HUMANIZING YOUTH THROUGH A GRAFFITI DISCOURSE: A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY SPACE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in
Chicano and Chicana Studies

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August 2013
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ABSTRACT

HUMANIZING YOUTH THROUGH A GRAFFITI DISCOURSE: A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY SPACE

By
Norma Franco

Master of Arts in Chicano and Chicana Studies

The graduate project evaluates the use of alternative spaces for the integration of youth in academia. The graduate project reviews Youth Justice Coalition (YJC), a current organization located in Inglewood, California. Using interviews, the graduate project evaluates the use of critical pedagogy and its effects on youth who enroll in the school. More specifically, the graduate project evaluates the use of positive alternative spaces within an institution such as the “Graff Room” at YJC and its effects on integrating “at-risk” or previously criminalized youth. Overall, the graduate project concerns itself with the uses of alternative spaces and youth who have previously been rendered as either “at-risk” or criminal.
Chapter 1: Introduction

“A straight tagger is about what they write and if you got beef with them then handle it with your hands not with no gun, not with no bat, not with no burner, not with no nothing, with your hands... gang banging is what you do to lead you to only three ways which is dead, jail, or nowhere. But tagging is just like your just expressing yourself in the way you do your colors, the way you hit up. Some of them are true artist and some of them are trying to get there to be a true artist. [But] once you start walking and you see all the places that hit up, there are valuable stuff that you can learn. Like from books, you could read about it, [it will] stay in your head for a few days but then the next day you will be like what the fuck I did this shit. And from graffiti...it be different. [For example,] there's this big wide wall and is all black, is the sky but at the bottom it has a quote, it was about life. If we didn't have light some shit like that we be dark and we wouldn't see our way. To me it meant you are the one that is writing the world that is leading your soul not to a dark path but to a lighter path and then that's it.” (Mayra Garcia 11/2012)

Mayra Garcia is a seventeen year old, Guatemalan female who has been raised in Los Angeles, California. Even though she has had a rocky academic career, Mayra is expected to graduate from Youth Justice Coalition, YJC with a General Education Degree (GED) in December of 2012. Having been a participant in the organization for a year, graduation has given her time to consider her future. She is hopeful to someday attend college and, most importantly, she is eager to provide for the child she is expecting. Mayra’s pregnancy is additionally complicated since she is expecting a child with her boyfriend who holds connections with a neighborhood that is considered as a rival to Mayra’s own neighborhood in Inglewood, California.

Prior to attending Youth Justice Coalition, she had attended a high school within the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), yet she was ultimately expelled due to multiple disciplinary issues including fighting with girls from rival neighborhoods talking back to the teachers, ditching classes, being caught with alcohol and marijuana, initiating school riots, and “tagging”. Given her disciplinary record, school officials asked Mayra to sign a contract in which she gave her word to never deface, or tag, school
grounds. The contract stated that if she was caught tagging on school grounds that she would be permanently expelled from public high schools in L.A school districts. In addition to the contract, Mayra was told she was being pushed out of her school because she was a danger to the community. Mayra remembers the meeting, “[school officials] told me I couldn’t be around because I'll put them in danger” (Mayra Garcia 11/2012).

Mayra began attending YJC after her sister was expelled from her school for possession. At YJC, Mayra continued smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol, yet she began to demonstrate respect to the teachers of the organization because she felt equally respected. After a few months at YJC, she began to demonstrate respect to her peers within the organization even when they were from rival neighborhoods given their collective participation in the “Graff Room.” The “Graff Room” was the only activity that excited Mayra during the first months at YJC. Due to her pregnancy, Mayra no longer drinks, tags, or gets high. Outside of YJC, Mayra continues to learn from her environment by observing the tags outside of school, bearing witness to arrests due to drugs as well as shootings in her neighborhood. Mayra has even picked up life lessons and wisdom from the conversations she has held with homeless men and women.

Currently, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) implements suspension and expulsion programs on the grounds of a student’s misconduct (youthjusticecoalition.com). In response to the districts’ disciplinary policies, Youth Justice Coalition advocates on behalf of students who have been expelled from schools within the LAUSD. YJC advocates for the students since they recognize the need to "end school-to-jail tracking" in which districts, like LAUSD, "push students onto the
streets" as a result of "zero tolerance policies that bar students from educational options" (youth4justice.org). Such a system pushes students out of schools and into streets where there is a dangerous possibility of engaging in greater criminal behavior. The current system pushes students out of schools as a way to address the problem, but also inadvertently slaps students the label of a “criminal” when handing them over to law enforcement for school-related misconducts. What would otherwise be solved within the limits of a school is passed onto police enforcement which introduces youth to a realm of consequences including criminal records as well as harassment by law enforcement.

Youth who participate in Youth Justice Coalition have been exposed and witnessed the inequality that is present within the education system specifically in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Many of the students at Youth Justice Coalition have either been denied entry in LAUSD schools or been expelled for prior crimes, gang affiliations, tagging, or misconduct just like Mayra Garcia. The voices of youth like Mayra suggest that society must take time to reflect on the labels unjustly placed on students who are considered “at-risk” youth. Also, policies must reconsider how youths’ experiences bar students from accessing educational opportunities. The voices of the youth who are pushed out of a system lend insight and reveal that they are more than "at-risk" youth and criminals, but rather they are striving to find their own space for creativity and self growth in institutions such their s.

Research Questions and Significance of Study

According to Freire, traditional systems of power inside public education institutions have been based on a teaching method known as the banking system (1970).
This system of power creates exclusion and inequality for students in the way it favors whiteness: “Whiteness constitutes unmarked practices that have negative effects on consequences for those who do not participate in them” (McLaren 186). This method is described by Giroux, as a system based on the idea of the micro-objectives that have placed value on a teaching method that is not founded upon inquiry, critical thinking, work, and knowledge (1988). This form of teaching has been favored in public schools as a way to “keep you busy,” to keep students from thinking critically of their own social realities (Dyson 77). The students are placed in the education system as “depositories and the educator⁴ as the depositor” (Freire 72). As a result, educators begin to understand their position in the classroom as the holders of knowledge and the youth as the “ignorance absolute” (Freire 72). This system of education seeks to dehumanize youth by detaching them from their “social reality.” These forms of education have been described as the “banking education,” a system that has purposely “annul[led] the student’s creative power” and helps serve “the interest of the oppressor” (Freire 73).

Traditional systems of power inside formal institutions have failed to provide alternative spaces for “at-risk” youth such as spaces that enrich the languages and aesthetics that youth find engaging. This is an important phenomenon because youth are robbed from their history and to some extent youth are left to feel uncertain and disconnected from their own identity (Freire 71). Molding students into mainstream ideologies⁵ and failing to acknowledge youth’s history, creates a disconnection between youth and the education system or the spaces that are currently provided to them. This paradigm reaches beyond a student’s disconnection academically but it indirectly builds a
physical space in which students feel disconnected from understanding their own history, their language, culture, and identity. This disconnection can at times push students out of education or push youth into seeking a sense of community and/or social support from the streets.

Using the following research literature, this projects aims to challenge the spaces created within academia and suggests engaging in a curriculum that reflects students’ social reality by using tools such as graffiti. The following will be a reflection amongst the voices of the youth inside an organization, *Youth Justice Coalition*, an organization that uses critical pedagogy and provides a space for youth to express themselves using graffiti as a medium. Available alternative spaces\(^6\) such graffiti is a tool that *Youth Justice Coalition* uses to humanize youths’ voices and motivate youth to attend school as well as reinforce a positive identity\(^7\). By using graffiti as a tool for youth empowerment, YJC pulls away from the curriculum found in traditional education.

The purpose of this study is to listen to the voices Mayra Garcia and other youth who participate in the *Youth Justice Coalition*. The main focus of *Youth Justice Coalition* is to "challenge the criminalization and mass incarceration of youth and communities, police unaccountability and state violence" (youth4justice.org). *Youth Justice Coalition*’s main tool has been creating alternatives spaces that promote and validate youth’s voices. *Youth Justice Coalition* provides youth with skills to address the gangs, drugs, police brutality, gun violence, alcohol abuse, and other hardships that are prevalent in their communities. *Youth Justice Coalition* engages youth by utilizing curricula that reflects students’ social realities and their interests. Curriculum includes information on policy
brutality, discussions on knowing one’s rights, immigration issues, activism, community engagement, hip-hop, and graffiti. *Youth Justice Coalition* provides youth with spaces such the “Graff Room,” a room for graffiti, which serves as an open space for self-expression and the humanization of youths’ voices and languages. YJC also includes workshops that encourage youth engagement in protest, literacy, and art. Very few organizations in the Los Angeles area provide a space for graffiti artists. For this reason, *Youth Justice Coalition*, a high school known as Free L.A High School, in which is located inside the organization of Chuco’s Center, has been unique in its existence for various reasons including its continuation school and their active engagement in critical pedagogy.

The main goal for this study is to evaluate how the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy can be used as the main tool to analyze and form alternative spaces such as the ones at YJC. By using a critical pedagogy lens and framework, this research evaluates the formation of alternative spaces as a tool with the capability to motivate, engage, empower, acknowledge, and provide a social support system for youth. Critical pedagogy seeks to challenge traditional educational pedagogies, provides agency to "at-risk" youth, and suggests that tools believed to be deviant (such as graffiti) can be incorporate a larger social phenomenon that should not be limited to the criminal identity of the youth. For example, for many youth graffiti represents an alternative and welcoming space. Thus, graffiti is able to enrich youth with a different type of knowledge and can provide youth with multiple opportunities such as social networking, social support, creativity, artistic expression, and resistance against social hegemonic
hierarchies. Graffiti as an art also allows youth to learn unspoken histories, claim a social identity, and create allies amongst other youth who feel defeated or let down by familial, educational, and governmental institutions (Freire 72). Although graffiti holds potential for youth on its own, youth need to be provided with alternative spaces inside formal institutions, in order to feel connected with the physical school grounds. These spaces serve as a tool to integrate "at-risk" youth into the curriculum. Utilizing graffiti within schools suggests that the educator can practice a critical pedagogy as well as recognize different types of knowledge. The knowledge which is produced in alternative critical pedagogical spaces can be understood through a framework of organic knowledge.

Organic knowledge is produce by—what Gramsci calls—organic intellectuals, whom create knowledge that exist outside of the sphere of hegemonic ideologies which also speak a community’s social reality (Burke 1). Organic intellectuals work within subcultures as "organism[s] functioning outside the social political and economic context” (Hebdige 76). Organic intellectuals work outside of the sphere of mainstream knowledge and everyone else most likely belongs to those in control of hegemonic ideologies (Hebdige 76). Although organic intellectuals are creating alternative knowledge, they also help maintain the hegemony to those in power. This dichotomy between hegemonic power relations and alternative spaces encourages educators to challenge their preconceived notions of the education system including the banking system as a system that annuls students’ voices and perceives students as “depositors” of knowledge (Freire 1970). To fully understand why new frameworks are needed, one must understand the social realities of the youth who benefit from alternative spaces. Such
frameworks—given their supposed deviancy and “at-risk” label—demonstrate the need for alternative spaces and suggest the need understand youth such as those who attend Youth Justice Coalition in Inglewood, California.

*Behind the Walls of the Youth Justice Coalition*

*Youth Justice Coalition* is based in the southwest area of Los Angeles in Inglewood, California. The youth who attend YJC have been exposed to a number of crimes (youth4justice.org) since Inglewood has 10% higher average for crimes committed when compared to the average nationally in the United States including murder, rapes, robberies, assaults, and thefts (http://www.city-data.com). This area is also reported to have a 4% higher unemployment rate than the United States’ overall unemployment rate (http://www.city-data.com). Inglewood is high ranking for crime rates according to the youth and data from the newspapers. This social reality is extremely important to the experiences of the youth of *Youth Justice Coalition*. For example, Mayra Garcia shared that there was a student shot by the school because he was mistaken as a “gang-banger.” This demonstrates that youth are in constant danger just by walking on the streets. They have a very limited availability of support or spaces to avoid those dangers. Mateo Chavez, another youth who participates in *Youth Justice Coalition*, describes Inglewood as “a pretty dangerous area; nobody comes down, shootings, mostly gang related” (Mateo Chavez 11/2012). And although some of the youth might not be gang affiliated, youth have been labeled by police and law enforcement as dangerous gang bangers. In fact, the Los Angeles Times has written multiple stories covering different gang-related deaths in Inglewood (Francine Orr/Los Angeles Times / October
23, 2012). Given that gang-related activity and incarceration are very larger factors in the social realities of the youth at YJC, police presence and brutality also is visible in the area. On January 26\textsuperscript{th} 2013, the Los Angeles Times reported that a man was shot for speeding on the street (Nicole Cruz/ Los Angeles Time/ January 26, 2013). Many of the youth in this area share similar experiences in their interactions with police including being harassed, stopped, and searched as a result of police racial profiling and police brutality. One of the reasons for police brutality is as a result of having a high presence of gang members. Considering many of these youth are victims of police capture, Youth Justice Coalition, as an organization, advocates for youth and recommends that "law enforcement gang suppression efforts focus on the 5-10\% of gang bangers claimed by law enforcement to be the serious offenders" rather than the 95\% who have committed minor "crimes" (youth4justice.org).

Some of the students who participate in the organization have had been involved with the criminal justice system and others reported living in areas of high crimes, gang-related activity, and drug activity (youth4justice.org). According to Youth Justice Coalition, "Los Angeles has the largest juvenile hall system” in the state (youth4justice.org). The youth who were interviewed for this research have been criminalized, fined, expelled, and had multiple police confrontations for tagging. The youth also shared that they were restricted from painting in the city, the public schools, and their own private property. Youth are criminalized, fined, jailed, and "detained for having paint on their fingers, tagging on their back packs or markers in their pockets ("possession of vandalism tools"). They can be even be added to gang registry databases
for writing on their own school notebooks (youth4justicecoalition.com). This demonstrates an increase of youth criminalization for tagging, the limited available spaces, and “at-risk” labels which place youth in high risk of becoming involved in other crimes. Those who are detained for not having the resources for safe spaces are then possibly filed as felons and written up as possible gang members or criminals. The punishment for being detained for tagging depends on the damages created as a result of the tagging. It can range from a $400 fine and from seventeen months to three years in prison (youth4justicecoalition.com). As a result of the high crime rates and incarceration of youth in the Los Angeles and Inglewood area, Youth Justice Coalition established their facility as a space that can enrich and support the creation of new knowledge.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Youths’ performance with graffiti stems from social resistance. *Youth Justice Coalition* provides the youth in their facilities with an opportunity to use their performance and express themselves with their own language. This study utilizes qualitative methods including the audio-recorded and transcribed interviews of four *Youth Justice Coalition* participants between the ages of 16-24 as well as two staff members whose interviews describe the practices used in the organization. The following research was conducted using a critical ethnographic praxis which is used to "by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control" inside the education system (Thomas 6). Critical ethnography was utilized as a way to approach the research in order to assess *Youth Justice Coalition*’s successes and areas of improvement. Interviews were used to analyze how a critical pedagogy space has been fostered as well as to understand how this space has influenced youths’ positive self-identities and the development of critical understandings of their social realities where they challenge hegemonic power relations. In interviewing *Youth Justice Coalition* participants, they reflected on their experiences and perceptions of public education and their experiences at *Youth Justice Coalition*.

The following questions were used to guide the research: how can the use of graffiti in an alternative, safe and creative space, such as in *Youth Justice Coalition*, be used as a tool to integrate and humanize youth between the ages of 16 to 24 to the education system? How does the use of graffiti in alternative spaces impact youth who are "at risk" of leaving or failing school? How do their past criminal records impact their
identity development (ethnic, academic, artistic, community, career), artistic expression, self-worth and sense of community in alternative spaces that use critical pedagogy? How is graffiti used at *Youth Justice Coalition* and what impact does it have on the youths’ lives?

*Pedagogy and Critical Ethnography Framework*

Critical ethnography proposes that the researcher should approach interviews as an opportunity to critically reflect upon one's own misconceptions and frames of reference. Critical ethnography enables the audience to "envision alternative life possibilities" inside the education system (Thomas 6). Furthermore, critical ethnography approaches the interview process with sensitivity and empathy. Critical ethnography provided the interviewed participants with an opportunity to share their voices throughout the research process as a way for the audience to understand their voices and critically evaluate their perceptions of graffiti artists as well as the impact that of the tools used by *Youth Justice Coalition* to empower the youth labeled as "at risk." As the researcher who employs critical ethnography, I hope is that through the interviews, I provided them with a space to share their stories and assume their role as knowledgeable informants rather than traditional subjects of research. In addition, a critical pedagogy lens was used to analyze the interviews and humanizetheir experiences in alternative spaces such as those at the *Youth Justice Coalition*. This lens is used to examine youths’ own interpretations of their social realities, communities, and themselves.

By using a critical pedagogy lens approach, interviews were analyzed to determine if youths’ perceptions of themselves and their school reflects a humanizing
curriculum and a positive identity as artist and activist who advocates for their own lives and their communities. The interviews serve as a way to examine whether the use of a critical pedagogy spaces, such as the use of graffiti, engage “at-risk” youth and get them to question the state of the educational curriculum, their social realities as well as whether they reflect a positive identity of themselves and a greater sense of community. Lastly, the interviews serve as a method to challenge the common perception of knowledge and to suggest that graffiti serves as intellectual knowledge which reflects the social realities of communities of color and its role as “a crucial one in the context of creating a counter hegemony” (Burke 1999). The use of interviews supports the claim that the spaces created by organic intellectuals, in this case graffiti artists, “[create] within itself one or more strata of intellectuals that gives it meaning, that helps to bind it together and helps it function” (Burke 1999).

Prior to the engaging in this study, I also had misconceptions of graffiti artists and I believed that graffiti should be kept within the perimeters of the home or property of the graffiti artists. I had little understanding of the art behind graffiti. I came to the realization that I needed to challenge my misconceptions as I began searching for answers of why youth are unable to graduate from high school. Within my search, I mistakenly believed the misconception that it was the youth who were "at-risk" and "failing" to graduate rather than understanding or questioning the role of the education system and its educators who were failing to engage youth who already felt disconnected from the curriculum. I realized that amongst the youth labeled as "at-risk" were graffiti artists who were challenging “ideologies” through the use of space. It was here that I began to
engage in research that questions the practices of education and the lack of consideration or inclusion of graffiti artists. I called into question the lack of agency as well as the inability for educators to visualize graffiti artists as organic intellectuals and producers of knowledge.

Quotations will be used when referring to "at-risk" as demonstration that that label has been unjustly assigned to youth by mainstream ideologies, police, and community members to demean youth. Youth labeled as "at-risk" are youth who have resisted dominant ideologies who seek a space which can offer them support, respect, and recognition. Overall, according to McLaren, critical ethnography enables the researcher and others to critically analyze the power dynamics that are at play at site which is being researched: “action researchers who, having theorized the dominant culture as imposing oppressive constraints on their subjects under study, have often worked to change the oppressive features operating within their research sites” (1997).

Interviews were divided into several sections; the first section focuses on how youth evaluate themselves as artists and whether they hold positive identities as artists, community members, students, and self-advocates. The interview questions were constructed with the intent of gaining greater insight of how youth characterize themselves prior to becoming involved with Youth Justice Coalition as well as their how their involvement with this organization has changed how they view life, school, and their communities. The questions asked in the first section helped determine if the youths’ identity has change positively by evaluating their academic engagement, goal making process, and the development of an identity as a non-criminal. The second
section focuses on how *Youth Justice Coalition* could have influenced their self-perceptions and their identities as artists, community members, students, and activists. The questions aim to identify how the organization provides academic or personal support and how support systems can impact youths’ perception of themselves as students who want to graduate as well as community members who feel integrated. The third section focuses on the youths’ experiences prior to *Youth Justice Coalition* with a special emphasis on their self-reflections as social activists and disputants of society’s criminalization practices rather than as deviants. These questions are directed towards youth and their thoughts on the schools they had previous attended including available support systems, student-teacher connections, and their life expectations. These questions were then rephrased and applied to *Youth Justice Coalition* to understand the type of support they receive, student-teacher connections and their post-graduation goals.

The layout of the thesis chapters is organized to provide the audience with a brief introduction to graffiti, an analysis of public education, the importance of alternative spaces, and a review of the conducted interviews. Chapter 2- Literature Review focuses on the existing literature. The first section of Chapter 2 explores current literature on the origins of graffiti including its role in transforming identity, art, education transformation, and community consciousness. The first section of the literature review provides a background of graffiti and its use of space as resistance, production of knowledge, social support, and identity development. The second section reflects on the positive and empowering outcomes of graffiti, the different barriers to using graffiti including the criminalization of graffiti artists and mainstream prevention strategies that have been put
in place. Furthermore, Chapter 2 evaluates and validates graffiti as a discourse of alternative knowledge and spaces in schools. The literature then explains the current system of education, the banking system and presents alternative tools for youth’s engagement through a critical pedagogy practice. In reviewing existing literature, this study seeks to uncover a critical pedagogy method by indentifying the strengths and weaknesses of such practices and its influence on youths’ identity.

Chapter 3- Findings presents the findings of this study including *Youth Justice Coalition*’s successes and areas of improvement that were articulated by youths’ reflections of their experiences while at *Youth Justice Coalition*. This analysis evaluates the interviews conducted in this research to reinforce the need for alternative spaces for "at-risk" youth. This chapter emphasizes that youth face many dangers in the streets and that a need exists for alternative spaces in formal institutions. The youth provide a critique of mainstream society and discuss a range of topics including the different schools they had attended prior to *Youth Justice Coalition*, the criminalization of taggers, their community, and the availability of systems of social support.

Overall, the chapters of this thesis emphasize youths’ positive identities of themselves as artists and their aspirations to become mentors, parents, and future college students. These sections seek to motivate educators and researchers to provide youth with spaces that validate their voices. To fully comprehend the interviewees it is important to begin with evaluating and understanding the positive and negative outcome of youth’s culture and language.
Chapter 3: Literature Review

Vigil explains that graffiti (words or writings in public spaces) are use as a social expression and art (1988). This space creates a space resistance to dominant knowledge while recognized by society as a form of deviant behavior (1988). Graffiti as a space has created a paradigm in which the youth feel safe and welcomed to share their stories. According to Vigil, “tagging” crews and gangs have become a competitor to institutions because they have provided members with form of “self-identification” that differs from mainstream society (1988). These street groups are formed as a way to find the factors that contribute to their self-identification. Vigil argues that crews find a way to discover who they are, to prove that they are “worthy” or intelligent, since social institutions like schools have failed include them (1988).

The most prevalent problem in youth graffiti usage has to do with the belief that graffiti is a territorial mark influenced by gang activity (Vigil 1996). For many years, graffiti has been linked to gang identifiers which are used to claim territory. Phillips argues that the public believes that graffiti is only used by youth who have been part of a gang (1999). The public claims that if graffiti by gangs that there will be other criminal activities will also be performed beyond just “tagging on a walls.” These activities include shootings, the distribution and use of drugs, and, in some cases, murder.

Considering the tremendous number of people who feel that graffiti is a negative tool used by youth, Phillips argues that some community members have argued against the belief that tagging is part of gang activity (1998). Phillips claims that many researchers have proposed that “taggers” have become part of crews, something different
than gangs. For instance, there are other researchers that argue that “taggers are not gang members. Gang members mark their territory by writing the name of their gang; gang members tend to be more physically violent, and break the law for a variety of purposes, while taggers - whose loose affiliation with other taggers is known as a crew - tend to write their names and their crews, tend to be less violent, and limit stealing to spray paint cans” (MacGilavrain 357). Graffiti is a form of artistic expression created by crews who focus on developing artistic skills and have no territorial ties.

Youth who perform graffiti in the streets tend to have no ties to gangs. Instead, they create crews as a social network and support system. Graffiti crews are focused on providing a social support systems and social network for one another as a way to get youth involved in the space and recognized for their skills. Many crews provide a space for respect as well as to support one another by sharing resources. In the process of finding alternative social support, crews also serve as a space to compete with other crews to get recognized for their art. In many cases, style competitions with other crews do not involve people who are connected to gangs or their aesthetics such as shooting crew members from other crews and committing violent acts. Although there are many crews that compete with other crews, the main focus is to allow crews to form a space where they are able to build alliances and social support. Cooper suggest that crews are described as "a unit of dudes who work together to achieve a goal" (1984). This suggests that there are numerous types of crews whose affiliation has no connection to gangs and whose purpose is to encourage young graffiti artists to support one another.
Graffiti as Social and Political Resistance

Graffiti according to Vigil has become a common culture for youth because it has arisen as a competitor to other institutions such as family and schools (1988). Graffiti was initiated as a form of political resistance. The exclusion as stated by Phillip, felt by mainstream culture and the lack of representation in mainstream media has created a graffiti culture as an alternative space (1999). Taylor states in his article that, adolescents become involved in graffiti as a way to oppose the dominant ideology of society and the mainstream culture that seeks to assimilate youth (2010). Aguilar argues that one of the main reasons why tagging is perceived as deviant has to do with its opposition to white supremacy (2000). Tagging has been perceived for many years as a form of resistance against those in power: whites. Lachmann argues that deviant subcultures are formed as “symbolic forms of resistance to hegemonic class-dominant” (231). As theory that comes from Marxist scholars, graffiti suggests that it was a way for people of color to resist the ideologies imposed on them by those in power.

Many such as Posener, have used graffiti to aspire to social change (1982). As shown in Figure 1, graffiti is a tool use to “keep the public check on the abuse of power” (Tatum 171). Graffiti is a new form of language used to fight back against “systems imposed on them” (Lewisohn 2008). As show in Figure 2, there are different types of graffiti utensils for graffiti including stickers, knifes, permanent markers, paints, lipstick, chalk, and pencil (Whitford 1992). It is an alternative space for identity (re-self definition) for example age and sex role identification.
Many youth who engage in graffiti have done so as an alternative form of social network and support to make up for the lack of support and network in other institutions such as academia (MacGilavrain 2007). The social space created in the streets by “taggers” is a space where others can acknowledge their skills. “Taggers” have searched for recognition in these spaces because “taggers are typically unmotivated academically and are outsiders in their school environment” (MacGilavrain 2007). In the streets taggers find alliances, community and recognition for their work (Powers 1999). Students seek to feel a strong sense of “peer respect and approval security and protection, group support and acceptance” (Aguilar 2000). Alliances and crews build social support and help each other become recognized in their area or city.

Youth who seek social support through graffiti discover their own accomplishment, find respect, and become recognition by members of their community (Powers 1999). Young people seek recognition for their own talents. For example, graffiti crews are built as a network of social support to help each other become recognized in spaces such as New York City’s subway. Graffiti in New York arose as a way to mark territory by providing a nickname recognized in the streets in which the style of writing became important for one to standout more than others. In other words, fame and
recognition has become important for graffiti artists and "taggers." It is said that graffiti artists know to avoid painting over someone else’s work and all they are seeking for is recognition by other artist and community members (Cooper 1984).

Powers emphasizes that the alternative space created by graffiti has been used as a form of competition but also has become a space in the community where youth can be recognized for their accomplishments by building social networks through “crews” where crew members can acknowledge one another (1999). Crews build social support and help each other become recognized in the city (Powers 1999). Youths create a social support by providing each other with resources such as paint. They recognized each other for their talents, talents such as artistic talents in the form of graffiti that are not recognized within academia (Powers 1999). Powers argues that they also create a social support to develop alternative spaces to re-define identify. Again, support systems are created because youth have failed to receive support in other institutions such as academia. Although Powers emphasizes that the use of graffiti is to create a space to re-define youth’s identity in spaces on the streets, youth also encounter risks while using this space (Powers 1999).

Lugones (1983) explains the phenomenon of intersectionality of race, class, gender, and sexuality with the concept of “colonial power.” This concept that can be utilized to explain the discourse of alternative spaces such as graffiti since colonial power is used as a way to explain current systems of oppression, domination, and exploitation as they are related to capitalist power that has derived from coloniality and modernity. Lugones also claims that colonialism and the hegemonic ideologies have been systems to
oppress and exploit others; knowledge derived from those with no power is constantly marginalized and oppressed. Graffiti is an alternative form of knowledge that does not derive from the hegemonic ideologies and it has been constantly turned down by law enforcement as a way to control the spread of a new form of alternative knowledge. Weasel (2004) demonstrates how graffiti works as an alternative visual culture which has been silenced and how those who perform this act are oppressed or punished. Therefore, community members who are not part of the graffiti subculture are told that this act can endanger the community which then categorizes any member who performs in graffiti as a criminal.

Weasel also states that graffiti is a “disorder” that cost too much money to fix. This is identified as a disorder created by people of color in low-income neighborhoods, and is viewed as a creation that needs to be stopped because it destroys the nature of current cities expensive to control. It is suggested that this knowledge is rejected because those who performed graffiti are people of color and from low-income neighborhoods. According to Lugones, people in low-income communities or communities of color are often classified or labeled as inferior with little access to power to enable them to produce new knowledge (2008). In contrast, law enforcement and those who spend tremendous efforts in controlling graffiti are those in power and those who control the production of knowledge, identity, and visual culture. While coloniality incorporates sexual access, authority, and labor, coloniality in relation to the graffiti phenomenon holds access to the control of production of knowledge. It is also a new visual knowledge since it seeks a different type of identity.
The most essential aspect of adolescence for youth is their quest for identity, especially during their teenage years (Fox 2006). Part of youth’s identity is in relation to their city and community. It is theorized that some youth who become involved in graffiti find themselves becoming part of graffiti as they seek to find a connection between themselves and their barrio. Many youth begin to challenge how space should be used in their city as a way to feel connected. Outside street groups become formed as a way to find the factors that are going to contribute to their “self-identification” (Vigil 1988). They look for a way to discover who they are and to prove their self-worth since institutions, like school, have failed to do this for them.

For many youth, graffiti is a tool used to discover where they belong in the bigger society (Bloch 2010). Graffiti can be used by many adolescents as a tool to discover their own identity and talents. Others believe that graffiti can help express youth’s identity using their own language (Gade 2003). Graffiti is a way to self-express issues of identity such as race, class, gender and sexual orientation. While doing this, youth find a tool for self-expression and question systems of power (Rodriguez 2009). Gauthier discusses how graffiti is a way to communicate and express struggles of identities (2001). Gauthier conducted a case study using interviews and visual documentation that helped him to analyze the art of graffiti or what he calls “visual representation.” Visual representation is art represented through issues of “gender, age, education, and class.” In his interview, Gauthier found common themes in “visual representation” including the common theme of identity; graffiti has developed a safe space to discuss issues of identity.
Although many researchers theorize that graffiti could help develop youth’s identity, others suggest that graffiti can be used as a visual way of searching for identity (Phillips 1998). Even with this being the case, graffiti can be a tool used to define an identity through shared cultural values. Although graffiti can be used as a tool for identity development, one must not forget that graffiti is considered vandalism and youth who are involved in the use of graffiti continue to be targets of the law.

As previously mentioned, graffiti has been associated with illegal activity and youth participating in the creation of graffiti have come to perceive themselves as criminals. Students find their involvement in graffiti as a criminal act; for instance, students have defined street graffiti art as a “hit and run art…unauthorized art in public spaces” (Hathway 2007). Hotchtritt concludes that when youth find themselves to be criminals, graffiti is no longer just a form for rebellion but a part of a criminal activity. If they have already been involved in criminal activity then they have involved themselves in a different type of “delinquency” (2008). Interestingly, when students consider themselves criminals they begin to assume the label of criminals and can become involved in other criminal activity. Graffiti artists do not follow traditional values and they are often involved in other acts of deviancy such as shoplifting (Hotchtritt 2008).

Criminalization of Graffiti

Graffiti is described as a problem that deteriorates neighborhoods (Scottsdale 2007). According to some, graffiti is not art, but rather a form of vandalism and deviancy. Deviancy is defined when a paradigm challenges dominant ideologies. Marxist scholars view deviant subculture as a symbolic form of resistance to hegemonic class-dominance
(Lachman 1988). Gauthier mentions that youth who engage in graffiti are stigmatized as “deviants, criminals, or freaks...are a destructive and dirty practice” and those who produce it “are vandals and should be treated as criminals” (2001). Graffiti is considered a crime whether it appears on private or public property. Many citizens are frustrated by youths’ continuous “tagging” efforts, especially when it is on their own walls. Graffiti is criminalized; if a youth is caught in the act, he/she may receive a penalty of imprisonment for three to five days or in some cases up to a year, as well as a fine of up to $500 dollars, depending on the damage (graffitihurts.com). Graffiti is described as non-artistic: an act that damages property and it’s gang-related. According to Sorensen in 1995 the United States spent about $4 billion dollars to clean graffiti (1997). This amounts to three dollars for every taxpayer in the United States per year. While Los Angeles Unified School District spent $13 million dollars to clean up their properties (Graffiti Hurts Website 2011). In 2006, the City of Los Angeles spent $24 million dollars to clean up graffiti.

Youth who perform or utilize graffiti as a space for self-expression are potentially exposed to other street crimes. Although it seems that graffiti may expose youth to other crimes, their involvement stems from the lack of available resources for artistic expression. This leads youth to utilize whatever tools are available for them to continue to express their agency including public walls, private walls, and stolen tools. Police identify graffiti as a social problem that is not only destroying the city, but endangering the very citizens of the city (Weasel 2004). Graffiti is not always associated with gang-related groups but it’s a possible way to vandalize and become involved in crime. Law enforcement and society encourage strong efforts to end graffiti by creating laws that
make it illegal for “taggers” to perform their activities on the public streets. Another concern is that youth who participate in graffiti are “at risk” of becoming involved in other more severe criminal activity. Lachmann repeats how most of the “tagging” materials are stolen without considering the motives behind this action (1988). One must wonder, do graffiti artists have any resources? According to Lachmann, providing resources for youth is highly importance in order to stop youth from pursuing “delinquent behavior” such as stealing (1988). Youth who create and work in these street spaces belong to low-income neighborhoods then it is possible to assume that their social support system is amongst their peers. Without resources for youth, this might lead “tagging” youth to follow the pressures of their peers and become involved in stealing and other criminal activity. The major concern for the law enforcement is that graffiti involves other social issues such as gang violence, vandalism, littering, shoplifting, and urination in public spaces (Weasel 2004). Studies shows that once youth are committing a crime or are arrested for having painted on the walls, youth are likely to be arrested for other crimes or felonies (Lachmann 1988). Being labeled as a “tagger” can determine the career opportunities by suggesting that youth and their involvement with tagging could get them to consider street types of careers that are considered “delinquent behavior.” When youth find their involvement with graffiti to be a criminal act youth also begin to define street graffiti art as a "hit and run art... unauthorized art in public spaces" (Hathway 2007). This suggests that those involved with graffiti can only change their deviant status by using acceptable forms of art mediums such as canvases, t-shirts, or coffee mugs. Establishing legal spaces for graffiti art can serve as an alternative to the
negative understandings of graffiti. According to Lachmann, spaces considered legal can be purchased (1988). However, what happens to those who do not have access or who can’t afford legal spaces? To avoid the police, youth need to become muralists or use canvases, yet in order for this to happen the artist needs resources including money. Once more, what happens to those who do not have these resources?

Graffiti is only considered art when the artist has the ability to own property, or when art is created on their own property and showcased in galleries (Barnett 1993). Graffiti as art requires that the artist have prior schooling or graphic design training. Graffiti should be created in a constructive way. It’s only constructive when it is not painted on the streets, but those who do not perform graffiti in the street have the resources to show it in galleries. Youth do not have the resources to present their graffiti art in galleries or to even own property. Many refuse to take graffiti out of the streets because the discourse begins to pull away from their connection to the barrio.

Youth who typically become involved with tagging tend to be from low-income neighborhoods and youth of color. Grody writes: “we are all poor kids in the city” (2006). Graffiti, or tagging, might be considered a criminal act because those who are involved in tagging tend to be from minority neighborhoods (Aguilar 2000). Graffiti serves more as a creative arena even through it is falsely related to crime. According to Carroll, “at-risk” youth engage in “delinquent behavior” as a result of feeling neglected by their surroundings and by their limited resources (2001). “Delinquent groups” perceive themselves to be non-conformists by seeking to be valued by their peers and by using graffiti since they feel that they have been “neglected” from
access to resources. Much like Carroll, many taggers find themselves engaging in scholarly research that acknowledges and understands spaces created by youth such as graffiti (2001). However, in the process they fail to acknowledge and provide agency to the youths' voices and as a result youth begin to recognize such marginalization and express it through graffiti such as the piece in Figure 3. Carroll contributes to the stigma and misconceptions regarding graffiti and taggers since the research uses the term “delinquent “ as part of the title to characterize youth who use of graffiti (2001).

Historically, most efforts have been focused on discontinuing and further criminalizing graffiti.

Prevention Program and Institutionalize Efforts

Many consider the streets a dangerous space for youth, but youth’s experiences suggest that that the "streets [have] more impact on them than what they learned in school” (Nasaw 1985). Some of the most prominent obstacles in their lives include
"unemployment, pregnancy and early childbearing, illiteracy, drug use, gang
involvement, and violent crime" (Halpen 2000). Halpen suggests that many youth feel
"detached from school, psychologically and physically” (2000). Teaching students about
their social realities might affect the approach students take when addressing social
problems. There are many spaces created to help students combat the issues listed above,
but many of these spaces work within a mainstream reality and seek to mold students into
the dominant discourse by reaching out to students and providing spaces that limit the
production of alternative forms of knowledge such as graffiti. Many spaces available to
youth encompass mainstream extracurricular activities. For instance, the Boys and Girls
Club and other organization fail to negotiate rules that would make current spaces
appealing to "at-risk" youth since they do not speak their language(s) or understand their
culture or aesthetics. This leads to a prominent gap between "at-risk" youth and
mainstream programs. Understanding the incompatibility between mainstream
organizations and the needs of “at-risk” youth might help fill in the gap. The spaces
created outside of school can create alternative spaces that provide students with a sense
of belonging and a voice to articulate a form of knowledge that has been suppressed in
mainstream spaces.

There have also been projects such as the one at Valley College located in San
Fernando Valley of Los Angeles, California. “Great Wall Project” by Judith Baca aimed
to provide a space for the underrepresented to tell unspoken stories of oppression by
going youth considered to be “delinquents” to work on the project. Despite the efforts
to provide a voice to youth, in an interview with UCLA Today (a newspaper aimed at
faculty and staff), Baca failed to humanize the youth by stating: "My first eighty kids had all been arrested at least once. You can imagine … many were like complete lunatics. We had to figure out how to get them to work together — aside from killing each other, which was pretty close to occurring" (UCLA Today 2011). Her comment seems to contribute to misconceptions of youth who performed graffiti, misconceptions that suggest that youth who performed in graffiti are vandals and need to be fixed. It could also be argued that this interview might have been changed to fit the wider view of what society witnessed the project to be.

One must remember that those who performed graffiti do so as a form of resistance and self-expression against dominant ideology. There are many laws that silence this expression since these laws seek to control cultural expression. Those who are silenced have very few resources. According to Moreau (2011), the organization Graffiti Hurts seeks to find safe spaces that would keep graffiti artists from being caught in "crime.” Graffiti Hurts, a grassroots organization based in Connecticut, provides awareness to community members, schools, and law enforcement about the negative effects of graffiti including how graffiti harms communities. However, little evidence is provided in regards to the successes of this organization. Graffiti Hurts seeks to silence graffiti artists and place them as outsiders of society. They do this by reinforcing the conception that graffiti artists are criminals and that they need to be stopped. The organization aims to stop the poor people from misusing their city.

G.R.E.A.T is another in-school program that is implemented to stop graffiti. This program is used to teach elementary school students to not take part in delinquent
behavior (Acuña 2009). Students are encouraged to engage in activities such as cleaning graffiti markings found on campus facilities. This act is used to inform gang members that by cleaning the graffiti that they do not own the community. In other words, it suggests that “vandals” do not belong in the city. The main goal is to create a clean and nice community for the students. This program fails to ask that if gangs are part of the community, then what can be done to incorporate them into the community without marginalizing the group or excluding them from the creation of the neighborhood?

*G.R.E.A.T.* assumes that all graffiti is created by gang members, but this is not the case. In associating graffiti with gang activities, non-gang members who also perform graffiti are mislabeled and lumped together. Cleaning the walls may help beautify the schools and communities, but it leaves the root issues unanswered.

Other schools have developed techniques to control and spread awareness of graffiti by fostering misconceptions or stereotypes of where graffiti originates. Schools utilize childrens books to spread awareness of graffiti and to prevent it from happening (Adams 2008). Most of books contribute to the misconceptions of graffiti by molding children to believe graffiti is an evil tool used by gang members who seek to control the city and incite trouble. Luis Rodriguez’s “It Doesn’t Have to be This Way” focuses on telling his story through Mochi, the main character, and the brutality of having participated in a gang for eleven years (1999). Although it is a well-narrated story, its aim is to address the issue of leaving a gang rather than acknowledging the reason behind why youth join gangs to begin with. Although the story is not specifically focused on graffiti, it demonstrates what stories focus on and what is left out.
Children are exposed and molded into believing that graffiti is an act of criminality and anyone who becomes a part of this is also a criminal that needs to be persecuted. The assumption is that taggers act like criminals; they run and steal when the crime is being committed. Mitchellhill writes: "when the criminal goes into the bathroom, he'll spot the cans... So he'll pick them up and run for it" (2006). This encourages children to believe that taggers are criminals and taggers are dehumanized with these misconceptions. Some tagging in books suggests that taggers are monsters seek to destroy and deteriorate the residents’ property. Being able to punish taggers is a way to bring "security in our schools," but one must wonder, security for whom? Not only are taggers criminals but they are un-intelligent, "you are right! He can’t spell Brat and he doesn't know how to write an S" (Mitchellhill 2006).

Schools also encourage youth to form volunteer groups that will go around the city in search of graffiti so it can be painted over. This is not tackling the real problem and might lead to reappearance of graffiti. Many efforts are focused on painting over graffiti but “painting over graffiti serves to provide fresh canvases to waiting writers” (Aguilar 2000). Efforts to stop vandalism are very short-lived since these efforts recreate the spaces needed to graffiti. Efforts to stop graffiti such as repainting a wall ultimately provide a fresh wall for youth to graffiti once more. Many spend tremendous efforts to remove graffiti without realizing that it will re-appear again (Tatum 2001).

Many efforts to stop graffiti have been created by law enforcement as a way to protect citizens from criminal acts (2006). This suggests that for law enforcement, tagging is a form of creation resistance, finding recognition, marking territory, and
expressing themselves in alternative ways. The paints used by taggers are said to
deteriorate the city’s buildings. Penalties are given to those who destroy the city. The city
addresses graffiti by believing that "the faster the graffiti is removed the faster the
tagging problem diminishes," but many times this only creates an open canvas for youth
to continue to be involved with graffiti (Ash n.d). Many taggers tag up a name and are
cought by the community’s collaboration as a way of providing pride to the "city
identity" to protect the victims of graffiti, landlords (Ash n.d). Whitford suggests that the
public perceives graffiti as a form of vandalism and a "degeneration of environment.”
Graffiti needs to be removed and reported right away (1992). There are different types of
removal procedures, among them is identifying the liquids needed to remove the marks.
According to Graffiti Hurts ‘ website, the graffiti removal methods include painting over
the wall, using chemicals to remove it, and using water pressure with solvent to dissolve
the paint. There are also different coatings applied to different walls to prevent writing on
the walls. The coatings used are not available to the public. When the coatings are
applied, the paint or markers used for graffiti comes right off with the use of water or
blades. There are two different types of coating, sacrificial and non-sacrificial. Sacrificial
coatings act as barrier against the wall and the paint used on the wall. While non-
sacrificial coatings resist paints. Of course, these methods required an extensive efforts
and funding. Figure 4 demonstrates how removals depend on the type of wall the graffiti
was painted on.

Figure 4. Removal through water pressure (Iveson 2010)
Many homeowners are aggravated by graffiti because “some ordinances require homeowners to remove graffiti on their property” (Graffiti Hurts 2011). Some cities provide free clean-up assistance for graffiti that is drawn on private property. Apartment building owners are responsible for removing any graffiti on their property. Graffiti in condominiums are required to be cleaned up by the Condo Associations (graffitihurts.com). Law enforcement has also encouraged community members to volunteer to paint over graffiti (Kristian 2008). Many community members agree to go around the city and clean up tags as a way to protect the community from vandals. They find themselves believing that if they clean tags that are gang-affiliated then gangs will be eliminated.

One of the most recent forms of prevention against graffiti has been a part of controlling graffiti on streets with the use of a cell phone application (Walsh 2010). The application is an existing application used by police officers, but available on Iphones. The application allows officers to take pictures of graffiti and detect Global Positioning System (GPS) location. The picture is then sent to the graffiti hotline to detect the location and address the vandalism. The application can also capture a picture image of the vandal so that the city can detect who is vandalizing. This application was created to stop graffiti since graffiti has made residents feel unsafe. The creation of the application is unknown, but it can be speculated that those in charge of police surveillance might
have created it. This application continues to spread throughout cities in the United States. Currently, Long Beach has begun to use this application. Some are hopeful that in the future this application will become available to citizens to capture the vandals and control graffiti from spreading in cities. Again, there is tremendous amount of money being use to initiate programs to prevent graffiti from happening. However, there are no efforts dedicated to understanding the messages or ideas behind each wall’s tag.

There are currently other methods being used to control the spread of graffiti in cities. One of these methods includes militarized methods (Iveson 2010). The United States Army has militarized methods of controlling graffiti in public spaces (Figure 5). The United States Army has been involved in providing assistance to erase graffiti in public spaces. Some of the methods used to stop graffiti are installing razor wires to separate the spaces the New York subway walls from people who graffiti since most of the graffiti is usually performed on subways (Figure 6). Other methods used by the army also include the use of chemicals to erase tags on walls.
Others have encouraged the use of cameras to stop graffiti. For example, there is a CCTV surveillance camera used to record criminals in the act (Iveson 2010). The operation to stop graffiti involves "intelligent intellectuals" who learn about the culture and come up with strategies to wash out graffiti (Iveson 2010). Intelligent intellectuals that have not yet discovered why there is a continuous and tremendous growth of graffiti in public spaces. The funding that is provided to "Intelligent Intellectuals" to help address graffiti has not studied the graffiti culture nor have they come up with prevention methods. "Intelligent Intellectuals" are failing to ask themselves what is graffiti, why it is being done and how could youth channel their creativity with the money that is being spent on public space surveillance.

These “intellectuals” have spent tremendous amounts of effort and money to negotiate and propose prevention strategies. In all efforts they have excluded themselves from aspiring knowledge or acquiring information on the reasons behind youth’s engagement in graffiti. Furthermore, they have failed to provide answers to the modem of students who engage in graffiti and instead continue to look at the obvious paradigm in which suggests that all graffiti youth are criminals and committing crime. Most importantly these “intellectuals” have failed to acknowledge graffiti as an alternative space that counters the hegemonic ideologies that students are asked to be learn. As a result, few studies view alternative spaces as forms of cultural production, resistance, and
social support that can be gained outside of education system. Graffiti serves as a counter-narrative to students, when students become disengaged or excluded from the education system.

*Pulling Students out of the Streets*

There are overwhelming and continuous efforts to control and stop the use of graffiti in the streets as well as in schools and organizations. These efforts suggest that art is accepted as long as the artist has the means of purchasing spaces for creation. What these graffiti prevention strategies control is self-expression specifically of youth who cannot access the resources to become part of how the mainstream appreciates art and artists. An essential way to understand the use and creation of alternative spaces, such as in graffiti, is to learn and acknowledge the culture as a valid alternative in the production of knowledge. Graffiti is considered a form of self-expression that demonstrates artistic talent. However, when this form of art is performed on public walls without a valid permit then community members, authorities, or society consider it vandalism. Graffiti inspires education and writing. Many researchers have shown continuous effort to respond to anti-graffiti programs which seek to criminalize youth. Instead, these to researchers acknowledge students’ voices in school and organizational spaces.

Graffiti artists achieve self-definition through their art. The spaces used to re-define the self are often not safe spaces since most spaces are on the streets which might lead youth to criminal activity if they get caught “grafitiando” which is defined as art on the wall. The term is used by some graffiti artist. Collins’ *The Power of Self-Definition* mentions forms of resistance and the importance of alternative safe spaces (2009). One
form of resistance is not conforming to do what is expected. Another form of resistance is finding one’s voice and self worth\textsuperscript{16}. Oral presentations and the use of music are forms of resistance. Graffiti is identified as a form of resistance for youth. Redefining self-worth is often done in safe spaces not occupied by the oppressor. The importance of these relationships is recognition of the voices and social support system which are built in these spaces. The importance of these forms of resistance is that they create a new self-definition. They reject the negative images prescribed by those in power and are able to find validation of their self-worth. For instance, through images such as Figure 7 and Figure 8 demonstrate youth’s empowerment through cultural and ethnic representations.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure7.png}
\caption{Ethnic Representations of Graffiti}
\end{figure}

Space used to claim history, community, agency (Grody 2006)
Graffiti provides an opportunity for artists to "tell their stories" and to humanize their stories (Bowen 1999). This challenges the ideologies of mainstream society since graffiti humanizes youths’ experiences. Graffiti is an art for the marginalized to find a space in society. Art helps them make connections between school "and the outside world" (Bowen 1999). Since it is a form of self-expression, the education system should provide the tools for graffiti to be used as a tool for self-empowerment. If the system accepts this form as art and graffiti makers as artists, then graffiti makers will apply the styles they use in graffiti to different types of jobs. For instances, Bowen writes: "when I'm designing I'm thinking in a graffiti way, the way I put my elements together or my concepts” (1999). Mainstream audiences fail to acknowledge graffiti as an art form because it threatens mainstream society and its ideologies. As a result, graffiti "was not accepted as a valid art form by many of [the students’] instructors" (Bowen 1999). Youth who graffiti ask for recognition and acceptance, but doesn’t everyone seek this?

Graffiti is a "form of cultural production" and political resistance” (Peteet 1996). Peetet suggests recreating traditional spaces by pulling away from traditional ideologies (1996). In order to follow through with this, one needs to challenge youths’ relationship
to power and overthrow the system of hierarchy. Graffiti has enabled the voices of the underrepresented to "record history and to form and transform relationships" (Peetet 1996). Graffiti can be used to discuss issues of "gender, religion and politics" (Peetet 1996). Graffiti incorporates the act of writing and fosters a space for social action. Graffiti “[is] a way of communicating in spite of official censorship” and serves as a way to humanize the voices of the unheard in spaces where this would otherwise not be possible. This results in an unbalance of mainstream social ideals. Graffiti seeks to establish relationships between the reader and history (Peetet 1996) since “graffiti art has its own visual language employed by writers to convey meaning” (Gottlieb 2008).

Hip-hop, much like graffiti, is an alternative space in the community used to enrich of culture expression which has also been used within in the academy. As alternative spaces, these spaces serve as tools that can be used in schools which have also produced successful in humanizing the experiences of the community and promoting critical pedagogy and critical thinking. Hip-hop has set the tone to help visualize what culture production can accomplish for those who have recognized it as organic knowledge. For example, Tupac17 was aware of the tenets of critical pedagogy including why this form of pedagogy was not necessarily incorporated in the school curriculum. Instead, Tupac recognized that the curriculum was there to “keep you busy” and to keep one away from thinking critically of what is happening in society such as “police brutality… racism in America…[and] why people are hungry” (Dyson 2006). Hip-hop challenges such ideologies since it has been influenced by the African American community and their history (Dyson 2006). Challenging mainstream ideologies has been
a threat to mainstream culture since a critical consciousness becomes a threat to the social order. Dyson writes: “they’ll let you go as far as you want, but as soon as you start asking too many questions, and you’re ready to change, boom, that block will come” (2006). Despite the perceived threat, Tupac knew that he needed to use the process of critical pedagogy in his music as a way to tell the history of his community as well as engage the community in positive and critical way. Dyson (2006) understands the purpose behind Tupac’s music: “he was going to use rap to get kids reading again” (Dyson 2006). Although many hip-hop songs include lyrics and images of “derrieres, platinum jewelry, fine alcohol, premium weed, pimp culture, gangster rituals, and thug life,” this genre of music has reached beyond this. Hip hop sought true “authenticity” of the community by “speak[ing] about the things that affect me and about the things that affect our community” (Dyson 2006). For instance, Rose (1994) writes that hip hop has provided a space to speak about resistance and the power of language. Rose explains that “power and resistance are exercised through signs, language, and institutions” (1994). When rappers use the power of their lyrics to police brutality, rappers are then attacked and understood as a threat since they are interpreted a “advoca[ting] violence against police officers” (Rose 1994). The relationship between law enforcement and the African American community has always been hostile (Chang 2005). This suggests the Black community’s deep history of police brutality, profiling, and harassment and how hip hop creates a space to voice injustices. Hip hop as a space in schools and as a pedagogical tool highlights issues such racial profiling and police harassment and communicates this through popular culture. While blacks are perceived to be “cultural threat to American
society” since certain images are consistently presented to mainstream society, hip hop tells the story of an oppressed community much like graffiti. Graffiti and hip-hop artists communicate police harassment and the criminalization (Rose 1994). Rose argues that those who make the decisions of what will be represented in the mainstream media “[make] rap newsworthy for its spatial and cultural disruption, not its musical innovation and expressive capacity” (1994). Hip hop as a space counteracts the mainstream images of the black community and tells their history while encouraging and engaging its listeners to think critically (Rose 1994).

Cultural production such as hip-hop (another form of youth’s language) seeks to create equity and a strong sense of group organization (Pardue 2007). Students are said to have "selective attention can easily allow them to concentrate on different things simultaneously, switching focus instantly to activities that interest them” to helped integrate youth into the curriculum (Kan 2001). Educators should remain attentive to what exists outside of the classroom in order to help their students create a new self-identity as well as help provide their students with agency share their thoughts and experiences. This pedagogical approach helps demonstrate how leadership can help create social change through the power of words. Yet, the idea of social change has been devalued in society because it fails to contribute to capitalism and will unbalance social hierarchies. This type of approach avoids humiliation and struggles in a student’s schooling; it humanizes student’s voices and encourages a different type of knowledge (Bruce 2000).
Culture production encompasses a wide range of approaches including critical pedagogy praxis through the use of hip-hop. Hip hop education, as a form of cultural production, provides a pathway to more inclusive knowledge and serves to "legitimize perspectives on reality" (Pardue 2004). As modes of production, hip hop and graffiti provide legitimization to youths’ languages and voices. A critical pedagogy approach depends on and reflects social change. This idea can be considered as an alternative pedagogical approach. This approach creates a safe space where it is alright to reference social inequality as well as discuss students’ social realities. This becomes a key tool to engage “at-risk” youth in the public education system. Bruce explains the role of hip hop: "hip hop is where many our students live—the music they listen to their traditions in the language they speak, the clothes they wear, the way they interact in the streets” (2000). Educators can use the student’s language and build upon it. Many times the material is thought by the students as irrelevant to their lives and fails to speak to their language and social reality (Bruce 2000). As the material fails to engage youth, youth become completely disengaged from academia, then forming their own spaces of knowledge and becoming perceived by mainstream ideologies as lazy, "at-risk," and deviant (Bruce 2000).

Paul’s study seeks to "make high school English curriculum meaningful and as her initial efforts to conjugate verbs with students fails” (2000). Tools such as hip-hop and graffiti encourage educators to conduct their classroom with a pedagogical approach that uses students’ culture "to future them to work" (Paul 2000). When used in the classroom, hip hop and rap serve type of pedagogy that uses critical inquiry. This
approach provides agency to students by recognizing their experiences "rather than [muting] the voice of students" (Giroux & Simon 1989). This form of teaching helps students understand and learn their own positionality in relation to their communities and life experiences. To further explain, Paul explains: "the lack of cultural continuity in the classroom can result in the cultural misunderstanding, student resistance, and low teacher expectations of student success and self-fulfilling prophecies of student failure” (1989). Culture, as a tool, works to increase the chance of literacy success and contest illiteracy.

Much like hip hop, those who involve themselves with graffiti do so to establish a personal connection to their barrio, as a result of having been unable to find the same connection within their schools and other social institution (Fox 2006). Youth whom perform graffiti art challenge how spaces should be utilized; they use graffiti to communicate their history and the stories of their communities (Fox 2006). Many argue that graffiti provides a safe space where someone can find social support since these groups serve as networks. These groups provide subculture group support considering that they fall outside of the social support networks found in acceptable social institutions. Hip hop and graffiti subcultures stand against hegemonic class dominance and popular culture since these subcultures are left out of the sphere (Hall 1992). Dominant spaces leave out groups and create differences amongst these groups. Popular culture changes over time and who holds power often influences who can be part of mainstream culture. Mainstream culture is always changing and seems to consume countercultures and make them commodities.
Even though mainstream culture is a dominant feature, it still faces different forms of resistance. Cindy Cruz, a Chicana activist who has used her experiences to create a space from which she is able to re-define identity as a Chicana (2001). More specifically, Cruz uses her family to challenge gender roles by dressing in a way that challenges the socially prescribed gender roles. Cruz demonstrates resistance by creating alternative safe spaces for herself and her family. This could be identified as a safe space use of unspoken knowledge which influences someone’s identity in ways that differ the spaces in mainstream society. Similarly, youth use unspoken knowledge to create graffiti (Cruz 2001). Since minority students are stripped from power, they utilize alternative spaces to resist dominant mainstream ideologies and hegemonic structures.

Graffiti and the ideologies that exist within these spaces create a different dialogue outside of the discourses which exist in the mainstream sphere (Islam 2010). These spaces are important since youth who utilize these spaces can speak out in ways that other spaces might not allow them to do so. Additionally, these spaces provide a voice to graffiti artists and humanize their voices by shedding light to what is typically unspoken or unaddressed. Spaces that are creative and free of censorship serve as alternative spaces for social support, networking, identity negotiation, and as a connection to the barrio. For example, graffiti provides a safe space where is it is possible to discuss what is often silenced elsewhere community struggles as well as alternative forms of art and knowledge (Islam 2010). These spaces provide social meaning and an analysis of culture. Youth are able to express themselves psychologically. Youth may discover a sense of belonging within their neighborhood or barrio (Islam 2010). Graffiti
as a counterculture provides a space for youth’s voices. Graffiti can easily be overlooked, but it voices political and social concerns (Islam 2010). When dominant culture suspects that the power is shifting, dominant culture is threatened by alternative subcultures that are "the counter-posed."

The determination of what forms of production and knowledge are acceptable is determined by society itself. To challenge this discourse the ideologies within the construction of culture need to be determined. For example, within education, pre-existing ideologies have been constructed to encourage youth to value the languages of math, science, and mainstream history. Youth who reject these languages by creating graffiti are punished with expulsion or criminalization. Many have described this form of resistance as disobedient behavior: "there are situations in which the overwhelming resistance can no longer simply be described as resistance, but rather as a dominant form of disobedient behavior" (Shamai 1990). This suggests that in order be considered "obedient" one has to be submissive and respect the social hierarchy. However, this places minority youth at an evident disadvantage. Resistance seeks to challenge prescribed roles, rules, and norms that have been put in place by a mainstream discourse. Mainstream discourse pre-exist the negotiation of roles and norms. In other words, rules were negotiated and socially constructed by those controlling the dominant ideology. For example, the authors of graffiti demand that they will not “stop writing on the walls because [their] views may be offensive to others,” but they are only silenced because the reality is that the views are contradicting mainstream ideologies (Islam 2010). As a result, the public perceives graffiti negatively since goes against mainstream ideas including
what represented in the media. This speaks to who controls the trends presented in the media, and the dominant ideologies that are included in those trends. Ultimately, this excludes the voices and concerns of the underrepresented (Islam 2010).

*Multicultural Education*

Recent banking curriculum recognizes the need for involving youth in academia. For instance, multicultural education seeks to engage youth. Research demonstrates that educators often times work with students from a different ethnic background than their own (Mahiri 1998). Curriculum has not yet shown to be open teaching students using the language of graffiti. Mahiri’s study reveals that teachers are discouraged to teach using a critical pedagogical approach which in turn molds students according to a mainstream lens (1998). This might result in students demonstrating opposition to what is being taught to them (Mahiri 1998). Even when educators begin to use this pedagogical approach, students demonstrate an unwillingness to being taught by an outsider and often do not feel comfortable to share their non-academic life while at school. Considering this, many educators will fail to understand the world that they are coming from, their own privilege (Mahiri 1998). It important to consider other concerns beyond the physical spaces that are available for youth since they will expect to be acknowledged, respected, accepted, understood, and will desire that their knowledge be validated in the physical space. Additionally, it is necessary to focus on the language that students use since understanding their language helps understand their life. While language can be understood literally, youths’ language refers to performance, aesthetics, and “lingo.”
It is suggested that if students find a space for themselves in school, it can prevent them from being considered “at risk.” This could also aid students in becoming aware of their ethnic identity since youth stereotypes can determine academic success. For instance, Gonzalez found that: “… eighth graders whose ethnic identity included reference to academic achievement had higher G.P.A. Being aware of their ethnic identity reflect schools achievement. Positive ethnic encounters included things such as dances, multicultural curriculum. To learn about own race can reflect on how students perceived their role in society to be and foster positive race relations” (Gonzalez 2009). Teachers who use multicultural education might be able to find ways to relate to their students’ lives or use their language. Multicultural education acknowledges the languages that youth identify with. Calvin's short article (2005) suggests that graffiti activity in school can be used as a way to discover culture and identity through a new form of language. This type of teaching can help students re-define themselves. Although multicultural events help youth find bonds in the school, the curriculum has still not addressed race relations.

Adolescents’ identities are in crisis during their teen years and their identities often experiences rapid or unstable changes (2008). With an unstable identity there is a higher risk of youth “dropping-out” of school as well as higher risk of “delinquency.” Having a strong sense of ethnic identity or belonging to a group can lessen the risk of dropping out and “delinquency.” Awareness of one’s race can be a good predictor of staying in school. Altschul (2006) states that beyond prevention, one can assume that youth look for a sense of belonging by discovering an identity at a young age. If youth
are not feeling a sense of belonging or finding places where they belong in school then
they might find outside spaces could put a student “at risk” of becoming involved in
“delinquent behavior” (Altschul 2006). These findings have been given attention in
academia to utilize spaces to as spaces where transformation can happen and where there
is hope of building a positive identity.
Chapter 4: Findings

In education, graffiti provides a space for students to link knowledge of their social realities to art. Art reflects a reality that connects communities through its theory (Da-Silva-Iddings 2011). Graffiti also "provide[s] a more humane habitat for the underground dwellers” and promotes critical awareness (Da-Silva-Iddings 2011). It encourages students to "[read] the world and [think] critically about it (Da-Silva-Iddings 2011). Graffiti speaks to color, history, and it reflects an over changing styles that depends on audiences (Da-Silva-Iddings 2011). Graffiti promotes social action, awareness, and change through a "positive form of 'urban intervention'" (Da-Silva-Iddings 2011). Graffiti represents a different social reality composed of "valuable version[s] of local happenings" with the key component of negotiating space in a discourse usually formed by popular culture (Pardue 2004). Pardue also writes that "Graffiti is about conquering space,” but it also is about claiming a connection with graffiti artists and their own community (2004). This type of culture can be described as a cultural capital19, or knowledge that is composed of expression that alters the social reality of popular culture. Graffiti as a space provides a pathway for "teenagers to exercise their imaginations in occupying and transforming the prison space into a transitional space of skill development” (Pardue 2004). In these spaces, youth understand that the space provided is for expression and not related to territorial ties. Youth Justice Coalition's facilities provided a space for youth without territorial ties (see Figure 9).
Defining Art

Spaces, such as the ones provided by YJC, resist dominant knowledge and provide youth with the opportunity to construct an identity that reflects their commitment to their community which also stimulates new forms of knowledge. This spaces resists mainstream knowledge by questioning hegemonic ideologies. According to Anyon, knowledge has been the act of remembering material and that involves the regurgitation rather than inquiry as a way to keep individuals from challenging mainstream ideologies (1981). This concept of knowledge keeps students from aspiring to develop their own opinions on the material that is taught in their classrooms. At Youth Justice Coalition, youth who are involved with graffiti are encouraged to think of graffiti as a different type of knowledge, but most importantly as an art form. In doing so, young graffiti artists are moving away from the banking system that is typically found in schools and into a critical pedagogy paradigm that acts as a threat to the dominant system of power. Knowledge is critical and speaks to the community’s values. The knowledge youth pick up tends to speak the languages of underrepresented youth, youth typically outside of mainstream culture. This knowledge humanizes the voices of the youth and provides new
self-definitions. The knowledge they learn also humanizes their art, and their social surroundings. Lastly, it challenges the mainstream definitions of art and the self.

When youth interviewed were asked to define art, their definitions challenged the mainstream definition of art. For example, a mainstream definition of art could be “works created by artists: paintings, sculptures, etc., that are created to be beautiful or to express important ideas or feelings” (Webster Online Dictionary 2010). According to mainstream culture, art is found in galleries and defined by what is beautiful using the lens of mainstream society. To contrast, the youth from Youth Justice Coalition define art as challenging mainstream knowledge and validating alternative forms of knowledge.

When youth were asked to define art and knowledge, youth stated that no simple definition exists rather that these definitions encompasses larger social phenomenon. In other words, art that is not limited to mainstream museum and knowledge and is not defined by math and science. Mayra Garcia defines art as “expression, it’s just there” (4/2012). To Mayra, art “is the shit, is who you are. Like protesting is cool; you fighting for something” (4/2012). Similarly, Mateo Chavez defines art as “whatever you want it to be, does not have a form.” (4/2012). These conceptions of art allow graffiti to be taken away from its mainstream context. It is clearly included as art and as an alternative form of knowledge. It is important for graffiti, alternative forms of knowledge, and organic knowledge since “knowledge tends to be more analytical…critical of the social class structure or distribution of wealth and power” (Anyon 1981). According to David Chavez, an ex-YJC youth organizer:

Graff is subject to interpretation. Just because I personally view certain pieces as good or bad, isn’t that important as compared to
the value that the youth artist themselves have. But for me personally, I think the best pieces to come out of the Graff-lab happen when people are teaching each other and are going over concepts and critiquing their own art (9/2012).

As noted above, anything that is valued by the individual is also subject to being recreated or co-created with others. Using this process, knowledge is deepened, questioned, developed, and imagined into new possibilities. In other words, this type of art encourages the artist and others to challenge themselves and to engage in art even when it may be uncomfortable. This gives them the opportunity to question their own knowledge and to focus on learning the knowledge of others who been silenced.

Despite the transformative possibilities of art, there is also the possibility of pain when youth value and seek to maintain their individual and collective knowledge within their own communities. During the interviews, youth shared that the knowledge created through graffiti is a part of their community. They added that if graffiti is ever taken out of context it is in then it would no longer speak to their community.

Graffiti is always been underground and forever stay underground, that’s how it is and always will be. I guess just like politics and how people look at it, like if somebody bad mouths it is just going to be bad mouth like forever going to be bad mouth, so just forever going to be underground. It’s funny how street art gets more fame than graffiti. Like graffiti like takes time and detail. Nobody can do sharp lines like that it took him a while to do really sharp lines like that is like they did it with a no brush” (Mateo Chavez, 11/2012).

Mateo Chavez and other youth who share this understanding are not only challenging knowledge, art, and mainstream ideologies, but they are seeking for mainstream audiences to recognize they are equals and to accept their work as art. In asking for respect, youth imply that others honor street art as the origins of their work and graffiti as
the space where knowledge is expressed. Even though his art has a bad reputation, Mateo Chavez demonstrates that he is still passionate about his art regardless of the inherent tensions that exist in society. For many of these students graffiti has become a form of knowledge, or organic knowledge (Hall 1992). Despite the search for respect and recognition of his art, Mateo Chavez emphasizes that art that is created within the community needs to be kept within the barrio since it speaks about the experiences of the barrio. Not only are graffiti artists asking for respect, but they demand spaces in their communities where they can tell the stories of their communities in forms that are recognized by the members inside the community.

Definitions of an Artist

Society values art on canvases; however, the mainstream lens fails to acknowledge the voices of those who cannot afford canvases and do not use traditional, and acceptable forms of art. Mateo Chavez shares that it is ridiculous to suggest the discontinuation of the use of walls for graffiti since “canvases cost money. I make the world my canvas. Like I’m anti-billboards, it’s stupid, means nothing” (4/2012). For instance, Mayra Garcia explains how she is empowered to utilize the tools that she can afford to speak about her experiences: “Give me a can, I’ll be out, I’ll do something in 30 minutes” (4/2012). Other youth were empowered by their art and the realization that art is not limited to canvas, but rather that art is about representing and communicating their communities’ social reality. Youth also mentioned their passion for performing their art at anytime: “I’ll take his can right here (can on table) and hit up” (Juan Lopez 4/2012). For Juan Lopez, graffiti makes him feel empowered since it reflects his passion and it
speaks to him and his community. While graffiti as a form of knowledge has been devalued in society, youth at YJC begin to see themselves as artists who create alternative forms of knowledge that are also connected to their everyday lives.

Youth who participate in the *Youth Justice Coalition* value their work and their roles as artists. For example, Mateo Chavez believes that no one can be excluded from being considered an artist and that “everyone is an artist, all forms of art [are art], protestors are artist, you fighting for something is art” (11/2012). Mateo’s explanation and definition of an artist suggests that there is no way to limit the creativity of an artist. Instead, his definition expands what it means to be artist and suggests than an artist produces alternative forms of knowledge including in the form of art. Thus, artists are those with the passion for creation. Even though Mateo’s definition of an artist has support, it is clear that graffiti as a form of knowledge and as a form of art is often rejected in mainstream culture. As a result, youth begin to recognize that graffiti is considered by others to be a deviant act rather than as a form of self-expression. For example, Juan Lopez had heard and understood graffiti to be an act of “vandalism.” He had also heard positive attitudes regarding his work which challenges the misconceptions about graffiti artists. Juan explains: “people have said its vandalism, but others tell me its tight shit and art” (4/2012). Furthermore, youth challenge negative perceptions of graffiti artists. When asked what it meant to be an artist, youths’ definitions confront mainstream definitions and redefine graffiti as a valid production of art and knowledge. Mary explains that “everyone is artists, who are people to consider it bad?” (4/2012). In addition, Mayra challenges the misconceptions by stating: “it’s about using colors, give
everyone a chance to show what they are about … you can be an artist... when I say artist I just mean everything” (4/2012). Youth find themselves understanding that art is for anyone and that it can be various forms of expression and passion. Using their own language, youth have formed a subculture which serves as a counter-hegemonic space to mainstream culture or the “ideologies representing the interest of which specific groups” (Hebdige 1979). Graffiti as a subculture is rich in its representations and, as art; graffiti demonstrates a clear expression of colors and style (see Figure 10).

A spray can, markers, and a wall can create graffiti as an art form, but it can also explain why graffiti exists outside of mainstream ideologies and why it is viewed as posing a threat. Mayra Garcia explains: “[mainstream culture], they judge you about what you do, is their opinion, it doesn’t mean shit” (4/2012). As a symbol, graffiti is a tool which youth use to express their need to speak, to show who they are, and that they are capable of producing art despite the negative connotations that exist. Youth demonstrate through their art that they are humanizing themselves by claiming agency for their own lives and communities. Youth’s social critiques are forms of knowledge because graffiti
allows youth to understand knowledge as “pedagogies [that] form social and cultural criticism” (McLaren 1997). Graffiti challenges the perceptions of deviancy and criminality, but it also challenges mainstream rejection. Graffiti also critiques mainstream rejection in using critical pedagogy practices. The alienation that youth feel allows graffiti to be used as a form of social resistance in which they are encouraged to use their new knowledge for transformation. Graffiti holds the possibility to harm youth who might not view graffiti through a critical understanding since it can lead youth to actual deviancy and criminal activity (McLaren 2003).

Negotiating Hegemonic Relationships

Graffiti is defined by mainstream audiences as a criminal act and this definition is embedded in youths’ minds since tagging is criminalized. It is understood that “victims of cultural imperialism live their oppression by viewing themselves from the perspective of the way others view them,” something known as double consciousness20 (McLaren 2003). Although the graffiti subculture exists as an tool for inspiration to reclaim space and one’s belonging within a community, many times minority students claim that this graffiti as a form of knowledge is less valuable than mainstream knowledge. In Bowen’s interview with some youth, art is described as only pertaining to art that belongs in “an art gallery” and due to this definition a youth interview work in “graffiti was not accepted as a valid form of art” (n.d). Instead, youth determine that art is only defined as art when it is “displayed in an art gallery.” Art that exists outside of this space is considered a form of vandalism. Youth value the knowledge transcribed through graffiti; they also recognize and view their art as affiliated with vandalism and criminality. Youth at YJC
did not seem to devalue their own art when comparing it to art in galleries; they continued to perceive graffiti as art affiliated to criminal activity and vandalism. Many youth who see themselves as vandals have perpetuated dominant ideologies. There are youth who carry the images and ideologies of mainstream culture and reflect about their personal experiences using the language of “mainstream culture.” This reflects the idea of the double consciousness in which at times “the oppressed subject refuses to coincide with these devalued, objectified, stereotyped versions of herself or himself” (Young 1990). For example, some youth define their graffiti as relatable to an act of criminality. For instance, Mayra explains that “Mom don’t like it because it’s from a gang and yea people do it to hit up. I tag because adrenaline and feeling alive” (Mayra Garcia 4/2012). Mateo also mirrors the same idea: “Yea an adrenaline when chased” (Mateo Chavez 4/2012). Juan refers to adrenaline as well: “Yea, the high” (Juan Lopez 4/2012). In the previous section, youth expressed their views of graffiti as art, they also negotiated definitions of art and artists, and graffiti artists sought respect through different types of knowledge. However, Juan Lopez, Mayra Garcia and Mateo Chavez continue to link graffiti to a criminal art, art that involves feelings of a “high” or an “adrenaline rush.” To be involved with graffiti suggests that they are also involving themselves in the dangers of crime. Feeling a high when participating in a “crime” is one of the many reasons youth’s engage in the thrill of graffiti. Rose suggests that those in positions of power, decision-makers in a commercialized world, make decisions about what images are placed in the media for the public and create the perceptions that people have of themselves and others (1994). Youth who consider graffiti as a form of
criminality internalize this into a “hit and run art.” If youth understand graffiti as an art, they might also perceive this act as deviant; their perceptions of graffiti are understood not only as an art form, but also as a criminal act. The idea of double consciousness suggests that it is necessary to evaluate the significance of alternative spaces since youth negotiate their identities with embedded ideas that they learn through mainstream spaces.

Educators have the tools to help youth with the negative images that they apply to their own identities. For example, teachers who have students who begin to present themselves as taggers or who dress in a “deviant” manner might begin to believe that these students are not intelligent and are careless about their academics (Chavez 1993). Chavez mentions that students will determine what type of student they are by what their teachers categorized them to be. If a teacher stereotypes the student to be a criminal then the student might start to believe that they are a criminal or find themselves caring less for their academics. This pushes a student to seek social support in spaces that are nonacademic including on the streets with graffiti crews.

One must not forget that youth continue to challenge a hegemonic discourse through graffiti. It is as equally as important to provide spaces that challenge the popular misconceptions in order to fully challenge youth’s criminal identity. The youth shared that people demanding incarceration or any type of criminalization for performing graffiti need to understand that it becomes a “waste of time” to incarcerate those, “just for tagging; [for] being a graffiti artist” (Mateo Chavez 4/2012). Youth fail to accept the incarceration of taggers as a legitimate reason to go to jail. Moreover, the youth question the purpose of incarceration because in reality those in jail “change who they are when
they come out [of jail]“ (Mayra Garcia 4/2012). Mateo explains: “when they’re out, they are corrupted [because] they become gang banger, when [they were] in just for tagging” (Mateo Chavez 4/2012). Some youth are incarcerated for minor offenses such as tagging, but when they are released they become part of a gang or even depressed. Youth are concerned that the legal system is not protecting graffiti artists and that law enforcement is focusing their efforts in criminalizing and leading them to criminal life and activity as a result of criminalizing youth. Mayra Garcia shared that her “homie got out and he moved out never talked to anyone. [it seem that he was depressed but depression] That’s the enemy” (4/2012). Young graffiti artists work towards finding a sense of belonging to reject the labels that render them criminals. McLaren explains that “politics [are] occluded by neutralizing the contradictory relations between the stated intentions of democracy and its actual outcomes” and are “positioned to challenge larger social, cultural, and economic relations and practices that exploit some and privilege others” (1997).

By not providing spaces for graffiti, youth can face the dangers of their streets. Youth recognize graffiti as resistance, they see value and humanity, and demand respect for their art and for themselves. For example, Mateo Chavez shared that when he has been tagging “people take pictures of you follow you around chase you, and disrespect you. I went to jail for styling. I spit at the cop (white cop) and then he arrested me and told me ‘we are going to take him back were you belong’ I felt disrespected. Another time I was just walking, I said ‘stupid pig.’ The cop stopped me, searched me, accused me of giving him a fake ID. [He] folded it threw it at me, then got a call and left. I felt
disrespected.” (4/2012) Youth are not protected by laws and are continuously alienated, disrespected, and criminalized. While Mateo Chavez did insult the officer, he was also a victim of racial profiling since he was stopped for fitting the description of what a criminal might look like. When Mateo Chavez was detained, the policeresponse was to take him back where he belong, and this suggests that police view youth who fit a certain a stereotype as needing to be isolated and detained in jail. As a result of being criminalized, some youth are either already under surveillance or being punished by school policies. Besides feeling marginalized, Juan admitted: “I’m on probation” (Juan Lopez 4/2012). Mayra also explained her punishment: “I Got kicked out of school” (Mayra Garcia 4/2012). What is evident is that youth have continued using spaces as social resistance and rejecting a mainstream lifestyle of art and education, which places them in danger of criminalization and punishment. Youth seek available spaces to practice their art, which can result in a constant battle against the law.

Furthermore, youth also shared that they learn to navigate the spaces of graffiti by having to learn the rules created. This places students in danger because youth are at risk of being arrested. Youth involved in graffiti view deviancy and criminology with a different lens. Youth understand that a criminal act is more complicated than being a deviant from society; a criminal act many times challenges mainstream ideologies. Even within spaces created outside formal institutions, youth learn and negotiate the rules inside the space. Mayra explains: “some people don't cross it out [the graffiti on the walls] because they know what they represent but some people they just put their sticker over it, it doesn't really matter” (Mayra Garcia 11/2012). Mateo shared:
Some of these kids don’t understand they just want to write on everything, it gets annoying to see that, lil writing everywhere. It gets annoying to see that something that you really worked hard on like this really detail and everything lil shine lil outline, like three outlines in there and just a whole bunch and just to see it get written on gets people mad sometimes” (Mateo Chavez 11/2012).

Mateo Chavez demonstrates that he has learned that he might get frustrated or territorial about his paintings that he has to play according to street rules in order to stay out of trouble. Youth are socialized to negotiate and understand these new ideologies. Some of these ideologies are composed of the negotiation in tradition, aesthetics, or identity (ethnicity, gender, career, and communities). These spaces are described as forms of resistance and considered a form of culture capital. These spaces are alternative forms of production and ideologies that "exist outside the school, and 'school issues'" (Shamai 1990).

Youth’s identity can be unstable and place youth in higher risk of “drop-out” of school and can also lead to a high risk of “delinquency” (Hochtritt 2008). Belonging to a group or having a strong sense of ethnic identity can lessen the risk of dropping out and later delinquency. Altschul states one can assume that youth begin to look for a sense of belonging or begin to discovering identity at a young age (2006). As described through the following interviews, the outcome within the street spaces acquired by the youth is that the current spaces place the youth in danger; dangers like getting shot, getting arrested, fighting, and sometimes killed.

I always wrote my hood so I would always be there. So out of all of them every time one would get cross out, another hood would come and cross them out. So just be like hood by hood by hood. So once everything was cross out you just hear fights and then like drive by's.
Youth like Mateo and Mayra do not have a sense of belonging or connection to their school. They will seek out a place to be recognized, outside spaces that risks a student gets involved in real or perceived delinquent behavior. The overall social system has been purposely constructed to place these youth at a disadvantage. Mateo agrees with this idea: "Yea the police sometimes come and get up...they asks for permits so you have to do it quick, I don't get the whole situation (Mateo Chavez 11/2012). The irony is that the system has been constructed to reject images that do not form part of a dominant discourse even when acknowledging that artistic graffiti is respected inside streets rules and territorial gang associations. Laws fail to acknowledge that graffiti stops gang-related graffiti in ways that censorship has not. According to the youth, graffiti that is non-gang affiliated is respected in the community even amongst gangs since it represents and tells the story of their barrio. Mateo explains that “eventually somebody is going to like write around it [because] they respect it” (Mateo Chavez 11/2012). At this point, graffiti loses affiliations to territorial ties and actually helps to stop territorial tagging. Recognizing the possible benefits of graffiti art, what could prevent law enforcement and community members from accepting and acknowledging graffiti by providing designated spaces?
It is evident that spaces are refused to youth who create graffiti because they challenge mainstream culture and their act is viewed as “an intervention in a relationship of power” (Peetet 1996). The power structure has set up the system to disable youth from accessing resources and this limits youths ability to reclaim agency. With graffiti, they are able to create knowledge that validates their experiences and social realities. Youth link graffiti to their everyday lives and experiences to their social realities (McLaren 2003). This knowledge encourages “students [to] actively to participate in public discourses and debates over social, economic, and political issues that affect everyday life in their own and neighboring communities” (McLaren 2003). For example, youth shared how they navigate through a system that does not recognize graffiti as art. Instead, the system defines them as deviants which results in youth resistance against systems of power. Juan Lopez describes that if they “Remove [graffiti,] it goes back up” (4/2012). Juan’s statement suggests how youth engage in resistance and how they negotiate space. Youth become persistent in their reclamation of spaces, even though millions of dollars are spent every year to remove graffiti,youth continue to resist by performing graffiti as a way to demand respect and recognition. Mayra Garcia demonstrates resistance: “[I would say] “fuck you” [to those who remove it” (4/2012). To remove graffiti is to silence the youth’s expression and voices. Mary Garcia shares that “if [graffiti] keeps getting removed, you stop there and move on to the next one” (4/2012). On the other hand, Juan Lopez explained that by witnessing the removal of his art that he feels like there is a battle where he will “keep doing it utile they stop removing it” (4/2012) Mayra Garcia feels that those who pay to remove graffiti are “wasting time and their money” (4/2012).
Mateo Chavez would like mainstream audiences to “give [them] a chance and show what they are about” (4/2012). This demonstrates how youth demand respect of their art. Youth who practice resistance through venues such as graffiti, or perceived countercultures, demand recognition for knowledge that is normally rejected (Hall 1992). The counterculture occupies an alternative social space that is comprised of "expressions, hair styles, and ways of walking, standing, and talking" (Hall 1992). Many define this as organic knowledge. Graffiti as an alternative space provides youth with an opportunity to reconstruct and form an identity that alters or negotiates the identity found in dominant discourse. An alternative space negotiates "dominant and subordinate positions" and can be described as a "hybrid space." These spaces are also rich in the cultural traditions, experiences, and aesthetics of those who occupy these spaces. Occupants of hybrid spaces find themselves "negotiating different kinds of differences” (Hall 1992). In order to understand the ideologies that are found in alternative spaces, one must understand the reality, as well as be able to negotiate culture hegemony and hierarchies. Consequently, the construction of ethnic hierarchies has always defined culture politics (Hall 1992).

For example, dominant ideology is said to hold culture hegemony, the while the rest are always in competition with this shifting power. Dominant culture "has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people" (Hall 1992). Those who question dominant ideology and who validate graffiti as a form of knowledge and expression provide youth with recognition and acknowledgement. For example, youth get excited when they experience getting acknowledgment for their work. Mateo explains his excitement: “when I do legal walls like people honk and like what I do so is like, I kind
of like that, people, they want to see something that is done well on the wall” (Mateo Chavez 11/2012).

Feeling a sense of accomplishment or excitement when people honk for the artwork signals that youth need spaces where they can also feel recognition and respect. According to Altschul, by accepting that the society views graffiti as a deviant or delinquent act, one can assume that by engaging youth in school can prevent them from deviant acts (2006). One can assume that the youth seek a sense of belonging and search for identity from a young age. For example, “at-risk” youth use language to describe how those who become involved with graffiti are silenced in public schools. By challenging educators to change their own frames of reference and provide spaces for youth, youth might be deterred from identifying with criminals or deviant labels. Therefore, it is urged that graffiti spaces be provided in order to engage “at-risk” youth.

Critiques of Public Education

It may be difficult for educators to challenge curriculum and provide spaces for youth in their classroom since a certain type of curriculum has been favored in public schools. Some students are given work with the intent of keeping them busy. As a result, students question why or how on these assignments will be useful in their future; they disengage from school when they are unable to find a clear connection between the content of their assignments and their own lives. Greenberg explains the need for relevant material: “knowledge needs to be functional not just retained” (2003). Youth who participate in the Youth Justice Coalition program experience alienation in school when educators place great efforts in punishing and disciplining student’s behavior rather than
figuring out why students act out. Educators fail to acknowledge that the students act out when they feel disconnected from school and do not link students' lives to the classroom. Even students at times find themselves embedded in the reality of the banking system and a system that emphasizes a curriculum of math and science. For instance, when asked what worksheets they would do, and if they were allowed to choose their assignments, Mary Garcia still said math, because she knows that is what she has to do to graduate: "I would try to do my math and the worksheets that I need to understand" (Mary Garcia, 12/2012). Youth want to feel that the material is relevant to their experiences. For example, Juan Lopez demands teachers to “give stuff with color, pictures, and not pictures of alligators, what are we going to use that in life” (4/2012). It seems like Juan Lopez hopes for material that reflect his artistic interests and his social reality. Mary Garcia also states: “sometimes stuff be looking dead. Math don’t use in life, what the hell is pie? They don’t care, not even teaching you, they give us stuff to keep us busy” (4/2012). She demands to be given material work beyond the purpose of keeping the students busy, but rather provide material that reaches a student’s life. Mayra Garcia says, “give us stuff about life” (4/2012). Youth demand that their teachers provide them with relevant curriculum. According to Juan Lopez, there is “no connection” between school and a student’s life (4/2012). Some teachers encourage their students. Mayra Garcia shared her experiences: “they tells us to go to college, get shit together,” yet they fail to listen to student’s needs (4/2012). Juan Lopez exclaimed that he would like to see material that will challenge him and that reflects usefulness in real world, something
beyond the use of textbooks. “If I wanted to learn about crocodiles, I’ll turn on the Discovery Channel” (4/2012).

Traditionally, educators are trained to use a Eurocentric model that impedes teachers from looking at models that exist outside of the banking system. However, youth are asking teachers to help them engage with critical thinking and to teach them about material that is relevant to their lives. This request could be described as transformative intellectualism. Transformative intellectual places are important since they suggest that knowledge can be a type of language that is relevant to youth and their social realities and is used to reclaim power to their own lives and histories (Giroux 1988). Reclamation is defined politically as a way of accepting the fact that a privileged narrative exists. Privileged narrative is identified by Cruz as being created by the oppressor and those places of power (2001). The process of reclamation can invalidate mainstream knowledge and propose a new discourse of knowledge which threatens those who use spaces as a way to reconstruct their realities. In other words, graffiti as an alternative space is created to resist dominant ideologies. It is interpreted as threatening to dominant ideologies.

Albright suggests for educators to challenge the discourse used to teach students and question whether or not their current method is speaking or serving student’s needs, and/or forming part of a Eurocentric teaching method (2001). Students have shared that school "It’s boring why should I write," and that the lack of connection to the material makes for a “boring” aspect of education (Albright 2001). Educators need to listen to youths’ voices in order to understand youth and their background and experiences. This serves as a way to understand what may exclude youth from their schooling environment.
Often, educators including those who work for *Youth Justice Coalition*, seem to forget the importance of building connections with students who are eager to form those connections.

Juan Lopez emphasizes that the “space is small, they should get more people here, regular school is active” (4/2012). Students want to feel connected with their peers “yea active, more teachers, more students” (Gonzalez 4/2012). Youth have critiques about their spaces at *Youth Justice Coalition*. For instance, Juan Lopez shares that some “teachers not there for you”(4/2012). This experience is similar to the lack of teacher involvement in their former public high schools. Mary Garcia agrees with Juan’s critique since she shared that “here, they don’t care either [like in public school], they tell us to do the work” (4/2012). Mayra Garcia shares that “some teachers make it fun of others just make us do the work. [Teachers make it fun when] they put music plus give us packets. You don’t learn from books, worksheets, you learn from life mistakes. I teach through my art” (4/2012). Mayra Garcia challenges the concepts of learning and knowledge and humanizes her educational experience by using art and other aspects that are relevant to her life. Mayra Garcia suggests that art can be used to teach others about everyday experiences and subjects that are important to them. Mayra said that when using art as a critical pedagogy tool, educators begin to teach about life experiences and provide youth with a space to express themselves within education. Even though it is difficult to accept a critical pedagogy method, it is clear that educators need to reconsider the social order, reconstruct their preconceived notions of beauty, and to reconsider youth’s language(s), especially graffiti as a new form of knowledge.
Although YJC provides spaces for youth, educators continue to be disinterested in their students’ lives. Cristian Ochoa elaborates on this:

If I could change one thing about YJC would be to encourage the teachers to be more active in their lives. To feel their pain. It would help the students rely on their teachers and feel like they are being pushed to strive for a better life. It would make a major difference. Instead of having 95% of the students staying, you'd have 100%” (Cristian Ochoa 9/2012).

If educators do not understand their students, it is possible that "students refuse to accommodate themselves to the practices and discourses of schools" (Albright 2001). Cristian Ochoa suggests that students need to be encouraged and integrated in their education. Educators need to reach out to students and make them feel that they care about their lives beyond not just academically.

To some extent, the educators at Youth Justice Coalition continue to provide students with “busy work.” Youth express that feeling alienated was more prevalent at their former public schools. Mary Garcia explains:

When I used to go to that [public] school, my sister would just act like we’re doing work. Like, they will give us work but they will go sit down at their desk and they'll tell us to finish it but they never put attention to us like that...They'll just pass out the work and then tell us what to do and then that's it. Something they would have to do [a] different way is, just like, they should be talking more to their students, paying attention more to their students, trying to help them out, trying to do good, not having [to] be struggling with their problems in their minds. (Mary Garcia, 12/2012)

It seems that educators at YJC are so concerned with points and preparing their students to graduate from high school that they forget the reasons why these spaces exist. These spaces promote critical thinking and encourage youth to become active in the community
by producing knowledge and developing a positive identity. Educators need to “hear students’ voices and attempt to approach education through the problem-posing method, thus giving students an opportunity to engage in dialogue, while allowing themselves to be taught by their students” (Greenberg 2003). Some youth have experienced isolation while they attended public schools; they did not have personal or academic relationships with their teachers or with the curriculum material itself. Teachers seem to not feel a need to approach their students or to provide them with extra assistance in their classroom. For example, Mary Garcia shared that many teachers close their doors to the students by being unavailable to the students during lunch and snack time or by turning down questions during class.

[In public schools] Ummm, they look out pero they don’t look out like that they just ask but they don’t go towards you and be like, do you need help with such and such [it would be better if they did] because students would get the problem better they would explain it better like one on one type of shit, they would explain it better” (Mary Garcia, 12/2012).

While some teachers at Youth Justice Coalition are consumed with preparing their students to graduate from the school, they ultimately realized that students have the potential to graduate. While attending a public school, Mary Garcia described teachers who did not care for those students who needed an extra hand with school, those who needed support and motivation in the classroom. Instead, public school teachers seemed to believe that they would show interest once the student begins to show interest in their schooling.

Many times educators failed to connect their teaching material to youths’ own social realities. As a result, students feel disconnected from the material, yet educators
blame students since they perceive students to be uninterested. For example Mayra Garcia, through her interview for this study described the lack of engagement is the result of an irrelevant curriculum.

[The work was] boring and the test was like, it was easy, it was from easy math but then like, I just got bored of it because I did this shit like in middle school, how I'm I going to do it again in High School and then like the teacher, they only paid attention to certain students and I was in Algebra 1 and they only paid attention to certain students in the class [because] I would just be there drawing and hitting up in my folder and they be like were you work at. I’d finish it and they just look at it and they say was correct and that's it but they wouldn’t ask me like, do you want to keep moving on or like you know, they just kept giving me the same work. So I just stop doing... they just keep telling us, do your work so you can go to another school so you could go higher” (Mayra Garcia, 11/2012).

Mayra explains how alienation occurs when youth begin to feel like a sponge with the purpose of acquiring points for a grade rather for the sake of learning. Often times, this focus discourages youth and leads the youth to reject school. When educators engage in the stereotyping, dehumanizing, and indirect stratifying students (Vasudevan 2009), it becomes easier to get rid of the failing students by pushing them out of the system. Students can be expelled, sent to continuation schools, and often even pushed out of continuation schools. By not engaging students, Mayra Garcia and other students like herself find that they are uninterested in the material and engaged in other areas such as fighting.

“[At my public school,] I only paid attention to one class, it was like a history class but they were teaching about the cribs and the bloods how they came together. That’s the only class I paid attention to. Other than that I liked my swimming class, I liked to swim. But other than that I was just fighting” (Mayra Garcia, 11/2012).
Mayra’s experience suggests that the only open space for students seems to be the streets where they are exposed to other risks. This reality provides an open space for students to create their connections to their community in spaces that are not censored, that are welcoming different knowledge, that recognize different strengths, but that are exposing them to a life of street rules and games. Students then become engaged in resistance forms, and when a student creates forms of resistance, instead of the system addressing the reason behind the resistance, the system categorizes the student as a criminal and exits the student out of the system (Albright 2001). Many times when exiting the student out of the system, it pushes the student to lead a life categorized as criminal.

Educators need to remind themselves that knowledge is often times acquired by one’s social reality (Breitbart 1984). Most importantly, educators need to recognize that youths’ social realities are valid forms of knowledge. To understand this is to "begin to work toward the ultimate goal of respect, acceptance and celebration of difference among the various groups" (Rusciolelli 1994). One needs to avoid judgment and an ethnocentric mentality in regards to culture, when a culture seeks to provide a voice to a knowledge that can contribute to the current banking system. New knowledge incorporates class activities such as a dialogue of ideas, videos, art, and culture (Rusciolelli 1994). For example, graffiti is used to give voices to youth. These voices challenge and threaten youths’ conceptions of traditional ideologies; many tend to take “a negative or omissive, in the erasure of graffiti, rather than the positive practice of proactively producing discourse” (Islam 2010). Many educators fail to acknowledge that when spaces are provided to encourage graffiti, youth move away from tagging “desk, chairs, bathroom
when bored in class” (Mary Garcia, 4/2012) to acknowledging and empowering themselves as artists. Graffiti knowledge critically “attempts to provide students with the critical means to negotiate and translate their own particular lived experiences and subordinate knowledge forms” (McLaren 1997).

Graffiti art has been utilized as a venue where a language that youth understand is spoken and where youth are encouraged academically. Youth who participate in Youth Justice Coalition have shared that the organization provides a space where they are able to graffiti to complete art assignments, and where they are provided an opportunity that does not exist in public education. By using a critical pedagogy practice, educators become “concerned with student experiences in a threefold sense” (McLaren 1997). With this pedagogy, “students’ experiences are validated as a primary source of knowledge” and this “pedagogy attempts to provide students with the critical means to negotiate and translate critically their own particular lived experiences and subordinate knowledge forms” (McLaren 1997).

*Humanizing Academia and the Space Within*

It is not just about providing spaces for youth, this framework also addresses youths’ identity. In providing a transformative space that uses critical pedagogy as its methods, students become involved since they strive to connect with other students. While making connections becomes important students also need to feel connected to the curriculum: "It was not the act of writing itself that the students resisted but rather the topics and conventions of traditional writing assignments” and its failure to relate to their
lives (Mahiri 1998). This pedagogical approach views students as “informants on their cultural knowledge” and encourages the use of materials that can relate youths’ particular social realities as well as dialogue regarding issues that pertain to this reality (Mahiri 1998). With this approach, students are provided with an opportunity to reclaim agency and acknowledge their social reality. The knowledge produced in examining one’s reality is accepted as organic and intellectual knowledge.

A critical pedagogy approach seeks to change education by using students’ interests and acknowledging their interests as valid forms of knowledge (Mahiri 2000). Through a critical pedagogy approach, educators learn about culture and utilize it in school as a way to engage their students to their curriculum in order to transform education as a space where student are centered and where the needs of students are met (Pardue 2007). Additionally, critical pedagogy encourages educators to produce knowledge by using an art form to become aware of their biases and encourage students to participate in the classroom (Stuhr 1992). This approach empowers students by recognizing students’ “ability to influence economic political, and social institutions (Stuhr 1992). Many times the American education system ignores culture and neglects the fact that students can become agents of change and producers of knowledge (Stuhr 1992). In the traditional American education system, educators are molded to believe that youth are not informants of knowledge; they fail to acknowledge youth as valid intellectuals and producers of knowledge.

Organizations that provide alternative spaces for youth who have been pushed out of their former school encourage youth to be respected as valid voices and as agents of
change in their community. A critical pedagogy approach suggests that critically thinking can be used to deconstruct, debrief, and learn about history. The use of art as a critical pedagogy tool is one method can be used to engage youth who have felt isolated in the educational system. By doing this, one needs to understand culture as a symbolic form that represents groups of people. When individuals "exoticize" a culture they view that culture as "strange or foreign and comes close to connoting alien" (Garber 222). This means that it is not just important to claim to be multicultural and to flaunt culture as a great thing, but it is also important to understand the history of a culture and the living conditions of a group without using exoticism. Exoticism suggests that there is "one stable or standard [culture] around which [the world] moves" (Garber 1995). This suggests that many study culture and its relationship to mainstream culture (Garber 1995). When counterculture is studied, many researchers fail to acknowledge countercultures as their own units with their own ideologies and as producers of knowledge that exist outside of the mainstream. By utilizing art to teach culture, students begin to be exposed to different heritages, artifacts, histories, and develop a form of "border consciousness," an approach that has been described a thematic approach (Garber 2001). Art is an important tool to teach culture, a tool that is beyond the memorizing, but rather a tool used to understand material and to "understand the arts as well as to produce art that matters" (Chalmers 1981). Art is not just an act of interaction but it becomes a space to enrich history and records the current social reality because art incorporates images that transform meaning through literature because (Chalmers 1981). The definition of a multicultural society many times excludes cultures that exist outside this
idealistic reality and as result many argue that an idealistic multicultural reality is non-existent (Chalmers 1981).

Transformative curriculum allows students to view themselves as sources of knowledge as opposed to students viewing their teachers as the only source of knowledge (Greenberg 2003). Why is this significant? A connection exists between students’ engagement in school, their sense of belonging, and the curriculum that speaks to students’ social reality. For example, educators in elite schools emphasize that knowledge comes from “past experiences or from tradition” (Anyon 1981). Elite schools utilize critical thinking because they believe that the privileged students who attend such schools will represent the future elite. Anyon describes the pedagogy that is used in elite schools: “knowledge tends to be more analytical…critical of the social class structure or distribution of wealth and power” and “more sophisticated, complex, and analytical than in other schools.” To contrast, minority students experience the banking system which limits their ability to create their own thoughts. In relation to graffiti, graffiti artists are better served by critical pedagogy since young graffiti artists threaten the systems of power by questioning the power structure with their art form.

This theory provides space to address students’ needs and interests rather than presenting a standardize curriculum or emphasizing test scores because it is proven that “the student, rather than the curriculum, is the proper center of a general education” (Read 1943). Knowledge is said to be tied to the meaning that a person places on it, thus this meaning is constructed by the social experiences lived by the particular individual, “there is no such thing as knowledge ‘out there’ independent of the knower, but only
knowledge we construct for ourselves as we learn (Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 1938)” (Hein 1991). What does this quote suggest about learning? Learning should not be limited to traditional forms, but instead learning should provide and expand knowledge beyond traditional subjects such as math, science, mainstream history, and traditional literature. Graffiti uses a previously silenced history rooted in both the past and present day struggles. David Chavez describes this use of history:

Tagging is [a] form of political and economic expression that has been used since the middle of the 20th century by Los Angeles youth to represent themselves and group affiliations. By providing a space for graff art we are opening up a safe space for youth to express themselves and trying to decriminalize artistic expression. Sometime access to the graff lab is the only outlet that youth have to work on their [art] that doesn’t put them at risk of arrest or harassment. For some of the youth I think it gives them something to look forward to (David Chavez, 9/2012).

David suggests that by providing spaces within institutions youth may avoid the dangers of the streets. There are few spaces where youth can represent themselves without risking criminalization. Organizations like the *Youth Justice Coalition* are clearly dedicated to providing youth with spaces where they can express themselves (see Figure 11).
Learning is not the construct of remembering, but also the value and significance the person gives to the thought. The attributes given by the person is the effect of the experiences and tools that the person has gained in life, “explanations which we fabricate for them” (Hein 1991). This encourages teachers to place a greater emphasis on acquiring knowledge rather than grading and points. It calls for teachers to evaluate and encourage learning before the completion of assignments since knowledge can keep students engaged, ready to learn rather than just busy. According to Hein, “If we accept the constructivist position, we are inevitably required to follow a pedagogy which argues that we must provide learners with the opportunity to: (a) interact with sensory data, and (b) construct their own world” (Hein 1991). This statement advocates for alternative space where students can create knowledge. These spaces give students the will power to critically examine their curriculum with tools provided at school, but most importantly they are encouraged to use their own experiences.

Finding a space for knowledge can be as simple as challenging the physical spaces of an organization. For graffiti artists, this means finding spaces with walls where young artists can express themselves. SKAM, another organization based in Chicago, uses graffiti as part of a program to help students express their talents within spaces where graffiti is permissible where students can be recognized for their art (Mejia-Rentas 1998). Much like Youth Justice Coalition, this organization’s graffiti program allows students to express their talents without criminalization (Mejia-Rentas 1988). SKAM’s
primary focus is to provide a space where students use graffiti as a tool that is meaningful to them. They are able to re-integrate their youth by keeping them away from delinquent behavior by serving as a resource. One of the greatest assets is that this organization provides students with the resources to buy permits to legally create their art on walls. The program provides them with canvases, painting materials, and wall space. The use of walls for graffiti art is permissible with permits that can be purchased by the organization. These organizations aim to validate youths’ voices and experiences by providing spaces and utilizing tools that challenge mainstream ideologies. Since youth are vulnerable to criminalization as a result of their tagging, organizations like SKAM and Youth Justice Coalition provide these safe spaces where graffiti can be pursued. While very few organizations provide youth with spaces to express their art form, YJC has provided these spaces so youth can be integrated in society. This support system also empowers “at-risk” youth.

Graffiti becomes threatening since spaces enriched by critical pedagogy teach students who think for themselves and to demand equal rights. For example, graffiti can be used as a way to ease students who have been tracked as “untouchable illiteracies.” It is suggested that it only takes choosing one thing that the students like and placing it in the classroom to get the students excited in order to practice the act of writing and reading (Kaprow 1994). McLaren suggests that “educational research should increase its focus on issues related to race, gender, and socioeconomic status” as a way to focus on the disengagement of youth of color (1997). McLaren also discusses how “in the liberal humanistic classroom, politics is occluded by neutralizing the contradictory relations
between the stated intentions of democracy and its actual outcomes.” By promoting critical consciousness, critical thinking, and critiquing power, students are “positioned to challenge larger social, cultural, and economic relations and practices that exploit some and privilege others” as well as poised to understand the “dialogical depiction of structures of power as shifting, fluid and ongoing” (McLaren 1997). If these actions are not considered “schools become subsectors of the economy” and the “classroom life in ways that favor dominant social patterning’s and co-patternings of relationships, legitimize certain truth claims, regulate specific knowledge-power relations, and provide differential access to meanings and interpretations” (McLaren 1997, 208).

Similarly, Cristian Ochoa, a previous volunteer, explains that students are not:

coming to class ready to learn but they are even more excited to draw, tag, and rap. The YJC also has art night where their art is displayed in a gallery! They feel like they are part of their community by having their voice heard. I've witnessed students improve in their class work. They actually come to school instead of ditching with their friends. Some students want to leave during lunch but then decide to stay and tag.... I strongly believe that if public [school] had these kinds of "spaces", it would encourage students to be more focus with school and not engaging themselves in activities that would get them expelled... when you incorporate activities students enjoy, it encourages them to stay in school” (Cristian Ochoa 9/2012).

Beyond the curriculum, youth need physical spaces to feel integrated in the curriculum. This space is rich in new knowledge, ideologies, cultural production, and aesthetics.

Cristian Ochoa describes a space where youth are humanized by the way they witness their improvement in school because they begin to feel validated as individuals. They no longer feel like they are a number or a nameless person in their classrooms.
Students at YJC are encouraged and challenged by their educators to think of themselves as having empowered voices:

“At YJC’s F.R.E.E. (Fighting for the Revolution that will Educate and Empower) Los Angeles High School, youth who [are] criminalized by the state, media, and followed by their community who receive these messages, are treated with dignity and respect as students...I can say that in my class I tried hard to make the curriculum reflective of the student’s interest and I believe all the teachers try to. Since we are a vocational school that teaches community organizing, the issues that we organize around directly impact the youth and their communities because youth are the ones mobilizing around these campaigns” (David Chavez 9/2012).

David Chavez encourages other organizers to find alternative languages and to teach using these languages even if it poses a challenge. Using alternative languages is a way of developing new types of knowledge that can humanize the voices of marginalized youths. To do this, a “libratory education believes that the creation of knowledge comes about through a process of inquiry in which people explore their identity and insert themselves in the historical process of existence as human beings while attempting to transform reality” (Greenberg 2003). By understanding that teachers should provide a space for marginalized youth, it will help acknowledge that these spaces provide social and self agency to youth because it discovered and promoted a connection with their own social reality. Kolb (1984) also views learning as something related to an individual’s use of their experiences. He implies that a dialectical relationship must exist in order for the student to grasp and transform the learning situation” (Greenberg 2003). Providing the space where dialectic dialogues can occur includes youth reflecting on their overall academic experiences. As result, youth start feeling empowered by the space since they
begin to believe that they have worth. It is likely that they will not continue to be pushed out of schools as a result of their frustrations or their own issues Mayra explains this in her own words:

Like right here when you get in a fight or something you got to just is a circle you talk your problems out with the person you don't get along with or miss treated or something and then there's like three facilitators ...Over there is just like you’ll get down and you just get push out” (Mayra Garcia, 11/2012).

Mayra describes YJC as a unique community where honesty and support are present. This promotes solidarity amongst youth and reflects student participation and engagement inside the classroom. Youth who participate in the Youth Justice Coalition have not only been validated in a classroom setting, but they have been provided spaces as a way to express themselves through the circle or the “Graff Room.” These spaces are available to the youth as a way to validate their voices within the organization as well as during curriculum hours. Graffiti, according to Mayra Garcia is “use with projects, protest, something that means something,” implementing value to their art by exposing it during events. Juan Lopez explains that outside the classroom Youth Justice Coalition provides the youth with a room to tag, but “the room is used during lunch, after school, during school it is closed” (Juan Lopez, 4/2012). As an alternative space, the creation of the Graff Room creates a discourse about space and artistic expression since youth “[open] channels for the production of discourse” (Islam 2010).

Graffiti as a space allows for a different types of dialogue to take place outside of mainstream spheres. It pulls away from traditional learning tools like books and challenges students to acknowledge their communities’ knowledge. It provides a voice to
what goes unspoken as well as to what is silenced. Mayra explains: “like from books, you could read it about it, it'll stay in your head for a few days and from graffiti it is different” (Mayra Garcia, 11/2012). For Mayra, graffiti helps explain power relations, culture, and society. Most importantly, by speaking the students’ language, graffiti bridges a connection between academia and students. These spaces “record history and form and transform relationships” because they are identified as a different type of knowledge and view youth as organic intellectuals (Peetet 1996). For example, Mayra and other students feel that they could tag whatever is on their mind: “all walls should be painted with all colors [because it] looks alive, it looks nicer” (Mayra Garcia 4/2012). Graffiti as an alternative space created the initiative to take action, and to communicate without censorship. It humanizes the voices of those who go unheard. For the youth, graffiti is used to provide color, meaning, and belonging despite having previously been labeled “at-risk.” By being provided an education that did not seek to criminalize her, Mayra sees her world in color and feels that she is able to teach others what she has learned through her experiences and the struggles of her own community (see Figure 12).

Once you start walking and you see all the places that hit up like they be some valuable stuff that you can learn like I didn't know how throw a bomb like in 5 min until somebody taught me. There's taggers that bang and then there's just straight taggers” (Mayra Garcia, 4/2012).
Known for their resistance, alternative spaces continue to be viewed as deviant since the number of “at-risk” youth continues to increase. Deviancy cannot be likened as resistance since the voices of the youth will continue to be silenced. Youth who perform acts of graffiti will continue to be labeled as criminals. It is important to understand that resistance is not criminal activity or rebellion, this confusion does not get to the root of the problem. If youth are criminalized, the result is to accept the prison industrial complex because that is the currently the only open space for youth who navigate themselves through the streets which is problematic. An alternative approach is to teach youth using a model based on critical pedagogy in which safe spaces can give youth a voice for social transformation and counter-narratives. Islam (2010) writes: "alternative spaces provide an opening channel for the production of discourse.” A critical pedagogical approach builds alternative safe spaces in schools and provides counter-narratives (Vasudevan 2009). The importance of alternative models is grounded in social justice since these spaces strive to change and provide a voice to a new mode of production (Buttaro 2010). Educators are challenged and encouraged to think critically of the ways they teach diverse approaches without attempting to mold students to mainstream culture or a particular social reality (Vasudevan 2009). Educators need to find alternative teaching models; art should be used as a tool and a pedagogical approach (Vasudevan 2009). Understanding that the youth need these spaces is crucial.

Giroux describes a critical pedagogy approach which utilizes culture such as the above as a practice that forms part of a micro-objective idea in which through these idea educators “provide the theoretical building blocks that will enable students to make
connections between methods, content, and structure of course and its significance to the larger social reality” (Giroux 1988). One could argue that graffiti, as a space or culture production, provides youth with the ability to think critically about their surroundings. They are able to challenge issues that affect them by using their art “as mediating concepts that illuminate the meaning and significance micro-objectives might have with respect to the socio-political structures that exist outside of the classroom” (Giroux 1988). Not only does this speak to students who are being pushed out of the system, but it also engages youth in visual culture and provides them with a discourse that will help them reconstruct and reclaim "those places of discipline and surveillance that have historically and systematically been indifferent if not hostile to popular culture in any organized fashion" (Pardue 2004). In other words, Mateo Chavez and other youth explain that Youth Justice Coalition provided a space where they could practice their art without being criminalized and where they were respected and appreciated outside of the academic sphere. Mateo elaborates:

Yea, it's pretty cool [the graff room], I never seen a spot like this anywhere in my life that you can just do something you like and go to class something like that. Like in class when I use to go to high school like L.A.U.S.D. I use to get kick out of class because I was drawing in books and I had so much beef because they think I steal it, stole their books but I really didn’t. They like took [the book] away from me” (Mateo Chavez 11/2012).

At his former public school, Mateo Chavez was denied the ability express himself through his own language, as well as the ability to build on his passion for knowledge. Not only was he detained for expressing himself through graffiti, but he was a victim of a
procedure that desires control and prevents students from utilizing their own property for self-expression.

Critical pedagogy “bridges the gap between critical knowledge and social practice. This involves bringing theory into the streets…linking their struggles to larger national and international struggles” (McLaren 2003). By using a critical literacy lens in education, youth's struggles in the streets are linked to the classroom since curriculum extends beyond the act of memorizing and regurgitating the content. Graffiti is described by youth as an art form that speaks to them because it includes a language that represent their identity and the communities that they belong to. Art outside of youths own language or knowledge only results in the exclusion of youth and the disconnection between their valued worlds. For example, Mayra Garcia expressed that [In art galleries you see] “dumb sticks, pictures, what the fuck does it mean, does not mean anything)” (Juan Lopez 4/2012 ) “Or metal” (Mayra Garcia 4/2012). Mayra Garcia and Juan Lopez feel that art galleries do not speak to them and their experiences.“But graffiti is color, detail, something we care about, like Mateo Chavez shit is cool, it represents him, it has estilo (style)” (Mayra Garcia 4/2012). For youth, graffiti is a transcription of art that has “sentimiento (feeling)” and that speaks to their language and represents their experiences.

Youth who perform graffiti understand that graffiti art is not accepted in the larger world because it does not serve the capitalistic world or the dominant perspective. Mateo states: The art in museum is trying to make money.” He also considers the removal of the Los Angeles riverbed graffiti as something “wrong, should have left up it was years
of art. I think keep graffiti in the street, not gallery, not museum, keep it where it came from in the first place” (Mateo Chavez 4/2012).

“[at time I feel that museum art is not okay because artist should not] get money from something you didn’t do. [like that art that is represented through photographs of graffiti, that is not your work] When you take photos” (Mayra Garcia 4/2012).

Youth describe that what is considered accepted in society is run by capitalists. Youths’ dialogue about capitalism and its’ influence on art answers the questions as to why graffiti artists are rejected in society. One begins to understand that graffiti is important to youth because it is part of their community. Gallery art emphasizes profits rather than art based on the community or the communities’ struggles. These critical understandings are described as macro-objectives since they “provide the theoretical building blocks that will enable students to make connections between methods, content, and structure of course and its significance to the larger social reality” (Giroux 1988).

In providing spaces for youth who were perceived to be “at-risk,” one acknowledges that there limited graffiti-friendly spaces for youth. Inevitably, students need a space where they can learn to make connections and to feel acknowledged in spaces like the “Graff Room.” It is important to provide spaces for graffiti within schools since these spaces engage “at-risk” youth. By recognizing that society views graffiti as an act of deviancy or delinquency, one can assume that school engagement can prevent such acts (Altschul 2006). One can assume that the youth seek a sense of belonging or discover a need for identity at a young age. When youth do not have a sense of belonging to their school, they seek out places where they can be recognized, spaces
where they might risk becoming involved in "delinquent behavior." Therefore, it can be theorized that if schools were to utilize graffiti in their curriculum that graffiti could potentially engage “at risk” youth with their education. In the given place that this would to happen, teachers would be asked to expand their classroom and fit the current visual culture of youth, for some meaning graffiti (Hamman 2005). Not only will this help students feel more engaged in their schools, but some argue that graffiti could become a new way for educators to support students with writing and reading.

Providing Services through Graffiti

With graffiti, youth feel free to express themselves with the languages that are relevant to their everyday experiences. Mayra Garcia shares, “I teach through my art” (Mayra Garcia 4/2012). Youth express that the space at Youth Justice Coalition was very different from traditional public schools since YJC created a community and social support for youth. Mayra explains how Youth Justice Coalition provided her with support:

I had dropped out for like two years and so I came back to school. I think I'm actually doing good over here, like back then I use to fuck up because of my absences and my tardiness and I use to be fighting a lot pero aqui, you have to get along, is like why am I here for because I’m trying to do better... the only thing I change is that I have to be focusing more on school not just be in the streets fooling around and shit like that. (Mayra Garcia 12/2012).

Students have become connected with the spaces at YJC by establishing relationships with the staff, teachers, and volunteers that are beyond just acknowledging students within bounds of school. Instead, these relationships provide support to students beyond
their academics. For instance, Mayra shared the staff, teachers, and volunteers in the following manner:

Like they help you when you have court, they help you when you are on probation. I mean they teach you about your rights what cops can do and what cops can’t do. And then we have the circle the one I was telling you about, and they have that. And they help you find jobs if you need them. Like in other schools they just be like you got to go to school, you got to go to school you can’t work. And even if you want to work they will be like, that is not an excuse. Right here is like they know your trying to get money for yourself so that you won’t be out in the streets hustling” (Mayra Garcia, 11/2012).

Mary Garcia also explained how she could trust her teachers and the staff at Youth Justice Coalition by stating that “Right here I could talk to anybody about any situation they’ll try to help me out ... the difference is that ... right here you could actually trust these people like your teachers, the staff” (Mary Garcia 12/2012). Youth Justice Coalition not only concerns itself with helping students graduate, but they concern themselves with giving students the tools to be able to solve problems outside the of school’s curriculum by using methods such as the circle. They become engaged in youths’ lives by helping them find jobs since they understand and recognize youth’s social reality which often includes poverty. Most importantly, Mayra feels that youth can approach their educators with kind of problem face outside of academia. This sets the tone for the youth who occupy spaces in Youth Justice Coalition since it encourages youth to come to class, attend labs like the “Graff Room,” and approach teachers when they need support or advice with their school and personal problems.
According to Mayra, to build support with youth, students just like herself need to feel connected to the staff:

“They are all white people, for real like there was no type of Hispanic teacher in the school I use to go to they were all white and like ... [well] Kim is white but I can relate to her because she’s been through what we been through she did her own shit and we did our own shit but she knows how it goes like she knows what’s up with the system but like when you are trying to talk to like the other teacher they don’t know. They be like Oh my God I need call the police, what the fuck they going do, they don’t do shit I can’t explain it, like you have the vibe you know who comes from where and if you can get along with them, so” (Mayra Garcia 11/2012).

To provide spaces for youth is to speak the youth’s own language. It requires understanding and to legitimizing youth’s experiences. Like Mayra explained, this extends beyond being of the same ethnicity, race or gender, it is about accepting new knowledge and understanding how this knowledge inside a space driven by mainstream knowledge provides support and respect to the youth.

When they were first interviewed, many students expressed that they wanted their spaces to be larger and more interactive as in a high school. For instance, Juan commented: "[the] place is small... regular school is active"(Juan Lopez 4/2012). By the follow-up interview, many students were being close to graduating from Youth Justice Coalition. They shared that the spaces at YJC were important for them. When compared to the public school system, they shared that at YJC youth had built connections and learned to pursue knowledge. They looked beyond the packets of busy work and learned to analyze and interpret the information that was given to them. Educators at YJC have become aware that the youth need spaces like the ‘Graff Room’ and the classroom where
they can be acknowledged for their unique languages. These spaces create knowledge through unrestricted student expression. Due to the connections that the students build within the spaces at YJC, youth begin to feel connected to learning and their education; they are inspired to graduate from school. Some youth at YJC described being attached to spaces such like the “Graff Room” since these spaces were their first link to the school:

“O yea I use to come in here, this is where I use to come and just stay, just look at everything the variety and see who has been here who’s been through here...there needs to be more spaces because they got a lot, because they probably. this one is the only one I know and another one in Oakland but that one is different. ... I'm kind of glad I came here if I didn’t, I would have been sitting in the streets doing who knows what” (Mateo Chavez 11/2012).

After graduation, students like Mateo feel a strong connection to their school and they return to mentor other students who share similar experiences. Mateo discussed his mentoring: "I use to just like when I graduated I didn't come for nothing I use to just hang out and I was like man what I'm I doing, at least I got to do something. So I just started coming again [because] I disappeared for a while" (Mateo Chavez 11/2012).

Mateo felt a strong connection to Youth Justice Coalition and the “Graff Room” because he appreciates and loves those spaces. He appreciated the support he received at YJC which led him to return as a mentor, as a way of providing the support to students who re where he once was.

The spaces provided at YJC extend far beyond instruction and curriculum; it also serves as support for students when students are mixed with rival crews and gangs. The staff and teachers help set an environment where everyone knows the expectations.
Mayra explained that these spaces are "drama free, drama free. Even when you enroll in the paper it says leave all your dramas at home don’t bring it to school" (Mayra Garcia 11/2012). While on the streets, youth find that tagging is “very territorial, mean-time territorial, it’s like if somebody does something over you, your automatically gonna fight somebody or just stab or shoot somebody, it depends on the person though” (Mateo Chavez 11/2012). At Youth Justice Coalition, the “Graff Room” is described by Mayra as used to "just hit up they didn’t really care who they cross out and if they did cross somebody out they just come back and they'll tell whoever got cross out and they'll just come back and re-do it. They were never be like beef, like they were getting down or shanking each other and coughing them and they will just be like" (Mayra Garcia 11/2012). Mateo also shared the rules of the Graff Room as demonstrated in Figure 13:

[The Graff Room] is a room to write so eventually I’ll get run over just like in the streets because you are eventually get buck by like the buff team or somebody ... because is a free expression room, everybody knows every time you come in it eventually is gonna get buff. Unless they do something really high because they can't touch it...like this it slowly got written on. People get mad over it but you got to understand that shit is going to happened is bound to happened” (Mateo Chavez 11/2012).

Figure 13. The ‘Graff Room’ (2)
INGLEWOOD, CA NOVEMBER 20, 2012— A wall inside the ‘Graff Room’ at Youth Justice Coalition. There are tags on top of tags As mentioned by the students, this has not caused any fights. Photo by Carolina Franco.
Youth understand that the Graff Room is a room of free expression and that whoever writes on the walls needs to be respected. It is fascinating that the Graff Room is not only a way to integrate youth in school, but it also a way to prevent fights. *Youth Justice Coalition* utilizes a method that makes it clear that students need to leave their misunderstanding, rivalries, dramas, and fights outside of the school.

By using a critical pedagogy approach to acknowledge youth’s voices encourages educators to be more inclusive. The education system needs to be "inclusive… which can contribute to a more just inclusive and nonviolent society" (Bruce 2000, 120). This type of learning releases emotional pressures and promotes emotional self-expression. For example, Mateo Chavez has an emotional attachment to *Youth Justice Coalition* since he holds an attachment to the Graff Room. He states: “This [Graff Room] is basically where you can do whatever you want, try different things, what you are good at” (Mateo Chavez 11/2012).

Graffiti used in schools provides students with social support and a way to express themselves. Students begin to feel validated by their teachers and that they belong in academia. Graffiti can also be used to encourage teachers to respect their students while at the same time recognizing students’ skills without the use of grades and positive comments or remarks (Kells 2004). By using graffiti as an art form in the school curriculum, it can help motivate and empower youth (May 2010). It seems that youth would be empowered by continue school since they feel they are being respected for their work and that they have found a space where they are accepted. Pattey-Chavez claims that language can be a social indicator for school achievement and that in the long run it
can result in the retention of students since students’ language is respected (1993). Language refers to languages other than mainstream languages like English and Spanish, but rather languages such as “slang.” Students need to feel that their own language is being recognized in order for them to continue to remain engaged in their schooling. Not only does it promote self-expression, but it encourages educators to understand their students and to improve academic achievements by "[finding] words that will in turn help them to identify, clarify, express, and channel thoughts and feelings rather than act either inwardly or outwardly violent" (Bruce 2002). For example, Mayra Garcia shared that a "straight tagger is about what they write, and if you got beef with them then handle it with your hands” (Mayra Garcia 11/2012). Students transmit emotions through poems, but one needs to understands that students can transmit emotions through any form of art include graffiti. Self-expression helps create agency and recognizes graffiti as “talents to give voice to the anguish of a generation of young African American” despite racial inequality (Bruce 2000). Although this quote refers to African Americans, it applies to other minority students as well.

Students feel empowered by those who speak their languages. For example, Mateo Chavez shares that “my brother [influences me in life he is a tagger]” (Mateo Chavez 4/2012). Those who can speak the youth’s language empower youth. For example, Mayra Garcia feels empowered and has been influenced by those who can speak her language. Mayra Garcia also expressed this: “my sister has estilo, when you get out you see it” (Mayra Garcia 4/2012). The style that influences youth has to relate to their social reality. When graffiti is used, it is seen as a phenomenon of “cultural
production” which pulls away from traditional ways of occupying space (Peetet 1996). Alternative spaces provides youth with a safe space to discuss what they cannot discuss in other spaces because “Graffiti function[s] as a rich cultural form, providing important messages that would not appear in more conventional types of discourse” (Islam 2010). Youth who were interviewed shared how they were challenged and how they were transformed by alternative knowledge such as graffiti.

Although the topics used by the youth in graffiti are controversial, it must to be understood that the topics they tag about are relevant to their everyday lives and speaks to their reality. At an attempt to take this voice away from youth, youth navigate through the system until that social recognition, humanity honored and respect (the right to dignity) is acknowledged in the eyes of others.

In alternative space, like spaces where graffiti is created, “the oppressed are not ‘marginals’ [they] are not people living outside society. They have always been ‘inside’—inside the structure which made them beings for others” (Freire 1978). Youth begin understanding their social reality through their own histories and experiences (Freire 1978). With this knowledge, youth begin to become part of an “authentic” reality (Freire 1978). Youth's definitions or descriptions of themselves are described within a paradigm that utilizes graffiti as a new space. Youth were asked to define themselves after having been part of Youth Justice Coalition. Juan defined himself by his art: “Your art [describes you]” (Juan Lopez 4/2012). Mayra defined herself as “I’m me” (Mayra Garcia 4/2012). Mateo stated: [I’m an] “artist, nobody can do what I do, I’m unique, yea that’s the word”
(Mateo Chavez 4/2012). Lastly Mary Garcia said that she is just “Trying to get out, finish school here, I still do bad, but I’m trying to finish, I’m boss” (Mary Garcia 4/2012).

Youth demonstrate their empowerment, positive identities, and reflections of themselves. Mateo Chavez was asked to describe the styles he was excited to teach (see Figure 14 and 15). What they described reflects their identity as artists and as students looking for a positive future. This suggests that students to view themselves as positive actors in their communities.

“I guess like a community college...I would want to study criminal justice ... I like seeing... I would like... mmm... you know how like when there is a crime scene and like people are there to take the pictures and stuff like that” (Mary Garcia 12/2012).
It is evident that *Youth Justice Coalition*, as an organization, provides support and serves as a network for youth where they are able to express themselves without censorship. According to Roth (2003), the use of graffiti in an organization can help develop students’ artistic skills and self-expression. Most importantly, when students are provided with a safe space where they can express themselves in an artistic way without being censored, they are able to establish a positive identity. When a student has a positive identity, they turn away from searching for an identity in groups such as crews and in some cases gangs. Finding a space for graffiti in schools can influence student engagement and help students discover an alternate identity different from their prescribed criminal identity. This might result greater retention of students and prevent them from becoming involved in delinquent behavior.

*Understanding a Different Social Reality and Teaching*

There are schools that provide alternative spaces in order to help youth witness a different social reality. For example, Franco suggests that graffiti is used to discover new tools to explore topics that have been taught in mainstream society such as history (2010). Franco believes that graffiti can be used to teach history and to provide students with a connection to their own community as shown in Figure 18 (2010). Graffiti provides an opportunity to learn the history of the community, the unspoken history and the oppressed version of history. Many teachers have indirectly encouraged their students to neglect their own histories which can lead students to feel disengaged from themselves and the things around them. Franco suggests that graffiti can be a creative way of teaching history and an alternative way of critically learning without just memorizing
history. As previous mentioned, some students fail to see a connection between their own lives and the subjects they are taught in school. This results in many students becoming disinterested in school. By using graffiti as a way to teach history, students engage in the methods of learning and begin to think critically about events while acquiring a clear understanding of the events they are being taught. These methods allow students to interact with their peers and understand their perspectives. Franco shared that when using this method in his study, the data demonstrated that students were engaged in the lesson through graffiti because students were interested in the material (2010). Students were looking at their own history and others history through the use of art and where asked to critically think of what each art piece was demonstrating. Most mainstream history teachers have their students read about history without getting their students to think critically about the material that they are given. Certain art represents the un-spoken history: it addresses the race, class, gender, and sexuality of Mexican American people. “If the city was a body, graffiti would tell us where it hurt” (Aguilar 2003).

Students who are at risk of dropping-out of school can use graffiti as a way to engage in literacy and creative thinking (Weinstein 2002). Graffiti is a different type of language; it inscribes for the reader to critically think of the art and analyze the message behind it. Students are then told to read a different type of writing and think in a different way (Weinstein 2002). Weinstein (2002) writes" few studies of how marginalized adolescents—those who are considered by school personnel to be at risk of failure, ‘problem students’, or 'low achievers'—use literacy to make sense of their social and school lives.”
Aguilar argues that students engaging in graffiti have developed a different way to express literacy (2000). Graffiti can be alternative form of literacy that illustrates the history of Chicano identity and to some extent, the rebellion against gender subordination. Aguilar has analyzes graffiti as a public literacy practice because most “tags” illustrate ideas of self-definition and find how their cultural identity applies to the bigger picture (2000). Most graffiti is done fast, anonymously, and with very little materials. Some graffiti artists are pushed out of school. Those who create graffiti tend to be from low-income neighborhoods. Pushing youth out of school through expulsion and other methods only push youth into the streets where they become at risk of criminal involvement. If youth feel neglected in school then they create forms of resistance outside of school. There is a historic rise of the writing of the walls as a way to stand up against either racism or economic depression. Finding spaces they find relevant can attracts them to school.

Graffiti provides the opportunity for alternative assignments for students to discover and express their personal identity (Whitehead 2004). For example, Whitehead (2004) writes that graffiti is used to explore issues of identity by providing a space for self-expression. Using graffiti in a lesson plan would help with language development and motivate identity development as well as encourage youth to express themselves through art. Youth who were interviewed shared that some teachers continue to teach using curriculum grounded in the banking system and continue to be disconnected to the youth. There are other teachers who seek to provide youth with a curriculum that enable them to think critically about the world around them, to challenge hegemony and
question current forms of knowledge. Youth described how teachers use material to challenge their worldview. They encourage them to think beyond traditional subjects like math, history, and literature. Mayra explains:

“My English class, we basically we do like a lot of stuff, like our first assignment was about some Army stuff like how do they convince us to go into the Army. We'll read about the truth so they try to persuade them that is not good for us we are people and ... when their soldiers retire they don’t even give them a place to live they don’t give them a money they don’t find a job for...not so long ago I did meet some, he was a veteran too I was waiting for the bus and he goes like man I don’t got no place to live at I got to be hustling my money. He is selling drugs now. He use to be in the Army and now he is selling drugs because he don’t got nowhere to live he don’t got nowhere to get money” (Mayra Garcia, 11/2012).

Despite using busy work, some of the educators at YJC bridge the gap between students’ social reality and knowledge by using the same practices that are utilize by youth outside of school. Mary explains:

Well, I enjoy everything that I do right here... Like being in this woman class...We learned different stuff like it depend sometimes we have like a warrior circle something like that which is like all good and we just talk about like problem of the day stuff like that” (Mary Garcia 12/2012).

This woman’s class engages students to learn about issues that affect them in everyday live. Other classes such as the warrior circle have been formed to help students cope with student fights, disagreement, and arguments and the social problems they see in and out of school.

Fortunately, there are educators at YJC who have inspired youth to engage in alternative knowledge and have taught students that knowledge is more than a traditional subjects like math, science, and literature. Mateo shared:
They just taught me about education how is really powerful because they had me reading this book what is it call? I still have it though, but it just told me how I think it was about some guy that was like in slavery and he was like started teaching other kids like down in the south, they had to like, teach kids and like, in the night time and how he was traveling around everywhere hiding from everybody” (Mateo Chavez, 11/2012).

By providing knowledge that relates to youth's social reality, this in turn influences youth’s overall engagement, appreciation, and love for knowledge and learning.

Researchers have engaged in promoting cultural and linguistic alternatives in the classroom as a way to engage students into an isolated curriculum: “The purpose is to discover how students perceive their own cultural and linguistic reality within the classroom, and to explore some alternatives that can promote the emergence and limitation of voice in the American educational system (Greenberg 2003). This type of pedagogical practice moves beyond engaging youth in critical thinking, but encourages teachers to challenge themselves to use tools and languages that they have categorize as un-available. Cristian Ochoa shares:

YJC incorporates their hobbies into their studies. Most of the students at YJC enjoy writing lyrics, rapping, and tagging so YJC is opening a recording studio in their school to encourage students to come to class everyday and work on their studies as well as working on some of the hobbies. YJC also has a room for the taggers where they can freely express themselves through art. They are not just motivated but they also feel appreciates and cared for, something the public schools weren't giving them” (Cristian Ochoa, 9/2012).

It is important for educators to engage in students’ language to build a larger connection and an overall student integration in which youth feel they are respected and
acknowledge. Using graffiti as art in a school curriculum helps motivate and empower youth by acknowledging their form of artistic expression (May 2010).

Although graffiti has been described as a creative tool to help teach youth in a classroom, others suggested that graffiti in academia can help create a space for social support and self-expression (Hochtritt 2002). Calvin suggests that graffiti as an activity in schools helps to discover culture and identity (2005). It can also be used to develop artistic skills (Hathaway 2007). Graffiti has been used in schools as a way to help students to artistically express themselves and as a creative thinking method as youth who involved themselves in Graffiti do it to discovered their own identity and as a social expression (Whitehead 2004). If a student discovers their own identity in school, it is believed that students will feel no longer seek recognition on the streets. Hathaway reports that graffiti can also be used to develop artistic skills and create as safe space for artistic expression without devaluing the work of students who do not fit into mainstream art (2007).

In order to pull away from a mainstream knowledge and ideologies, knowledge should be understood as “a social construction which means that the world we inhabit as individuals is constructed symbolically by the mind…Only when we can name our experiences – give a voice to our own world and affirm ourselves as active social agents with a will and purpose – can we begin to transform meaning of those experiences by critically examining” such experiences (McLaren 1997). When the experiences of youth are legitimized, youth will understand their history and their position of power in society which can help them critically examine their place in the social structure. In order for this
to happen, the curriculum in education needs to provide a space to legitimize youth’s language and experience. Mayra shared how teachers at YJC have done this for their students:

We had a teacher named Bryant he will bump music but at the same time he will write he will graffiti bit that will be our assignment it be our English assignment. Like our resume he helps us. He will write he will do a graffiti type of thing and he will just put what we did and in the resume you thought umm...Yea your skills he would write it and that's how we did our work and that's how I got focus, he would bump music that we like and that he like and the way he wrote it and explain we well I learned other people did learn too but they don't take it as it was a big’ thing” (Mayra Garcia, 11/2012).

Youth need to relate and communicate to the work they are assigned by being encouraged to discover skills that can be utilized in the world. Through alternative methods, they can be provided with resume writing and other tools to survive in the real world. Teaching with a focus on youth’s language is important, but providing a space to acknowledge their experience is as equally important. Mayra shared her experiences:

“Right now I'm reading this book ... has to do with how a gang banger how he felt into the sticks. How he was born in the border of Texas and he would he got into gang banging once he was like, [because] when he was 13 he was already in the hood. Once he was 17 he was trial as an adult because of a murder case. But them two books like they get my attention [because] certain stuff they said I was doing. The way he reminisces about it, that’s the way I reminisce about it, that’s what I use to do back then. But those two books I don’t know they are hard to get” (Mayra Garcia, 11/2012).

Youth are aspiring to hear about personal experiences and struggles, experiences that speak to their experiences and communities. By changing the tools used to teach or
using youth’s experiences and languages, educators can form connections with students where they acknowledge what is often missing in education. For example, Mateo Chavez has understood that, “in the street you get recognized [through graffiti], in school [you do] not” (4/2012). To legitimize youth’s experiences through graffiti art is to recognize and understand that graffiti forms part of a world outside of the mainstream sphere. It is like speaking a language which transcribes experiences and new knowledge.

When the public understands graffiti as art, youth involved in graffiti will feel validated while at the same time they will understand that they are creating an alternative form of knowledge. By humanizing their experiences, graffiti legitimizes their voices and they will find their place in society. Once this is done, there is hope that eventually youth will be integrated into the overall structure and question positions of power. Often times, public education criminalizes graffiti for failing to form part of a traditional form of knowledge, or by understanding it as a territorial marker. Compared to public schools: youth shared their experiences in *Youth Justice Coalition*:

“You don’t tag anywhere in organization, everyone knows each other’s styles if I do something, tag anywhere else, I’ll get caught. When getting caught they give you graffiti removal, tell you not to do it” (Juan Lopez, 4/2012).

“But in public school you get arrested/ expelled depending on damages. They search your locker. Threatened you to sign a contract. I did not sign it” (Mateo Chavez, 4/2012).

“Make you sign a contract, I did and what’s the point eventually got kicked out. The contract is a promise to not do it again” (Mayra Garcia, 4/2012).

“You can’t even tag in your notebooks” (Mateo Chavez, 11/2012).
It becomes easier to criminalize graffiti on school grounds than to understand its message, the type of graffiti, or to even acknowledge what lies behind the words or drawings. In a public school, there is no space to legitimize a student’s language. Instead, schools control the use of space in hopes of invalidating the voices of youth and mold them to mainstream society. At *Youth Justice Coalition*, youth are not criminalized or threatened for “tagging.” This gives value to their languages and humanizes their voices.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

“This is my family now so I got to respect them, [the teachers], because they showed respect to me. They just taught me about education how is really powerful because they had reading[s]. Cus the old schools, [public schools], like regular schools they want to dictate everybody. Like a lot of space they supposedly are to help “at-risk” youth [but] there is not a lot of spaces like these that they just let you be you and let the students be connected. [This] school stands out so much” (Mateo Chavez 11/2012)

The impact that the space at Youth Justice Coalition had on youth who were labeled “at-risk” is evident through the youth’s voices and reflection of youths’ agency through alternate identities that reflect that of artists, activists and community members. Many of the youth came into the organization drained and worn-out by teachers and schools that sought to criminalize them. Many were pushed-out of both public and continuation schools and provided with no alternative path. As a result, the youth coming in had no ties to schools or any expectations to make relationships with teachers. The youth interviewed identify that if it was not for the room provided as a room of free expression, the Graff room, that they might not have been on campus for long periods of time. Through the hours spent in the room the youth were slowly integrated into the organization and connected to the school. This helped the teachers gain and build respect with the students and stimulate students' love and appreciation for new knowledge. This love for new knowledge was something that the students came in without understanding or wanting; as the time progress the youth begin building connections with this knowledge through books and writings that they appreciated and spoke to their experiences. This not only helped the teachers integrate the youth into the curriculum, but it helped develop relationships with the youth.
Youth Justice Coalition has provided the youth with an opportunity to discover a reality (the space in education) of education that reflects a personalized and humanized curriculum. School educators have taught students to appreciate the love of learning and provided them with the tools necessary to build positive identities and engage with their community. Most importantly, Youth Justice Coalition has identified, acknowledged, and provided a space for graffiti, a form of youth language. This form of language has given youth the opportunity to: discover new forms of knowledge, recognize oppression, become community advocates, become their own advocates, and re-identify themselves as artists, producers of knowledge, and organic intellectuals. Furthermore, the need for available spaces for youth labeled as “at-risk” has become critical; because without these spaces it is evident that “at-risk” youth will continue to seek such spaces for social support in the streets. There are many forms of youth language, and there is a necessity for spaces that provide youth with an opportunity to discover a new reality composed of social support, community engagement, reclaim agency, and an opportunity to humanize their own experiences.

It is important to learn how to utilize youth’s skills as way of navigating through life and integrating the “marginalized” into society. According to the youth they demand respect, not to be criminalized for using a tool that does not represent mainstream culture, but that at the same time speaks to their own communities. Youth demand the humanization of their voices instead of wanting the support for incarceration, criminalization, punishment, deviant labels, and isolation. The youth interviewed cried out for others to show them respect and provide them with opportunities for knowledge
and the appreciation to want to learn; the respect and understanding that community member’s demand for the walls of their property. Youth demand spaces that will provide them with the tools to keep them engaged and encouraged others to understand their messages, their voices, their histories and respect them as community members who are lacking resources to express their changing languages. To do this is more complicated than providing a room for graffiti or allowing youth to use graffiti to complete worksheets and/or assignments. It is about providing a space for positive identities reflecting in positive engagement in community and their lives and the opportunity to love and produce knowledge. While at the same time it is about learning to provide a space to respect their language as part of language that belongs to their own communities and not to a mainstream, popular culture.

Present efforts that aim to address the issues of “at-risk” youth have criminalized the youth for being engaged in ideologies outside mainstream population. These ideologies are formed to challenge mainstream ideologies. The voices of the youth have made it clear that it is essential to resist mainstream efforts and to encourage organizers, educators, and organizations to engage in a critical pedagogy curriculum in which they seek to humanize their students and understand their language. This research has proposed to evaluate a form of youth language, such as graffiti, and encourage the community to understand the reasons behind the use of graffiti as a learning tool and form of self-expression.

For many years it has been perceived that the youth using graffiti have been criminals and vandals, who are conducting themselves in deviancy because of lack of
correction or direction. Over the years researchers have uncovered that graffiti has been an approach used as a resistance tool. Along the same lines many of these researchers failed to make the connection between the use of graffiti and the importance of claiming a space for a developed positive social identity composed of creating knowledge and legitimizing their own experience. Alternative spaces, such as the ones created inside the paradigm of graffiti, serve as tools that assist the artist and as a tool to uncover an identity that can be outside the sphere of mainstream culture. As a result of the spread and the use of these alternative spaces, mainstream culture has performed continuous efforts to stop the spread of graffiti and the use of such spaces. As a result these efforts have sought to oppress youth from low-income neighborhoods and people of color because those behind graffiti have been overall identified as people of color or people belonging to low income neighborhoods. These efforts of censorship have lead youth who use alternative spaces, in this case for graffiti, to rebel against this through their only tool, the use of walls and spread of more graffiti as a form of reclamation and ownership of their own identity and agency of their own lives. The problem though has been that many community members have anger and frustration against the tags done on their property. This on-going cycle of censorship and reclamation of space has only resulted in a war between the tremendous efforts put together by schools, community members, and law enforcement to fight to control of graffiti in the community and by the youth who are continuously reclaiming the space. Many of these efforts result in the criminalization of youth identified as graffiti vandals. These control efforts fail to address the problem to
why youth continue to draw on walls, which is due to the isolation of institutions such as education, and the lack of humanizing youth and their experiences in such institutions.

Over the years the hegemonic system of power has enabled youth of color to feel isolated from society and the education system. This public education system has over the years been developed as a way to disadvantage youth of color and/or youth who organized themselves outside of mainstream culture. Graffiti is a counter-hegemonic tool. As youth performed graffiti they began engaging in critical thinking through a critical pedagogy lens and questioned systems of power while reclaiming such power through their own language such as tags. The youth in *Youth Justice Coalition* have demonstrated that their involvement in graffiti is far beyond the reasoning of rebelling or resisting against society, but has been done in a way to feel connected and integrated in their community, “hood.” Youth described graffiti as an avenue where they seek out respect and recognition. *Youth Justice Coalition* has provided a space for “at risk” youth to feel connected to society by providing them with a space to feel connected to their “hoods.”

The organization has placed a room for graffiti and allowed students to utilize graffiti to complete school-work in hopes of providing youth with a space to feel re-connected to their communities and re-established youth’s agency in their own lives and experiences. Youth in the organization feel that they are not criminalized and/or punished for expressing themselves in a way different from traditional forms of expression. This encourages youth to have images that reflect their positionalities as artists and members of their communities.
Through this curriculum youth felt valued as a student and person, and realize that they matter.

“[In] other school[s], [public schools] they just know you by your name and how you look, they just remember your face. [But] right here they get to know you from inside and your outside.” (Mayra Garcia)

The voices such as the one from Mayra Garcia demonstrate that there’s something lacking in academia. Her voice reflects that the curriculum has been formed in a way that aims to keep the student busy and that lacks a critical pedagogy lens in which grades and assignments are placed before student’s voices and knowledge.

Youth Justice Coalition aimed to open a space that provided youth with an opportunity to claimed identities as artist. The youth were able to re-construct this word and claimed it as their own identity that serves not only as a challenge to the definitions of what it means to be an artist, but their own identity that reflected one beyond the perceived definition of criminal youth. Through graffiti youth have begun to think about the disproportionate positions of power. The language in graffiti developed the pedagogical tool to critically think of the world around them and provided the youth with the knowledge and the tools to analyzed and be aware of their social realities, their own position in the social structure, and to mobilize and question this system of power in hopes of creating in some way a “human liberation” (McLaren 2003). Again, there are multiple youth languages and it is through a humanizing lens that an educational curriculum will be able to acknowledge, understand the language, provide spaces for this language in their institution, and with the process build positive identities for “at-risk” youth.
Youth at *Youth Justice Coalition* through their tools of graffiti re-define the word of art to acknowledge the production of new knowledge. Youth were able to identify graffiti as a valid production of knowledge. Many were able to recognize their work as valid tools to engage in alternative tools for writing, art, protesting, and community connection. They saw graffiti as a space with opportunities to learn about colors, life, school, and art. The reclamation of graffiti as a positive tool for knowledge help the youth feel connected to the physical space at *Youth Justice Coalition*. This resulted in continuous attendance to the school, *Youth Justice Coalition* in Inglewood. At first, the attendance was due to wanting to use the space to express themselves through graffiti, but for the four of the students interviewed, it became an attendance for wanting to graduate and obtain a diploma. This is as a way of keeping out of the streets and also reclaiming agency to their lives. As a result, many of the youth created goals of obtaining their diplomas, serving as mentors, wanting to attend a community college to become crime investigators, or even simply being loving, sober mothers. All identities and goals that would have been extremely distant if the organization, *Youth Justice Coalition*, would not have spoken the youth’s language, validated this language, and provided a space for such language.

Although this space has helped youth redefine themselves as artists and has provided them with a space to question positions of power, according to the youth the curriculum inside the school continues to be disengaged from youth’s needs and lives. Many youth have felt that their needs in *Youth Justice Coalition* have not been met yet and instead a few teachers continue to provide students with work that serves the purpose
of keeping youth busy. Although *Youth Justice Coalition* has given some agency to youth, youth continue to ask for someone “to finally understand them” (Mayra Garcia) by encouraging teachers to provide them with materials that they can relate to and will use outside of school. This could be used in hopes of creating an outcome where graffiti would encourage teachers to challenge their ways of teaching in hopes that teachers relate to their students social realities. Other youth express that there is further isolation in public schools, and as a result, have encouraged teachers at public schools to humanize them and treat them with respect and not as criminalized youth. Although there continuous to be the traditional teachers at the organization in *Youth Justice Coalition*, there are many other teachers working and/or volunteering in the organization that the youth have identified to speak and teach through means that they understand. Some of the educators at YJC use graffiti to help them complete assignments.

Furthermore, the youth identified other teachers who engaged their students by playing music in the background. There were those teachers who seek books and information and enable students to think of the world outside the walls of the organization, such as women injustices and the oppression of military men. Other staff members simply created an atmosphere in which the students felt welcome to share and utilize them as a support both in school and outside of school. According to the youth, building connections reaches far beyond being from the same race, for them they identified that the importance of feeling connected to the staff is about being able to feel that the staff understands and accepts their struggles. Some youth shared that they received support that reached beyond school issues, for example staff assisted youth to
find jobs when needed. There were youth who said that sometimes it was about helping with their resume, or searching for jobs because they understood that they needed that money. Not only is it important for the staff to accept the struggles that youth are facing but it becomes important for the staff to provide them with tools and resources to help their living conditions, such as support for court.

Although many of the youth were able to challenge their own identities within the space provided at *Youth Justice Coalition*, the youth interviewed were battling with the idea of their work being art and being viewed as artists, while at the same time reflecting upon their work as vandalism and criminal work. Many of the youth because of their experiences outside of the organization, such as being arrested for performing graffiti, continue to acknowledge graffiti as a form of vandalism. This demonstrates the need for alternative spaces utilizing critical pedagogy is essential to teenagers in high schools at the very beginning of their school career. This means that the youth need to be provided with spaces to legitimize youths voices and knowledge by providing them with support before youth feel isolate or are label “at-risk.” Youth describe graffiti as the rush that they get while tagging in the streets. Youth not only perceived their work as art but recognized that even though its art, they are still rejected through the mainstream sphere. And as a result, it was still considered in their eyes as a criminal activity. This idea has been identified as the “double consciousness” idea in which, on the one hand, youth are taught to acknowledge their work through a positive lens and as a form of art with themselves as the artist—and on the other hand, the youth also understand and get a rush from performing an activity that is perceived as deviancy.
Many youth though, even when recognizing their work as a perceived vandalism, reinforce that they will not stop their graffiti because for them it serves as a connection to their community. Youth want and stated that they liked to keep this art in the community and outside of the sphere of mainstream popular culture such as galleries. While they seek to keep it in the streets or in spaces where it is valued as the art of the community, they still ask for others to respect such activity and appreciate it as art. Through the art created at Youth Justice Coalition and the space provided in the organization, the youth were able to find a connection between themselves and their own school. Youth, through the school and their active engagement in the community, found an identity that helped them reclaim their connection to their barrio, hoods, or communities. Youth were also provided with the opportunities to become activists in their communities by participating in marches and inside their own classes learn about the living conditions of their communities. This active participation in the city, through utilizing tools such as graffiti, engaged youth to become active in community engagement, activism, and discovered reclamation for knowledge and love for such knowledge.

Ultimately, a school which emphasized critical pedagogy (knowledge) is really aspiring for social change and questioning the divisions of power that have over the years disempowered and placed people of color in positions of subordination. To understand graffiti and use it in the classroom is to recognize that such tools and open spaces will deconstruct the banking system of knowledge, and places disadvantaged youths into positions of agency over their own lives and educational experiences. Graffiti should be used as a way that not only helps youth complete tasks, but encourages youth to
understand their social realities, engages them in critical thinking by using a critical pedagogy lens, and integrates them in an educational system that has placed these youth in an evident disadvantage. Most importantly by providing a space for youth, the education system will provide agency to youth and recognize them as intellects of thought and knowledge.

It is necessary to understand youth and provide them with a curriculum that reaches far beyond the goal of keeping the student busy. It is essential to use the tools that are relevant to youth’s language and world, in order to enable students to think about society and positions of power and discontinue valuing material that serves one purpose, to keep youth busy. For example, aside from the efforts of providing a space for graffiti at Youth Justice Coalition, according to the youth, some teachers have failed to provide insightful material that would promote and/or encourage critical thinking and are relevant to their lives and their social realities. By using the tools that are relevant to youth and by understanding the type of knowledge that youth value and are producing, such as art, youth will begin to feel connected with their teachers and the material. In the contrast, Youth Justice Coalition has not only given youth the opportunity to express themselves freely inside the ‘Graff Room’, but they have also provided the youth with an opportunity to feel connected to a school and learn to love knowledge by utilizing material that reflect their interest, experiences, and history.

Overall, the space created at Youth Justice Coalition was a product of the theory of critical pedagogy because it spoke and advocated for youth’s language; as a result it continues to be acknowledged by the youth who form the community as a safe space of
respect, encouragement and support. By acknowledging students social reality and using the tools in youth’s communities to teach them to survive within the social structure, a larger mainstream society, students were encourage to think about knowledge beyond a simple memorization method but rather to think, feel, create and acknowledge their communities experiences as a new form of knowledge. Youth were provided with the opportunity to demonstrate that their knowledge was worth sharing and that they were capable and driven to produce knowledge in hopes of witnessing agency of their own lives. These positive identities were driven by the appreciation of academics and respect that youth were given about their language such as graffiti. Youth demonstrated these positive identities by becoming advocates for their own lives and communities, such as standing up against injustices, demanding justice for themselves and their barrio, their family.

To empower youth’s voices, such as the ones at Youth Justice Coalition, reveals a demand for an overall humanization for themselves, their voices, their interests, their experiences, their language, their history, their community, their families. Youth stand in solidarity with their own language to speak to others about the importance of acknowledging, supporting, and providing spaces in hopes of witnessing a different social reality away from a criminal identity. Overall youth through their own languages and spaces are calling out for a transformation, acknowledgement, respect, acceptance, and the opportunity to love academia as a unit enriched with powerful words, wisdom, relationships, passion, support and a definite love for knowledge beyond the traditional memorization method, but rather a learning and creation practice. The rejection of such
practices and spaces that are over-populating the jails and streets by providing spaces of respect, it will help populate the schools instead of the streets and jails. It will enlighten the hearts and minds to really listen and learn to what the voices of the students are trying to convey through their languages, and about the knowledge that the silenced youth have produced. Students such as Mary have become that living example of who these voices are and what such youth feel that is needed to rid their criminal backgrounds: “because most kids are [in public school there should be more Graff Rooms] …most of the taggers and gang bangers are in public schools. Instead of going after school [to] hit up the streets they [the students] could stay after school more and hit up the Graff room. I think that would keep them out of trouble…..” (Mary Garcia 12/2012). Overall the battle to end this constant war on the incarceration of youth continues to be alive until these voices are given humanization and transformation. These student voices are seeking transformation by demanding solidarity and agency, but most importantly spaces to learn and build knowledge. This will help youth build passion to learn, advocate for justice and create knowledge.

Figure 16-CHUCO’S.
INGLEWOOD, CA NOVEMBER 20, 2012—Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco
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Appendix A-Research Steps

Graffiti has become "the most familiar form of youth's visual culture" (Whitehead 2004) and has been used by youth labeled as “at risk.” Youth involved in graffiti have engage in "tagging" as a form of resistance to the "hegemonic class dominance" (Aguilar 2000). However, something needs to be implemented to prevent youth from becoming involved in criminal activity and "tagging" in public spaces, while at the same time providing a safe space. Youth Justice Coalition is an Inglewood based youth organization/continuation school that provides support for students who have been labeled “at risk,” have had a past criminal record, and/or have been expelled of the public school system. Free L.A. High School has provided youth who are currently in probation and who have been denied entry into other high schools, with an opportunity to earn a high school diploma and find work after that program. Youth Justice Coalition has provided the youth with a space that can be used artistically for Graffiti. Within the organization, students have been provided with spaces to use their creativity and graffiti as an artistic expression in some of their courses and in the walls of a room used specifically for graffiti (anyone in the organization is allowed to go in and tag, but only between adequate times). Spaces for graffiti such as the one provided in Youth Justice Coalition provide an opportunity for a discourse that will allow youth to re-define their own identity, sense of community, self-expression, and will allow youth to represent themselves artistically. The following project and analysis incorporated interviews with four Latina/o participants ages 16 to 24 who were either current participants or graduates of the Youth Justice Coalition- Free L.A. High School. Youth who participated in this study were identified by
staff members and were asked to participate given their commitment to graffiti while participating in the organization. The interviews were conducted and audio-recorded. There was 3 individual interviews and one group interview. This research may have provide knowledge to understand what Graffiti means to youth and why they are using it. It might have help others (like schools or after-school programs) understand possible avenues by which to engage youth in education and society. This project serve as an example for other researchers studying how Graffiti has been used inside of an organization and the benefits that this has had for youth. Graffiti as an alternative safe space is a fairly new idea and the project will provide the Chicana/o Studies Department at CSUN the tools necessary to engage majors and graduate students in this field of study. The priMary Garcia goal is to encourage the community at large to understand youth who perform through graffiti and to support more safe spaces for them rather than marginalizing them. The study is of significance to Chicana/o Studies in the field of education, as it provides with an alternative avenue for educators to engage youth who have been labeled "at-risk". Educators and/or after school programs may utilize the techniques discuss in the project as an alternative way to understand and engage their own students into their own programs/schools.

Before conducting interviews, Youth Justice Coalition required any researcher to submit forms and a proposal to conduct interviews at their site. The proposal and process is necessary to maintain the youth protected. Again many of the youth who form part of Youth Justice Coalition have had or currently have a criminal record, and for protection of the youths identity and privacy, Youth Justice Coalition submits all researchers to go
through a proposal hearing in which will determine the eligibility of conducting research in the facility. *Youth Justice Coalition* encourages researchers to conduct research that will enable students’ voices and would fight against the misconception and the spread of traditional forms of knowledge, research and understanding of youth who are label "at-risk." It is therefore important to acknowledge that the stigma amongst youth in *Youth Justice Coalition* suggest that the youth part of the organization and school are criminals. Many of the youth in the organization have had a past criminal record but one must understand the youth from the organization through this project and the voices of the youth themselves. Through the voices of the youth and interviews conducted it is clear that youth in the organization are solely seeking for spaces that will recognized them as valid voices, organic intellectuals, and a space that will provide a social support, respect, and recognition.

As part of the research I used a set of semi-structured questions. The interviews took place at Youth for Justice Coalition to ensure the youth confidentiality. The interviews explored to what extent this space has provided youth with social support and how these spaces have allowed youth to recreate their own identity, self worth, sense of belonging and a forum to express themselves artistically. The interviews hope to provide answers about the space itself and how young graffiti artists have used it. In addition the interviews provided an opportunity to identify the pros and cons of engaging youth, specifically youth labeled "at-risk", in a critical pedagogy practice, as organic intellectuals and producers of alternative knowledge. The interviews identified known "taggers" and determined if the space at *Youth Justice Coalition* has enable them to
perceived themselves as an artist and producers of knowledge. It serves as a critique to the pros and cons of the practices engaged in *Youth Justice Coalition*. A staff member assists in identifying the youth that can participate in the interview. The interviews were conducted as a way to analyze students' perceptions of themselves as graffiti artists as well as their perception of the (Chuco’s) in *Youth Justice Coalition* given their public school experiences. Interviews were conducted in a group setting first before conducting individual interviews, at *Youth Justice Coalition* as a way to help the participants feel comfortable with sharing. Youth participants were asked to participate in a second interview, conducted as an individual interview in hopes of obtaining further information on the participants lives, perceptions of themselves, and their experiences at *Youth Justice Coalition*. The youth’s names were changed for the purpose of this study and will remain anonymous to protect the youth’s identity unless otherwise specify by the participating youth. Because of the severity of keeping the students voices confidential and anonymous, some youth interviewees refuse to give or share demographics as they perceived this information as personal information: this includes, age, location, ethnicity, expected graduation year. There was one youth that refuse to participate in a second individual interview, but the first participation in the project was utilize since the youth did not ask for termination of the project.

To determine the youth growth in the program one will have to identity how many years the youth have participated in the program and the graduation year, to indentify youth’s growth inside the facility. A comparison and analyses of interviews will be done accordingly to graduating youth in compare to those who are currently enrolled at *Youth
Justice Coalition. This analyses is an important strategy to use as a way to help determine how many youth come into the program, and how youth begin to progress as a result of the program. This analysis will help determine how the stay in the program has changed youth identity and the performance of graffiti. The comparison and analysis will assist in comparing the artistic expression of youth who have graduated to the youth who are currently part of the Youth Justice Coalition and the perception that they have of the school and program.

Participants interviewed and the parents of the participants may fear that their privacy might be exposed, such as their name, but they were reassured that names and any private information will not be used in the written thesis project and that all names will be kept confidential. Names, communities, and other identifying information will be changed for the use of the project to protect participant’s identity. If and when the participants and the parents of the participants felt uncomfortable during the interview they were re-assured that they have the right to refuse to answer a question that makes the participant feel uncomfortable. Participants and the parents of the participants had and have the right to refuse to be part of the project prior to the interviews and at any time during the interview or project. Participants and the parents of the participant had the right to ask the researcher, in this case me, Norma Franco, to not use information they wish to keep confidential in any responses in the project. Participants and the parents of the participants had the right to ask for their termination in the project at any time before, during, or after the interview/project. Again all interviews conducted were audio recorded and later turned into transcriptions.
To obtain a wider perspective and gather a precise and/or complete set of data 2-3 staff members, educators, volunteers were interview to provide insight of the organization and the youth residing in the organization. These interviews were done in-person with audio recorded and later turned into transcripts because of availability issues through email/online chatting space or over phone. The purpose of these interviews were to identify through a staff perspective the pros and cons of the space provided in Youth Justice Coalition as well as understanding the logistical matters into setting and providing a space for identified "at-risk" youth.

With the organizations approval murals done by youth in the facility will be photograph (Murals do not provide with the artist name. Mural artist were kept anonymous to protect youth’s identity). Photographs were taken of the murals and graffiti done inside, outside and around the facility. Most importantly photographs were taken of the graffiti performed in the graffiti room to provide vivid examples of the space that has been provided for the youth in Youth Justice Coalition. Carolina Franco, a 4th-year, soon-to-be-graduating photojournalism student at California State University, Fullerton took the photos.
Appendix B- Limitations and Barriers in the Research

At the start of the research, fall of 2011, I was referred by a previous volunteer of Youth Justice Coalition, Cristian Ochoa Arceo, to David Chavez; I submitted a proposal to Youth Justice Coalition through a staff representative David Chavez. At the same time I submitted a Human Subject Proposal at CSUN in November 2011 and received approval in March 2012. I began conducting interviews in April 2012. At this time I conducted a group interview at Youth Justice Coalition in April 2012. The youth who participated were referred by David Chavez and were given the option to be part of the project. The youth were 2 males and 2 females. The interview lasted about 2 hours. David Chavez agreed to participate in a staff interview in September 2012 and referred me to a staff member so that I would be able to advance in the research. At that point Cristian Ochoa Arceo also agreed to be interview and participated in an interview in September 2012.

At the termination of David Chavez I re-submitted a proposal to the organization through Ana Muniz. I was then provided with the contact information of the students interview in April 2012 on October 2012. At that point I conducted a second interview to the students who participated in a group interview in April 2012 all except one male student who refuse to be part of the follow up interview. The 2 males interview had concluded or graduated from Youth Justice Coalition, Chuco's school. The 2 males also refuse to provide demographics such as age, number of years of the organization, and one of the males refuse to provide information to when he had graduated. One of the males agreed to provide an insight and a tour of the facility murals, graffiti, and art while
Carolina Franco took the pictures. The females interviewed were sisters and provided all demographic information, also demonstrating an interest in being part of a second interview process.

Due to the complications with setting up additional interviews, the research was limited in research participants and as a result, one needs to keep in mind that participants represent a small sample of a larger youth labeled "at-risk" population. Please note that although it is a small percentage of the youth who represent Youth Justice Coalition or "at-risk" youth, the youth can serve as samples of the experiences that other youth both in the organization and youth labeled "at-risk" have gone through. Even though the sample is a small, one must remember that the voices of the youth can be used to provide a pathway and as a sample for others to conduct research among this area and provide a space for more youth to share their story and become agents of their own living experiences. One must remember that this is only the start of a new area of research.

Although the research was limited in terms of the participation of youth to share their experiences, this does not invalidate the experiences that have been shared in this project. More research will encourage the act of providing spaces for youth to share their stories and experiences, as well as to provide agency to such experiences. Furthermore, this ultimately helps provide a pathway to legitimize youths experiences inside institutions that have provided alternative spaces for social support. Although this research did not provide a space for youth outside the graffiti culture to share their own experiences one must not forget that there are many languages and youths visual culture such as music, art, skating, gangs, that need spaces and opportunities to share their
experiences. There needs to be more physical spaces and research done to provide agency to other existing cultures that will serve as alternative spaces. This alternative space will help validate the voices of youth, engaged these youth in academia and/or society, and most importantly re-established youth’s agency of their own lives and living experiences.
Appendix C

The following research pictures were taken at Inglewood CA, at *Youth Justice Coalition* on November 20, 2012 by Carolina Franco. These picture are sample of art created by the youth at YJC.

![Figure 17. –INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. ‘Graff Room’ at Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco](image1)

![Figure 18 –INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Inside the ‘Graff Room’ at Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco](image2)
Figure 19. –INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. ‘Graff Room’ at Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco

Figure 20. –INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Outside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco
Figure 21. –INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Outside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco

Figure 22. –INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Outside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco
Figure 23. INGLEWOOD, CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Outside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco.

Figure 24. INGLEWOOD, CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Outside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco.
Figure 25. INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Outside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco.

Figure 26. INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Outside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco.
Figure 27. INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Outside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco

Figure 28. INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Outside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco
Figure 29. -INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Outside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco

Figure 30. -INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. The Murals in front of the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco
Figure 31. INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Outside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco

Figure 32. INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Murals inside the walls of Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco
Figure 33. INGLEWOOD CA, NOVEMBER 20, 2012. Rail road tracks in Inglewood CA, a block away from Youth Justice Coalition. Photo by Carolina Franco
End Notes

1 Tagging- (Graffiti) words or drawings on a wall


3 Banking System- A system that annuls student’s voices by pulling students from their own culture and history. This system favors a traditional system of math and science curriculum.

4 Educator-the word educator refers to not just teachers, but rather any individual who works with students such as mentors, tutors, aids, substitutes, and youth organizers

5 Ideologies- it lives through the unconscious, socially constructed ideas in which it cannot be seen, but that makes one’s own frame of reference; it is the preconceived ideas, images, concepts, values and structures of society institutions and what the unconscious beliefs makes up these institutions (Hebdidge 1979, 11-13).

6 Reflect a safe space to represent a subculture and promote ideologies that counteract hegemonic ideologies. These spaces “construct independent self-definitions [and] reflect the dialectical nature of oppression and activism” (Collins 2000, 111).

7 Identity- A self assurance reality in which an individual forms ties to. For example: ethnic identity, historical identity, occupational identity.

8 Organic Knowledge- knowledge derive from organic intellectuals, that is distinct from traditional forms of knowledge (see organic intellectual definition).

9 Organic Intellectuals-Use my Gramsci to distinguish those who produce knowledge different from traditional forms of knowledge; knowledge that derives from the streets.

10 Hegemonic- “The moving equilibrium,” existing dominance (Hebdidge 1979, 15)

11 “expressive forms and rituals of subordinate groups” in which represent the rejection of dominant ideologies by constructing their own style with the means of rejecting dominant forms of expression (Hebdidge 1979, 2-3).

12 Mainstream Media- “promote the elevation” of popular culture while following the unspoken ideologies of mainstream society (Rose 2008, 199)

13 Modernity- new, to deconstruct colonial power, the capacity to reason and obtain knowledge, knowledge that has been a tool to discovered the true nature of an objective reality (Jaggar, 2008, 342).

14 Barrio- Neighborhood

15 Sense of Belonging- feeling a connection between their community which includes their neighborhoods, school community, work community etc.
16 Self worth- Valuing oneself through positive identity and images.

17 Tupac- Hip Hop artist, “it is one of the most important and contradictory artist to have spoken in and to our culture” (Dyson 2001, 17).

18 Authenticity- the idea of the truth and the real within discourses and the ideologies make up such spaces (Dyson 2001, 5)

19 Cultural Capital- Capital derive from culture support. Cultural capital can be obtain through knowledge gained by family obligations (Bourdieu 1978).

20 Double Consciousness-An idea derive from Dubois

21 Intellectuals that challenge a traditional ways of teaching (Giroux 1988)