I had people come at me in high school trying to jump me and I said what the fuck did I do? They said well your Doner from SKA FTL crew. It’s the hate that comes from the streets. It sucks because we do be killing our own kind. It didn’t even matter if I was in a gang or not, at that point if you did graffiti you were a gangster, that’s how the police saw you and that’s how the people outside of your streets saw you. ”

-Doner

So, what is the meaning of an urban space in graffiti and more importantly, what is the meaning of an urban space when property becomes territory? Graffiti causes millions of dollars to be spent on eradicating which means that graffiti decreases property values. “At the national level, the costs associated with graffiti vary widely and have been estimated to be as high as \$15

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to \$18 billion dollars”<sup>4</sup>. The regulation between authority and the residents in urban spaces is challenged when the ownership of the property is understood by the barrio (community) that one belongs to. The barrio is challenged for public ownership of the gang and property is “violated” to mark territory.

“Graffiti is a voice for the ghettos, you don’t ever have anyone standing up for our communities. We know that we are in the ghetto, we know what people think about us. We are showing you we are here. We exist. Those statistics that you like to read about, the kids who don’t have a proper education- the brown and black kids in poverty, we express ourselves in the broken down neighborhoods that we live in with writing on the walls. To us it’s not vandalism, it shows people that we are here, as they pass by they know where we’re at. The rich people have the Hollywood sign and we have our spray cans.”

-Big Jim

The “crimes of style” are for the adolescents who shout out traditional channels of achievement and those through ethnicity and education, retain some modicum of choice, graffiti writing provides an alternative process for shaping personal and identity and gaining social status without obtaining capital. Also, compared to writers and taggers, gangs promote the name of their group or barrio<sup>5</sup> instead of identifying themselves.

“People don’t ask us about graffiti, they look, they see, they comment, and criticize. Ask me why it’s important to me. Ask me why I do it on the walls. Then you can tell me it’s ugly.”

-RDS

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<sup>4</sup> Lesky

<sup>5</sup> Ferrell

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### *Conclusion*

The goals of the participants is to express their histories on why graffiti is important for the low socioeconomic class, POC, and adolescents of East LA. The participants collectively agreed that graffitiing gives them the ability to identify themselves in a system where they are perpetually categorized and dismissed as only vandals and nuisances. All of these participants were raised in poverty in dominantly latino neighborhoods in East LA. Each told a similar narrative of the need for an escape. They look at their community as an equal to their life, they join gangs for territory and representation. Their graffiti represents their street and their gang, but all wanted to escape the street. They had stories of friends and family members dying for the barrio because of territory.

“My good friend since middle school, we were in the same gang and he was this up and coming graffiti kid. In 2001, he was tagging with our friend. He was trying to get out of the gangs and just write. He just got a job at Ralph’s and was thinking about going to community college. He was in the wrong place and another gang showed up and shot him. He died right next to his tag, it made me think. Am I me, Doner, or I am [gang name]<sup>6</sup> and my street? I was just a hand holding up the spray can that was putting a tag that didn’t represent me, but a place. And I could die for that. For a long time I convinced myself that I was okay with that. I was a samurai dying for honor, but then I didn’t remember what was I was fighting for.”

-Doner

Graffiti is related to a sense of self that one has. Just as we consume clothes, accessories, and decorations to show others who we are with materialistic things, the taggers use graffiti as a

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<sup>6</sup> Not being inserted per request of the subject

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way of saying “I am.” Being born into a lower economic class is a tremendous empirical impact. Since those classified in lower economic categories usually lack cultural practices attributed in human, social, and cultural embodied capital, which often determines and evaluates the chances of success in the structure of the social world, they’re left at a significant disadvantage of inequality. The participants faces alienation and othering, not just from society but from a loss of identity from being in a graffiti gang. Graffiti is an expression, it has an impermanent canvas but it allows you to mark your presence.

Just like graffiti, these participants believed that when they were consciously aware of who they were supposed to be in this world, they didn’t belong. Graffiti provided the participants power, it gave them a sense of self with their barrio. Each participant had a violent childhood, the graffiti gangs provided solitude of violence and belonging in the community that they were. All participants had such a strong connection to their barrio that it felt as if they were more than just a representation but a continuation of their street. Society and authority demonizes graffiti gangs for their violence and vandalism, yet we should be questioning why taggers continue to make a place for themselves in a public space. Asserting your presence, whether you throw up gang tags, pieces, or tags is delineating the boundaries of the barrios and identity.

RDS: “I’m out of the gangs now. It’s been a while actually. I just throw up pieces now, I’m a muralist and a writer. It’s different. It’s a lot different.”

C: How?

RDS: “Well, for one I’m not carrying a handle on me, this to me is art. I thought what I was doing was art and in a way it is, but my stuff now could be in museums. But my art is accessible, you can drive past it and it’s free. I put it in the same neighborhoods. I hope some of the kids would start throwing up some stuff too or be inspired by my pieces. That’s all I want.

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I've done good for myself. As a kid I would have never believed you that I would be here, be making this shit or even be alive to be this old.

C: Do you feel like you know who you are now?

RDS: As a person? Fuck no, as a graffiti writer fuck ya. I'm Ricky Don't Stop and I don't belong to nobody but me anymore."

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Short Film I created for Summer Research

<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/590003281>

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