ABSTRACT

“WHO MADE YOU THE GRAFFITI POLICE?”:
GRAFFITI, PUBLIC SPACE, AND RESISTANCE

by Christopher Fortney

In this thesis, I critically examine connections among graffiti, public space, and resistance. Questioning essentialist views of graffiti and public space in terms of a struggle between order and disorder, I ask: how do graffiti writers produce public space, and to what ends? This project is based on interviews, focus groups, and participant observation conducted with graffiti writers in the Columbus, Ohio area. I conclude that graffiti writers’ often uncritical practice of “graffiti as resistance” has, in this case, led writers to produce systems of order in public space that are largely ineffective as resistance and that produce marginalization and domination. Some practices, though, indicate possibilities for resistance that targets graffiti writers’ views of public space, rather than power itself. Writers’ views and practices may articulate with related views and practices, revealing connections with broader societal processes and introducing issues for efforts toward resistance.
“WHO MADE YOU THE GRAFFITI POLICE?”:
GRAFFITI, PUBLIC SPACE, AND RESISTANCE

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Geography

by
Christopher Fortney

Miami University
Oxford, Ohio
2014

Advisor________________________
Dr. Bruce D’Arcus

Reader________________________
Dr. Marcia England

Reader________________________
Dr. C. Lee Harrington
Table of Contents

Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1

Governmentalities and Graffiti (Counter)publics ......................................................... 3

Graffiti as Transgression .............................................................................................. 4

(Counter)public Spaces ................................................................................................. 5

Geographies of Resistance ........................................................................................... 6

Governmentalities .......................................................................................................... 7

Producing Better Graffiti ............................................................................................... 9

Participatory Ethnography ............................................................................................ 10

Participatory Action Research ..................................................................................... 10

Sample Selection ........................................................................................................... 12

Privacy, Confidentiality and Risk .................................................................................. 12

Autoethnography .......................................................................................................... 13

Interviews and Focus Groups ....................................................................................... 13

Participant Observation ............................................................................................... 15

Participatory Data Analysis .......................................................................................... 16

Limitations ..................................................................................................................... 17

Bustown Graffiti and Public Space .............................................................................. 17

Vandalism and Art ......................................................................................................... 18

The Graffiti Police ....................................................................................................... 19

Graffiti as Resistance ................................................................................................... 24

Producing Privilege ....................................................................................................... 24

Resisting Resistance ..................................................................................................... 25

Articulation ..................................................................................................................... 28

A Better City Through Graffiti? .................................................................................. 30

References ...................................................................................................................... 32
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Automatic James Indigo, the best dog ever.
We made it buddy.
Acknowledgements

Bustown writers, especially those who participated in creating this thesis
Bruce
Carrie
Charlotte
Chris
Dad
Damon
Eric
Fyra
Jonathan
Lee
Marcia
Mom
Nancy
Rebecca
San
Introduction

Two graffiti writers approach a wall. The wall is already covered in graffiti, but the pair decide to paint their aliases over older graffiti that has been partially covered by inexperienced graffiti writers. Later, another writer notices what has transpired and, because the older graffiti had been painted by friends of this writer, they paint over the pair’s new graffiti with their own alias. This writer then contacts one of the original pair, admonishing them for painting over the older graffiti and informing them that their work has also been painted over. The writer from the original pair replies that the graffiti had already been covered by inexperienced writers, so their painting over it should not invite such reactions. Further, this writer asks, “who made you the ‘graffiti police?’”

Popular debate surrounding graffiti commonly involves arguments over whether graffiti is art or blight; resistance or crime (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011). Similarly, popular discussions of graffiti commonly involve arguments over whether public spaces represent spaces of free and unmediated public expression or spaces of public order and comfort in the face of disorder and blight (Mitchell, 1995, 2003). From all sides of these debates, people view power as prohibitive order located in particular people or institutions, and resistance as unmediated disorder that lies outside of and challenges this prohibitive order. From these perspectives, graffiti is practiced in opposition to restrictive power that governs use of public space. Conflict among graffiti writers over where, how, and what graffiti should and can be written, though, challenges such conclusions: if public space is defined by antagonism between order and disorder, power and resistance then, “who made [anyone] the graffiti police?”

Academic research also fails to fully explain this conflict, revealing gaps in the literature on relations of power and resistance operating within counterpublics, such as the “graffiti writing counterpublic” (Iveson, 2007). Existing scholarship, in large part, resembles popular debates: while some researchers cast graffiti as a sign of criminal disorder threatening safe, orderly, public spaces (e.g. Wilson & Kelling, 1982), other scholars cast graffiti as subcultural, transgressive resistance that challenges dominant spatial norms (e.g. Cresswell, 1996), and public space as an arena where marginalized “counterpublics” might claim a part in a broader public order (e.g. Mitchell, 1995, 2003). So, similar to popular debates, both literature on graffiti
and literature on public space define graffiti and other counterpublic practices in contrast to restrictions imposed by those wielding repressive power. Some literature, though, suggests that such conflicts emanate from power relations formed within counterpublics (e.g. Iveson, 2014). Thus, conflict within counterpublics problematizes the assumption that counterpublic practices necessarily transgress or resist power relations. From this perspective, at issue is not whether graffiti is art or blight; resistance or vandalism. Rather, these considerations direct inquiry toward power relations within counterpublics themselves.

A “governmentality” framework based on Michel Foucault’s (1990) conceptualizations of power as productive and diffuse can help explain power relations within counterpublics. Foucault argues that power relations—including, rather than opposed to resistance—may or may not produce “states of domination” in more or less orderly ways (Foucault, 1997, p. 299). Resistance, in this framework, does not involve efforts to eliminate power relations. Rather, resistance involves individuals’ recognizing how collectively held views or “mentalities” materialize in their practices and either refusing to participate in materializing views that may lead to domination or choosing to engage in alternative practices that might normalize transformational mentalities (Ettlinger, 2011). So, a governmentality framework directs analysis of graffiti and public space toward examination of the materialization of collectively held views in graffiti writers’ production of public space.

In this thesis, I investigate the relationships among graffiti, public space, and resistance. This analysis is based on three months of fieldwork with graffiti writers in the Columbus, Ohio area. Consistent with a view of power as productive, although the graffiti writers I worked with materialized collectively held views of “graffiti as resistance” through their production of public spaces, writers’ discourses and practices often normalized marginalization and domination of inexperienced writers and non-writers. Consistent with a view of resistance that targets mentalities, though, writers sometimes produced public space in less harmful ways, suggesting that graffiti writing need not always lead to marginalization and domination. These new and different practices offer possibilities for the practices of graffiti as resistance directed toward harmful mentalities. However, my research also indicates that articulation of writers’ views of graffiti and public space with related views such as neoliberalism and related contexts such as neighborhood development can complicate attempts to produce alternative views.

As Iveson (2007) suggests, while individual case studies may not be “representative” of
cases in other locations, such investigations may be “illustrative of the relationship between publics and the city more generally” (p. 19, emphasis in original). In this context, I do not suggest that the views and practices of the specific writers I worked with represent those of writers or other counterpublic actors in different locations, or even in Columbus. Rather, my aim in this thesis is to use empirically grounded critique to both problematize and inform investigations of issues surrounding graffiti, public space and resistance. This research should be relevant to geographers interested in the intersections of power and resistance, graffiti, and public space; academics interested in these issues more broadly; and any citizens interested in understanding and critically engaging their relationships with public space—particularly graffiti writers. By critically examining graffiti writers’ production of public space, writers, academics, and other interested actors can begin to have conversations about what kinds of public spaces graffiti does produce and what kinds of public spaces graffiti could produce. Further, this research should begin to illuminate connections between graffiti writers’ production of public space and broader urban and societal processes.

**Governmentalities and Graffiti (Counter)publics**

In this thesis, I investigate the relationships among graffiti writing, public space, and resistance. Toward this end, geographers (e.g. Ley & Cybriwsky 1974) and other academics have been interested in the spatial practices of graffiti writers since at least the 1970’s. Likewise, ideas surrounding “the public” have long been critically examined by geographers and other scholars (e.g. Habermas, Lennox & Lennox, 1974). Some researchers portray public space as a space of safety and order, with graffiti and other unmediated behavior representing a disorderly criminal threat to this order—for example, Glazer (1979) assesses subway graffiti as an indicator of “uncontrolled” space, while Wilson and Kelling (1982) expand this argument to connect graffiti and other “disorderly practices” to proliferation of serious crime and urban decay. Other scholars position graffiti as a transgressive social and spatial practice through which marginalized actors and groups can challenge and even replace dominant norms (e.g. Cresswell, 1996). Similarly, public space literature suggests that “counterpublics” challenge dominant publics by claiming public space (e.g. Mitchell 1995, 2003).

However, these bodies of work also reveal that conflict among graffiti writers might involve debates over how graffiti writers produce public space (Iveson, 2014), and that
counterpublics can produce or reinforce normalized views (Iveson, 2007). In this context, power relations operate within, rather than in opposition to counterpublics (Iveson, 2014). So, existing research suggests that examination of connections between graffiti writers’ production of public space and the normalized views writers materialize might reveal how graffiti writers produce public space, and to what ends.

Literature on resistance (e.g. Ettlinger, 2011), suggests that a view of resistance as critique can reveal answers to these questions. Specifically, a Foucauldian governmentality framework allows for the engagement of previously unexplored geographic processes through examination of the materialization of collectively held views in the everyday practices of individual actors (Ettlinger, 2011). Thus, a governmentality framework draws this particular analysis toward graffiti writers’ materialization of collectively held views as they produce public spaces through their everyday practices.

**Graffiti as Transgression**

Academic literature on graffiti has, in large part, rejected notions of graffiti as simple vandalism or disorder (e.g. Glazer, 1979; Wilson & Kelling, 1982) in favor of consideration of graffiti as a complex set of subcultural practices that transgress normalized conceptualizations of order in public space (e.g. Docunayan, 2000; Dovey, Wollan & Woodcock, 2012; Ferrell, 1996; Iveson, 2007; Macdonald, 2001; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011; Snyder, 2011). Several scholars have noted distinctions between a “coherent subculture” surrounding “hip hop graffiti” and other forms of graffiti such as “political graffiti, latrinalia (graffiti in toilets), and racist or gang graffiti, as well as the contemporary street art movements” (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011, p. 129; see also: Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2001; Snyder, 2011). Most scholarship casts this subcultural order as challenging normalized conceptualizations of order in public space—for example, Cresswell (1996) argues that graffiti’s being “out of place” allows “others” to change the meaning of places in the face of “hegemonic” order, while Brighenti (2010), suggests that graffiti is implicated in struggles over the very definition of what and where “public space” is. While some of this literature problematizes popular binaries—for example, several scholars argue that graffiti writing represents both art and crime simultaneously (Iveson, 2007; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011)—these perspectives still fail to explain conflict among graffiti writers.

However, the literature also begins to engage conflict among graffiti writers, suggesting
that such conflict may be explained through research on the views and practices through which writers produce public space. Notably, literature indicates that graffiti is not culturally homogeneous (Snyder 2011), that graffiti’s transgression is contextual (Cresswell, 1996), and that graffiti may in some cases produce or reinforce normalized views of public space (Iveson, 200(107,119),(987,890)7, 2014; McAuliffe, 2012). Through practices such as the development of criteria differentiating “good” and “bad” graffiti, writers’ practices can serve to include and exclude, help and harm (Halsey & Pederick, 2010; Iveson, 2014; McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011; Phillips, 1999). For example, graffiti writing is often a highly gendered practice (Macdonald, 2001). In this context, Iveson (2014) explains that conflict among writers might stem from development and enforcement of such criteria. Further, Docunayan (2000) argues that such conflicts may emanate from writers’ competing claims to property ownership. Thus, while this research begins to explain conflicts among writers, it invites inquiry into how graffiti writers produce public space.

(Counter)public Spaces

Public space literature suggests that “counterpublics” can resist marginalization by claiming public space. Much of this literature draws, at some level, on the ideas of Jurgen Habermas (1974), who claims that the “public sphere” is a conceptual space between government and private citizens where democratic debate takes place. Nancy Fraser (1990) criticizes Habermas’ view of a singular public sphere, positing instead that multiple “subaltern counterpublics” continually develop and insert competing discourses into public circulation, thus opening possibilities for challenging the existing system. Don Mitchell (1995, 2003) spatializes and advances these arguments, suggesting that marginalized groups “claim” physical public space in order to claim membership in a broader public. In this way, Mitchell argues, public spaces are never entirely ordered or disordered; rather they are characterized by a dialectic relationship between order and disorder, comfort and risk. This scholarship, however, does not fully account for conflict within counterpublic groups and spaces.

Some public space literature begins to explain conflict within counterpublics, indicating that research should approach such conflict in terms of power relations. Both Fraser (1990) and Mitchell (1995, 2003) mention that counterpublics’ “claiming” of public space may reproduce harmful social norms or produce new harms of its own. Further, recent research suggests
consideration of public space in terms of competing “regimes of publicity” or certain formations of discourses and practices (Staeheli & Mitchell, 2008). In this context, multiple, competing counterpublic actors might be considered as producing more or less alternative views of public space through discourses and practices that define people and spaces as public at a given moment (Iveson, 2007). This points to a need for research that considers the power relations embedded in relationships among normalized views and the kinds of (counter)public spaces that actors socially and materially produce in specific physical and temporal locations. Also, Warner (2002) notes that public discourses depend on “preexisting forms and channels of circulation” (p. 106) and that counterpublics are “fundamentally mediated by public forms” (p. 121). These observations indicate a need for research that examines connections between counterpublic discourses and practices and the discourses and practices through which other publics are produced. In the case of graffiti, these perspectives suggest that research should ask not only how graffiti writers produce public space, but also “to what ends?”

**Geographies of Resistance**

A review of academic literature on resistance indicates that a view of resistance as critique can inform this investigation. Resistance has become an increasingly popular topic among geographers and other academics since at least the early 1990’s, however, conceptualizations of resistance relative to power have shifted in recent years away from views of power as a singular entity, toward perspectives considering multiple powers (Keith & Pile 1997). One such take on power relations involves a move away from views of power as a restrictive, prohibitive force located in particular persons, institutions, and places, toward views of power informed by Foucault’s (1990) conceptualization of power as productive, diffuse, and ubiquitous (for a detailed account of the construction of “Foucault” as an object of discourse among Anglo-American geographers see: Hannah, 2000). This view of power characterizes resistance in terms of efforts to transform power relations rather than in terms of efforts to eliminate power relations—in other words, resistance involves identifying problems with the existing system and working toward normalizing new power relations that produce less domination (Ettlinger, 2011).

Despite some objections to Foucault’s work as leaving no hope for escape from systems of domination (e.g. Fraser, 1989), scholars have begun to tap Foucauldian concepts of power and resistance in many ways—specifically, such perspectives have proven quite useful to
geographers and other academics studying issues related to public space. For example, Huxley (2006, 2007) identifies several “spatial rationalities” designed to guide the practices of individuals in urban spaces and Allen (2006) demonstrates how “ambient” power can operate in public space through the inclusion (as opposed to exclusion) of certain groups rather than others. Importantly, Rose-Redwood (2006), draws on a view of power as productive in linking non-state actors’ practices of geo-coding to larger-scale projects of governance. From this perspective, many practices of counterpublic actors such as graffiti writers might be oriented toward governance. Further, geographers and other academics investigating resistance and public representation have found this approach useful in identifying, analyzing, and making use of effective avenues for resistance (e.g. Berman, 1998; Lee, 2007; O’Grady, 2004). Thus, this view of power and resistance proves extremely useful in the context of this thesis, as it allows for critical analysis of any normalizing effects of graffiti writing counterpublics’ production of public space.

**Governmentalities**

A Foucauldian “governmentality” framework operationalizes this view of power and resistance. A governmentality framework, suggests Ettlinger (2011) “privileges neither the discursive nor the material but rather the relation between the two” (p. 538). Thus, governmentality focuses analysis of power and resistance on the relationships between social norms and everyday practices. In this context, this framework is particularly well-suited for an investigation into the relationships between graffiti writers’ practices and the views of public space writers produce.

Governmentality can be defined as the mentality or rationality by and through which governance occurs. As per Foucault, governmentality is the “art of government” associated with the development of the modern state (2000a). In Foucault’s conceptualization, power in liberal societies is exercised through the indirect guidance of the choices of free individuals rather than through individuals’ direct subjection to ideology. As such, by “government” Foucault means not only the state but any context in which the mentality or rationality through and by which the “‘conduction of conducts’ and a management of possibilities” (2000d, p. 341) might occur (see also: Foucault, 1980b, p. 122). Governmentality differs from previous forms of government such as sovereignty and discipline (although it does not replace these), says Foucault, in that it “has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential
technical means apparatuses of security” (2000a, p. 220). This concept applies primarily to modern Western society, at least as it is discussed by Foucault—for example, governance of consumer behavior in the United States has far more to do with the conduct of conducts than with sovereignty and direct government, and while this governance may involve the state, it does not involve the state alone.

Governmentality involves “a ‘code’ that governs ways of doing things [. . .] and a production of true discourses that [serve] to found, justify, and provide reasons and principles for these ways of doing things” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 230). This “code” may be described as a rationality or technique of power, co-constitutive of a mentality or mentalities particular to its context(s) and also contingently related to a number of other mentalities and rationalities. Foucault says that these codes, “these mechanisms of power, these procedures of power, must be considered as techniques, which is to say procedures that have been invented, perfected, and which are endlessly developed” (Foucault, 2007a, p. 158). It is not through the production of truth itself but through development of these codes—by which production of true discourses and practices are governed—that power relations are negotiated. It must be noted that techniques of power are not imposed upon regimes of discourse and practice from above; rather they are implemented in partial, modified, and selected ways in different contexts in ways which serve to support the “truth” of particular discourses and practices in these contexts (Foucault, 2000d). As Foucault (2000d) explains:

[There] are different strategies that are mutually opposed, composed, and superposed so as to produce permanent and solid effects that can perfectly well be understood in terms of their rationality, even though they don’t conform to the initial programming: this is what gives the resulting apparatus its solidity and suppleness. (pp. 231–232)

So, governmentality is articulated in specific and differing forms between, across, and at multiple scales in both the contextual and spatial senses of the word—in this sense we can discuss “governmentalities” in the plural.

As per Foucault (1990, 2000d), there are various types of these codes or techniques of power, including biopolitical techniques directed at populations, disciplinary techniques directed at individuals, and pastoral techniques combining individualizing and totalizing technologies. For example, biopolitical techniques such as the U.S. census are often associated with statistics through which populations are constituted—we can see how power operates in the production of
truth here through the constitution of rules by which racial/ethnic and other population categories are constituted, among other effects.

Foucault conceptualized resistance in terms of resistance to the governance of populations and individuals. In this context, Foucault discusses resistance in terms of a “voluntary insubordination” or “reflected retractability.” In other words, resistance involves gaining access—through critique, or the “desubjugation of the subject in the context of [. . .] the politics of truth” (Foucault, 2007b, p. 47)—to an autonomous self, thereby enabling individual agency or choice; refusal to participate in the materialization of norms through certain codes or rationalities. As such, the novel view of resistance that Foucault presents is not one in opposition to power in itself, it is “a matter of making conflicts more visible” through working in the “open and always turbulent atmosphere of a continuous criticism” (Foucault, 2000c, p. 457), and it is “to attack not so much such-or-such institution of power, or group, or elite, or class but, rather, a technique, a form of power” (Foucault, 2000d, p. 331). For example, Foucault describes resistance to the medical profession in terms of a resistance to “uncontrolled power over people’s bodies, their health and their life and death” rather than in terms of resistance to its profit-making (2000d, p. 330). These techniques of power could operate, for example, through calculated structuring of insurance policies and procedures—a quite salient point in the context of contemporary US debate.

However, Foucault warns, “the problem, then, is not to try to dissolve [power relations . . .] but to acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the ethos, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible” (1997, p. 298). As per Foucault, “Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are ‘free’” because “Where the determining factors are exhaustive, there is no relationship of power” (2000d, p. 342). In other words, “there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised” (Foucault, 1980a, p. 142). In this context, Foucault characterizes the relationship between power and freedom as “at the same time mutual incitement and struggle [. . .] a permanent provocation” or as the “‘agonism between power relations and the intransitivity of freedom’” (2000d, pp. 342-343).

**Producing Better Graffiti**
From a Foucauldian perspective, the everyday practices of graffiti writers *produce* power relations, rather than being determined by them. Resistance, then, lies not in simply ‘doing’ graffiti but in critique of existing ways of ‘doing’ graffiti and, possibly, in choosing to ‘do’ graffiti in different ways. Likewise, counterpublics are not a necessary element of resistance—resistance is necessary element of counterpublics: counterpublic spaces cannot exist without power relations; without choices; without both power and resistance. In this context, a governmentality framework directs analysis of connections between graffiti, public space, and resistance toward investigation of the everyday practices of graffiti writers as they materialize collectively held views of graffiti and public space, any marginalization and domination resulting from these practices, and possibilities for less harmful ways of writing graffiti.

**Participatory Ethnography**

In order to examine these issues, I conducted three months of fieldwork with graffiti writers in the Columbus, Ohio area. As a Columbus graffiti “insider” I have unique access to this community and was able to conduct research without the need to first “get inside” the subculture.

The theoretical framework I have developed above introduces two important methodological considerations: first, a focus on power relations as productive introduces both ethical and methodological issues. I have attempted to address these issues by drawing from principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR). Second, while geographers have used a variety of methods in studying graffiti—for example, Ley and Cybriwsky (1974) used a hybrid quantitative/qualitative methodology in examining graffiti in Philadelphia—I opted for ethnographic methods. Specifically I made use of autoethnography, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation. While many researchers (e.g. Cresswell, 1996) have focused on graffiti as visual artifact, examination of writers’ production of public space focuses inquiry on everyday practices. On this note, ethnographic methods have been used quite fruitfully by geographers and other academics in interrogating the everyday discourses, practices, and motivations of graffiti writers (Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2001; McAuliffe, 2012; Snyder, 2011). Geographers have also used ethnographic methods in exploring other issues related to public space and resistance (e.g. Lee, 2007; Staeheli, 1996; Staeheli & Thompson, 1997).

**Participatory Action Research**

Consideration of practices in terms of power implicates research practices in power relationships,
raising both ethical and methodological issues. In regard to ethics, if research practices produce knowledge via representation, then research practices produce power relationships (Clifford, 1988). This can be problematic if the researcher or subjects produce or reproduce harmful power relationships through the research process or if these actors view the research process as exploitative (Allsop et al., 2010; Clifford, 1988). Methodologically, if research practices produce power relationships, and power relationships are the object of study—as is the case with this project—then research practices become an object of research, themselves. Scholars investigating graffiti using ethnography have identified such concerns as pertinent and handled them in various ways—generally by situating themselves carefully (e.g. Macdonald, 2001). One way geographers and other scholars have handled similar ethical and methodological concerns is through the use of PAR-based approaches.

As a general methodological approach, PAR involves doing research with rather than on subjects, with the aim of producing both quality research and positive change in the lives of subjects (Breitbart, 2003; Cahill, 2007b; Kindon et al., 2007). In line with the methodological concern that methods themselves should be an object of research, PAR emphasizes the “means” of knowledge production as an important object of study, particularly in terms of power relations (Breitbart, 2003). In line with the ethical concern that research might (re)produce harmful norms, PAR stresses the importance of subject involvement in all stages of the research project with the aim of producing positive changes in their lives (Breitbart, 2003; Fuller and Kitchen, 2004). This focus on subject involvement might be seen as contributing to what Clifford (1988) calls a “polyphonic” approach to ethnographic representation, wherein a multitude of authors produce research collaboratively, rather than a researcher extracting and analyzing information about a population. Post-structuralist engagements with PAR suggest that this approach might be useful in developing and exploring previously untapped subjectivities (e.g. Cahill, 2007a; Cameron & Gibson, 2005), consistent with my project’s focus on resistance as critique. While few geographers studying graffiti have employed PAR approaches, Young’s (2010) work with graffiti writers and city officials is encouraging (despite limited success).

I attempted to involve subjects at every stage of the research process in order to address these issues in my own project. This was largely a process of “consultation” wherein a number potential research subjects have been consulted throughout the research process, from development of research questions to data analysis (Kindon et al., 2007). However, as Kindon et
al. (2007) suggest, varying levels and types of participation at different stages in the process are to be expected and should be negotiated by researchers and participants throughout the research process. Varying levels and kinds of participation may be influenced by levels of personal interest and access to resources such as time and money (Breitbart, 2003). So, while my project may not have involved subjects at every stage in the research process, these are common issues faced by PAR researchers and this does not necessarily mean that my project did not fruitfully engage this approach.

Sample Selection
As a long-time Columbus graffiti ‘insider’ I have unique access to this population. In fact, this project originally developed in the context of existing, informal gatherings of graffiti writers. Therefore, at least a substantial number of subjects were recruited immediately. Further recruitment took place via snowball sampling (writers telling other writers about the project) and site-based sampling, where writers who showed up to gatherings were recruited to join the project (Longhurst, 2003). Owing to this method of recruitment, many subjects were friendly or at least familiar with one another. Nonetheless, subjects included members of several graffiti “crews” (groups of writers), with varying levels of experience and a wide variety of views.

Privacy, Confidentiality and Risk
Subjects experienced low or minimal risk in addition to that experienced through their everyday activities. Breaches of confidentiality were the most serious potential risk involved in this project. However, the risk of such breaches was no greater than during existing informal gatherings. The content of conversation and activities in focus groups was almost identical to that in existing informal gatherings, with the addition of research notes being taken. No audio or video recordings were made. Law enforcement obtaining research notes presents a serious risk only if such notes contain identifiable names linked to identifiable locations. This concern was mitigated through the use of pseudonyms and obfuscation/omission of information pertaining to specific locations.

Graffiti pseudonyms (or other pseudonyms, depending on participants’ preferences) were used in place of names in any research notes. Even if pseudonyms are known to law enforcement or other writers, this information does not present a risk beyond those of everyday life unless it is linked to a specific location. So, in research notes, place names and details were omitted or
obscured such that specific locations were not identifiable. Further, while I have shared the total number of research subjects with my thesis committee, I have not included that information here as it may increase the risk of exposing specific people or places.

**Autoethnography**

In order to carefully position myself as both a researcher and a graffiti “insider” I engaged in reflexive autoethnography. Autoethnography refers to research methods that involve self-representation (Butz & Besio, 2009). Butz and Besio (2009) identify a range of autoethnographic practices, from those that focus on the researcher (“personal narrative autoethnography”) to those that involve subjects representing themselves through various mediums (“subaltern autoethnography”). As a graffiti “insider,” my project is located somewhere between these extremes in Butz and Besio’s continuum; in an area they label “insider autoethnography.” In this context, techniques such as the reflexive use of personal narrative might help blur the line between researcher and subject by making the researcher an object of research, rather than an insider using access to extract information (Butz & Besio, 2009). This is one way my research might involve a “polyphony” of voices (Clifford, 1988). Butz and Besio (2009) note that personal narrative methods have been infrequently used by geographers despite the utility of such methods in exploring geographic processes “from the inside out” (p. 1666). Although not a geographer, sociologist Nancy Macdonald’s (2001) engagement with self-narrative as a graffiti “outsider” trying to gain access provides one excellent example of the utility of these methods in graffiti research.

Following these considerations, I took care to document my own thoughts, feelings, and experiences in field notes and other research-related representation. In order to minimize risk to both myself and research subjects, I used pseudonyms or otherwise obfuscated my identity in field notes. This strategy served the dual purpose of allowing me to effectively make my own practices an object of research. In the few cases where I have cited these notes in this thesis, I have maintained the use of pseudonyms. While this method of self-representation may obscure my positionality, clearly identifying myself in these instances may put research subjects at risk.

**Interviews and Focus Groups**

After granting consent, subjects participated in the research project based on their own preferences and levels of comfort. In the course of my fieldwork, I conducted a total of eight
interviews with—as one writer gave two interviews—seven different writers. I also conducted two focus groups, each involving four to eight members. Some writers participated in both interviews and focus groups, although this overlap was partial. I used these interviews and focus groups to engage graffiti writers’ individual and collective opinions.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with graffiti writers in order to better understand how writers explain the world around them and their interactions with it (Secor 2010). This method has been used in many studies of graffiti (e.g. Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2001; McAuliffe, 2012; Snyder, 2011; Young, 2010), public space (Staeheli, 1996), and resistance (Lee, 2007). Interviewees were selected on a voluntary basis, with all participants being offered the opportunity to be interviewed. Interview length was similarly determined—at writers’ discretion, interviews ranged between 30 minutes and two hours in length. Typical questions (based on open-ended “how” and “what” formats, as per Secor, 2010) included:

- What is graffiti?
- What is a graffiti writer?
- What are the rules of graffiti?
- How are these rules developed?
- How do these rules change?
- What is public space?
- What is private space?
- What would you do if it was completely legal to write anywhere?
- How do you decide who to paint over?

Interview data carried over into focus groups—making interviews more like two person focus group sessions. However, individual participants’ confidentiality was taken into account and I only shared information that they deemed suitable for a wider audience.

I conducted focus groups in order to investigate the way subjects talk about issues with each other in a more natural environment than a one-on-one interview (Secor, 2010). While graffiti research has not engaged focus group methods explicitly (although, see Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2001 for methods of participant observation that look quite similar to focus groups), geographers such as J.K. Gibson-Graham (1997) and Jo-Anne Lee (2007) have employed focus groups in examining women's’ subjectivity and gentrification, respectively. Further, Bosco and Herman (2009) argue that focus group methodology might also be viewed as a collaborative
process whereby all participants are both researchers and subjects—this is consistent with the principles of PAR (Breitbart, 2003).

As per Secor (2010), these focus group sessions lasted approximately one to two hours, included four to eight participants, and took place in comfortable settings. Graffiti writers represented the vast majority of participants, although friends were often present. Friends were read the same consent form as writers and writers were comfortable with friends being present. However, friends tended towards silence during these sessions and did not appear frequently in my notes. The writers who participated knew each other beforehand, although they came from several different areas of the city and traditions of graffiti writing. Group meetings were semi-formal, with participants joining and leaving at various stages due to matters such as scheduling and interest levels. Although these sessions were driven primarily by participants, questions such as those discussed above in the context of interviews were used as conversation-starters.

**Participant Observation**

I also spent much of my summer observing how and why graffiti writers interact with public space through direct participation in these interactions. My participant observation took the form of spending time with graffiti writers—some of whom participated in interviews and focus groups, some not—as they lived their everyday lives. This approach overlapped with interview and focus group methods, as graffiti writers spend a majority of their time hanging around talking about graffiti, rather than actually writing graffiti (Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2001).

Participant observation is, as Watson and Till (2010) note, the principal method that distinguishes ethnographic approaches from other methodologies. While asking people what they do and how they do it can be quite productive methods, participating in and observing everyday practices can be invaluable in uncovering the “taken-for-granted” motivations and processes that projects like mine focus on (Allsop et al., 2010). Researchers engaging graffiti subcultures have found participant observation vital in accessing the details of everyday discourses and practices this project seeks to uncover (Ferrell, 1996; Macdonald, 2001; Snyder, 2011; McAuliffe, 2012).

As an “insider” I am afforded unique opportunities in participating in and observing writers’ activities but, as Butz and Besio (2009) point out, this has made it more difficult to recognize the taken-for-granted—making reflexivity all the more valuable a tool. Further, participating in and observing graffiti writers’ activities recalls the ethical and methodological
concerns identified above in the context of PAR, as well. However, a PAR approach speaks to these issues by involving subjects in each stage of the research project (Breitbart, 2003).

**Participatory Data Analysis**

In order to maximize subject participation as per PAR, I attempted to involve subjects in data analysis to the greatest degree possible. Participatory data analysis places data analysis within the collaborative realm of PAR, attempting to involve subjects in coding and analysis of data (Cahill, 2007b). In the case of my project, the collaborative environment of the focus group seemed most appropriate for involving research subjects in data analysis. However, subject involvement primarily took the form of consulting, as subjects’ lack of time and willingness to participate limited focus group participation. Further, while subject participation drove this process, analysis was guided by the theoretical framework I have established above—a “flexible yet structured collaborative analysis” (Kindon et al. 2007).

In order to address my theoretical framework’s focus on everyday practices, I conducted data analysis according to Foucault’s (1980c, 2000b) concept of “ascending analysis.” As per Foucault (1980c), ascending analysis means that research should start not at the conceptual top or center, but at the conceptual bottom or margins of a problem—with particular practices or “infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory, their own techniques and tactics”—and ascend or generalize from this point of diffuse and particular practices to discuss “the manner in which they are invested and annexed by more global phenomena and the subtle fashion in which more general powers or economic interests are able to engage with these technologies” (p. 99). This approach begins with practices and examines the technologies of power embedded in them, expanding to look at other more general strategies that make use of these technologies in various ways.

In the course of my analysis, I highlighted themes in my research notes among the everyday practices of subjects, reasons given for these practices, and “ways of doing things” (Foucault, 2000b, p. 230) that connected these practices and reasons. Loosely following Ettlinger’s (2011) “analytical anchor points” (p. 541), I also noted the ways that these norms and practices produced more and less harmful and marginalizing public spaces, as well as the ways these norms and practices connected with more general, societal-scale discourses and practices. First, I identified practices that writers commonly used in producing public space and the reasons
they gave for such practices. Then, I highlighted the rationalities or techniques of power that normalized writers’ practices relative to reasons given. Next, I examined the ways that multiple views materialized in writers’ practices and the ways that writers’ views and practices articulated with similar views and practices in related contexts. However, while my analysis was rigorous, several limitations are worth noting.

Limitations
My analysis was limited by lack of geographical context as well as insufficient depth of inquiry into related norms and contexts. These limitations, however, present possibilities for future research. In focusing analysis on everyday practices, I was forced to locate my research in a specific geographic location (Columbus, Ohio). Thus, I am unable to make claims about graffiti subculture as a whole. However, as my analysis focuses on the everyday practices of writers as they connect with broader, societal-scale norms, this work might be complemented by future research that engages similar questions in different physical locations (e.g. other cities). Further, while this thesis aims to illuminate connections between the everyday practices of counterpublic actors and the production of societal-scale norms, my focus on views of graffiti and public space has produced an analysis that only begins to examine the materialization of other views through writers’ practices. Likewise, engaging only graffiti writers as subjects has led to an analysis that only begins to examine connections between writers’ and other actors’ production of public space. Following this thread, by focusing only on practices of graffiti writing in my notes, I have produced an analysis that only begins to examine connections between the production of public space through graffiti and the production of public space in other contexts. So, while my work leaves gaps in these areas, future research might fruitfully engage such connections.

Bustown Graffiti and Public Space
Columbus, Ohio is a large Midwest city with a diverse and growing population. Many active graffiti writers call Columbus home, often referring to it as “Bustown”—a reference to both the city’s name and lack of rail-based public transit. The graffiti writers involved in this research project produced two main collectively held views of graffiti and public space through their everyday practices: the vandalism view and the art view. Through their production of the vandalism view, writers connect resistance directed toward repressive power with practices aimed at promoting unrestricted competition for visibility in public space. Through their
production of the *art* view, writers connect resistance directed toward repressive power with practices aimed at promoting the aesthetic improvement of public space. These views are not mutually exclusive, rather they are mutually constitutive: writers practice graffiti by materializing not one or the other view but by producing *both* views in a variety of combinations. Writers materialize the *vandalism* and *art* views with and through techniques of power including individualization, totalization, classification, normalization, exclusion, regulation, and surveillance. In the context of these practices designed to conduct materialization of the *vandalism* and *art* views, I argue that writers have made themselves “the graffiti police.”

**Vandalism and Art**

Writers produce the *vandalism* view by writing their graffiti names or aliases as many times and in as many places as possible. Writers that I interacted with and interviewed frequently defined graffiti in terms of behavioral transgression. For example, N described graffiti as “Writing on any surface” where that writing is “unwanted.” (interview, 2013). Writers producing this view represent their actions as resistance directed toward rules and regulations imposed on public space, particularly rules and regulations involving property ownership. Another writer I interviewed, V, expressed this view quite clearly:

> Why is that yours? If there were no cops I could take it so could you with mine but it’s a wall [. . .] I don’t like the idea of ownership of property. Not doing anything but adding paint. I get why people don’t want their houses painted . . . fucked for them. (interview, 2013)

In line with an emphasis on resisting restrictive rules and regulations, writers producing the *vandalism* view produce public space by competing for visibility in spaces cast as controlled by others. In an informal focus group, S and T discussed what it means to be a graffiti writer:

> S: I’m not a fuckin’ idol I’m an alcoholic. I work a shitty job go home get drunk and write on shit—‘Oh that’s your house? I’m sorry’
> T: ‘Oh you paid for that? Oh I paid for this paint!’
> [Both laugh] (focus group, 2013)

In another example, U compared graffiti to advertising, saying “Coca-cola and McDonalds [advertise], I want a part” (interview, 2013). So, writers producing the *vandalism* view link resistance directed at rules and restrictions imposed on public space with unrestricted
competition for visibility in public space. When producing the art, view, however, writers’ focus shifts toward the aesthetic qualities of public space.

Writers produce the art view by writing their names or aliases in the most aesthetically pleasing ways and spaces possible. When producing this view, writers represent their actions as resistance directed toward any imposition of banality on public space. U asserted: “I guess to a point public space is for the public and we should be able to paint murals wherever—blank grey walls are bad.” (interview, 2013). The writers I interacted with often produced public space through their improvement of spaces cast as ugly or neglected. According to U, “[Writers are] like exterior decorators for the public environment.” (interview, 2013). Similarly, in an interview, W stressed the point that “Motives matter” and indicated that graffiti should “create an environment where everyday people can escape monotony” (interview, 2013). An example from the field further illustrates these connections: while several writers were painting elaborate pieces in a rather remote location, a group of fishermen walked past the writers. One writer asked the fishermen if they liked the pieces better than the drawings of penises that had previously covered the wall. The fishermen indicated that they did appreciate the writers’ artwork and the writers proceeded to add the fishermen’s names in stylish lettering above their own pieces. The group of writers was quite pleased with this interaction. These examples demonstrate writers’ linking of resistance directed toward imposed banality with efforts to improve public space aesthetically.

The Graffiti Police

Writers materialize the vandalism and art views with and through techniques of power or “modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, that were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people” (Foucault, 2000d, p. 341). Based on interpretations of Foucault by Gore (1995), as quoted in Ares (2008, p. 103, see also: Ettinger, 2011, p. 546), I have identified the following techniques of power in the context of Columbus graffiti:

individualization or “giving individual character to oneself or another”; totalization or “the specification of collectives, giving collective character”; classification or “differentiating groups of individuals from one another, classifying them, classifying oneself”; normalization or “invoking, requiring, setting, or conforming to a standard”; exclusion or “the reverse side of normalisation — the defining of the pathological [. . .] a technique for tracing the limits that will define difference, defining boundaries, setting zones”; regulation or “controlling by rule, subject
to restrictions, invoking a rule, including sanction, reward, punishment”; and *surveillance* or “supervising, closely observing, watching, threatening to watch or expecting to be watched” (p. 169). Writers produce public space according to these techniques, although not uniformly. Rather, I argue that the decisions and priorities of individual graffiti writers impact the configurations of these techniques or mechanisms of power that writers use to produce the *vandalism* and *art* views.

Writers individualize their production of collectively held views through the writing of names or aliases. Writers also totalize these efforts by forming, joining, and writing the names of “crews” (groups of writers) and by representing themselves more broadly as a collectivized subculture. Writers assign individual status and membership in these groups based on adherence to normalized standards. Individuals or groups who meet or exceed standards are considered “respected writers” (N, interview, 2013). A respected writer, as N defined the term in an interview, is “[. . .]one who has definitely been doing his thing for a little while and has some sort of rep in the scene—among writers.” (interview, 2013). Individuals or groups who fail to adhere to standards are considered either “toys” (inexperienced or bad writers) or non-writers (“the public”). N also defined “toy” in our interview: “a poser in the graffiti world, trying to participate in NY style graffiti culture without knowledge—just wish-wash on the wall.” (interview, 2013).

Writers quantify and qualify the visibility of graffiti—and thus the value or status of graffiti writers—by defining and invoking standardized criteria. When producing the *vandalism* view, writers prioritize quantitative criteria. When producing the *art* view, writers primarily value qualitative criteria.

When producing the *vandalism* view, writers define and invoke standardized criteria involving volume. These criteria include number of pieces of graffiti, size of each piece of graffiti, amount of legal or physical danger involved in reaching the location of graffiti, visibility of the location of graffiti, and time spent painting graffiti. Writers I interacted with valued the number of pieces of graffiti a writer had produced both in a single location and in general. R emphasized the importance of number of pieces in a particular location when he proclaimed, “I’m the king of this tunnel” (participant observation, 2013), as he already had two large pieces in that particular tunnel. R also connected the legal and physical danger encountered in walking the length of the tunnel with the *vandalism* view, noting that this was an unauthorized act and
that he had done so more times than any other writer (participant observation, 2013). T highlighted the emphasis placed on number of pieces of graffiti more generally when discussing female writers: “When you date someone they want to write, but you gotta have something behind your name, actually paint, can’t be a sharpie tag writer.” (focus group, 2013).

Emphasizing the amount of actual paint used in creating a piece of graffiti, S expressed a desire to paint “only fills” or bubble/block letters completely filled in with paint, as opposed to “hollows”—only the outlines of bubble/block letters—and “tags” or basic script letters (focus group, 2013). Writers producing the vandalism view approach location in terms of the amount and frequency of traffic in areas from which the location is visible. Although writers that I interacted with certainly valued all kinds of traffic, T summarized the importance of visibility quite succinctly: “Wanna paint where people are walking” (focus group, 2013). Working from the vandalism view, writers value time spent writing graffiti in terms of the amount of time a writer has been actively producing graffiti—U referred to this as “the seniority thing” (interview, 2013).

When producing the art view, writers define and invoke standardized aesthetic and technical criteria. These criteria include proficiency in style and technique, and appeal (visibility of the content of graffiti). Writers producing this view stress the importance of proficiency in artistic style and technique in relation to previously existing graffiti. For instance, U invoked this standard in reference to situations where space is limited: “If you’re going to paint a piece and there’s no space on the wall then if you can’t burn it don’t go over it [.]” (interview, 2013). In this quote, U’s use of “burn” refers to a writer’s ability to produce art that is qualitatively superior to whatever they are covering. In producing the art view, writers also value the aesthetic appeal of graffiti in a given location or area. U encapsulated this nicely: “Visible [. . .] it’s an aesthetic thing, ‘would this look good on someone’s house?’ No, that might send the message ‘Fuck you homeowner I have a personal vendetta’ but if it’s already fucked up . . .” (interview, 2013). Following the importance of proficiency in producing graffiti style art and aesthetic influence, writers producing the art view value the length of time that a writer has been actively proficient in improving public space.

While writers set standards that define acceptable practices through normalization, they define unacceptable practices through exclusion. In the field I observed the following incident: A writer painted graffiti near some other writers’ house in broad daylight, then walked directly
back to the house. Several writers at the house viewed these actions as disrespectful, drawing negative attention to the house from the neighborhood (and thus possibly the police). These writers expressed their displeasure to the offending writer and proceeded to socially exclude this person, although only temporarily. In this example, writers produced the art view through the exclusion of a writer whose practices failed to meet aesthetic standards: the writer painted a quick “throw-up”—simple bubble letters—which some writers viewed as aesthetically unappealing and therefore likely to draw the ire of neighbors. In the same example, writers produced the vandalism view through the exclusion of a writer whose practices might have invoked the enforcement of rules (police response). Writers produce both the vandalism view and the art view by excluding the practices of toys from consideration as graffiti: as U suggested, toys’ actions render spaces open for new graffiti by negating either the ownership taken by writers producing the vandalism view or the improvement created by writers producing the art view. In this context, a writer might go over another writer because “toys dick or ruin pieces.” (U, interview, 2013).

Writers codify the vandalism and art views by developing and enforcing rules. Given writers’ strong opposition to rules, they tend to view adherence as optional, often preferring appeals to normalization. For example, N described one basic rule but qualified his statement carefully:

The first rule to learn is not to go over people and then you learn the hierarchy of going over if you need to: pieces over throw ups, throw ups over tags—but even then it’s conditional because of your ability as a writer to distinguish between like history and wish-wash, just know your history and know the respected writers. (N, interview, 2013)

Despite loose adherence, writers learn to behave according to their understanding of rules developed within the subculture. U described this process: “[I learned the rules of graffiti through] older writers’ culture passed down. Precepts, rules I adhere to cause others say so, but you adapt them to yourself. Like don’t go over O.G. writers.” (interview, 2013). In these examples, writers describe the main ‘rules’ in graffiti subculture: adhere to standards of quantity and quality when going over other writers and do not write over the work of respected writers. Failure to adhere to these rules can lead to enforcement, as T explained: “Respect the movement but don’t fuck it up, I like toys writing but once they start fucking off that’s when we’re here to teach.” (focus group, 2013). S experienced the threat of such enforcement at a local bar: “[A
crew] wanted to beat me up once [. . .] after [I left a bar] because I left a can at a spot and someone covered [a writer’s graffiti] and he thought it was me.” (focus group, 2013).

Writers conduct surveillance in the city in order to enforce rules and promote compliance with norms. In the previous example, S faced the threat of enforcement as a result of another writer’s surveillance. Another example from the field illustrates writers’ practices of surveillance in greater detail: During one trip to paint pieces, a writer noticed that someone had written over the work of a writer in their “crew.” The group of writers proceeded to write over the new work, including the message: “Don’t fuck with us.” In this example, the writers’ surveillance of this particular space led to the discovery of an infraction and the enforcement of rules. Writers’ surveillance, however, is geared not only toward enforcement of rules but toward guiding the actions of writers such that enforcement is not necessary—even in this act of enforcement the writers sent a message by writing over another piece of the offending writer’s work: “Watch who you go over, thanks.” These writers were warning the offending writer that their actions were being monitored and that enforcement should be the expected result of infractions. As V stated in reference to writers’ practices of surveillance and enforcement: “What did you think was gonna happen?” (interview, 2013). In other words, writers conduct surveillance with the aim of normalizing behavior not only through direct coercion but also through the threat of enforcement.

All writers do not practice these strategies in uniform ways. As C pointed out in an interview, “Any definition of graffiti must include process” (interview, 2013). Writers do not homogeneously produce graffiti—graffiti, rather, is the name given to a heterogeneous process whereby writers, often in conflict with one another, produce the vandalism and art views to varying degrees. In this context, the situation I describe in the anecdote that begins this thesis becomes intelligible: writers made themselves the graffiti police. In that example, one writer was privileging the vandalism view by regulating the other writers’ behavior after they violated rules and standards by covering a respected writer’s graffiti; the other writers, however, were privileging the art view by considering the space available after it had been aesthetically tarnished by toys. Thus, writers produce public space according to both the vandalism and art views, with and through more or less calculated modes of action, crystallizing a “process” called graffiti. While this explanation speaks to how writers produce public space, further analysis reveals the effects of these practices.
Graffiti as Resistance

Ascending analysis of the empirical data created throughout the course of this research project reveals that graffiti writers’ consider their own actions in terms of resistance directed toward repressive power (in the form of individuals and institutions). This bracketing of power relations within graffiti writing can obscure the taken-for-granted, mundane, everyday flows of power through which writers produce themselves, others, and public spaces. Writers’ often uncritical practice of ‘graffiti as resistance’ has, at least in this case, led writers to produce public space in ways that produce marginalization and domination of those considered to be inferior writers or non-writers. However, these systems are imperfect and some practices indicate possibilities for resistance that targets the vandalism and art views rather than power itself. While these possibilities are quite exciting, writers’ attempts to produce the vandalism and art views in new ways may prove ineffective if writers do not recognize the ways in which their practices of graffiti writing also produce other collectively held views, such as neoliberalism and sexism. Similarly, these efforts may prove ineffective if writers fail to consider how the strategies they employ in producing these views articulate with efforts to produce public space in other, related contexts, such as neighborhood development.

Producing Privilege

When producing the vandalism view, writers attempt to resist control over the ownership of public space. However, my fieldwork demonstrates that writers produce the vandalism view by establishing and maintaining control over the right to public space. Thus, rather than effectively resisting systems of property ownership in public space, writers—as suggested by Docunayan (2000)—produce these systems themselves. Through these systems, writers deny non-writers and toys the right to ownership of public space, either through marginalization or outright domination. Writers exclude non-writers and toys’ claims to ownership from consideration as graffiti and therefore do not afford individuals from these groups the respect given to established writers. For example, during the course of my fieldwork, writers frequently wrote over blank walls, toy graffiti, or non-graffiti media such as advertisements or love notes. If the claims of non-writers, toys, or even respected writers violate rules or standards, regulation may include outright domination and violence—in an example mentioned above, S almost experienced this after another writer thought S had written over their graffiti (focus group, 2013).
When producing the *art* view, writers attempt to resist control over the appearance of public space. However, my fieldwork indicates that writers produce the *art* view by establishing control over the appearance of public space. Thus, rather than resisting systematic production of monotony and banality in the appearance of public space, writers produce systematic monotony and banality themselves. In other words, writers’ production of the *art* view involves attempting to resist the imposition of “blank walls” on the city through the imposition of graffiti writers’ aesthetic standards. In a focus group, A compared municipal practices of planning and zoning to graffiti writers’ practices, such as designating certain locations as “pieces only yards” where less complex graffiti is discouraged (focus group, 2013). Writers’ imposition of their standards on public space leads to marginalization of those whose aesthetic tastes may differ from writers’ tastes. As U said in an interview:

I don’t think [graffiti is] always for the public, it’s a personal thing in public space for the few who choose to get into doing it or following it. Most people don’t care; most people won’t appreciate a hand on a dumpster [...] (interview, 2013)

As with the *vandalism* view, writers’ production of the *art* view obscures marginalization and domination in everyday practices by directing resistance toward power itself rather than toward the strategies, the techniques of power, that produce marginalization and domination in the context of the right to public space.

**Resisting Resistance**

Writers, however, do not always act according to the strategies they employ in guiding themselves and others toward producing the *vandalism* and *art* views, suggesting that these strategies are imperfect. In this context, I have identified several examples of writers producing the *vandalism* and *art* views in ways that counter established strategies. These practices may indicate possibilities for practices of resistance aimed at producing the *vandalism* and *art* views in ways that lead to less marginalization and domination. I argue that the practices of these writers indicate that possible strategies for effective resistance might involve the production of public space as space that is shared through experiences rather than owned by claim and as space that can be aesthetically improved by difference rather than banality.

Writers do not always marginalize non-writers and toys’ claims to ownership of public space. Some writers choose not to claim ownership of certain spaces such as homes, cars, and
houses of worship. As N said to me in one conversation, “[Private property is] where someone lives and sleeps.” (participant observation, 2013). This strategy, however, is largely used in producing the art view by portraying graffiti as an improvement to public space rather than as an attack on property ownership. The following exchange with N illustrates this point:

Interviewer: What is the point or goal in not writing on “personal property”?
N: It seems a little more invasive or destructive than I want to be, conveys the wrong message for graffiti culture.
Interviewer: What message should graffiti culture be sending?
N: Challenge things.
Interviewer: How is writing on personal property sending the wrong message in this context?
N: I want people who work to challenge things. I want everyday people to challenge things not feel like they are oppressed by something else.
Interviewer: “Challenge things”?
N: I want people in general to see hey this people are taking use of public space in ways that are not OK, illegal, but it doesn’t harm anyone—bridge, neglected property, something paid for by public funds. Think about the use of things, what we restrict each other from doing—not just graff’. To understand the world is portrayed [differently?], what is set forth by the few who have control, the few don’t have the interests of regular people in mind.
Interviewer: “Oppressed by something else”?
N: “I don’t want people to think graffiti is an attack on a specific person or anything.”
(interview, 2013)

In this interview, N framed the decision to avoid writing on personal property in terms of “harm” and oppression, suggesting that graffiti should not be “invasive” or “destructive.” While this is in line with art view, N also implied a connection between writing graffiti and challenging norms that restrict access to public space. Importantly, N drew a distinction between critically engaging public space and “an attack on a specific person.” Thus, N’s decision to avoid writing on personal property represents an attempt at producing the vandalism view through resistance directed toward strategies that produce marginalization and domination of actors in public space rather than resistance directed at power itself. N’s production of the vandalism view in this way
breaks from established standards in that N considers not only quantity but also “message” when writing graffiti. However, while N afforded non-writers agency in this example by deciding to respect others’ establishing ownership of public space through personal use, N did not go so far as to afford active voice to non-writers in graffiti’s own claims to public space.

In another example, writers I worked with attempted to include and involve non-writers in their production of the vandalism view. In the encounter with local fishermen that I have discussed above, writers produced the art view through their portrayal of their work as an improvement to the previously phallus-covered wall. However, these writers also included the fishermen’s names on the wall, justifying their actions in terms of a shared right to public space: by traversing the railroad tracks to reach a pond on what was presumably private property, the fishermen were using this space in illegal but harmless ways, much like the writers. In this context, I argue that the writers’ inclusion of the fishermen’s names on the wall represents a step toward production of the vandalism view in ways that “challenge” marginalization and domination by normalizing rights to public space that are negotiated through shared experiences by many different agents with active voices.

As with claims to ownership, writers do not always marginalize toys and non-writers’ attempts to improve public space. For example, during the course of my fieldwork, AUTISM made conscious decisions to use shapes and colors in ways that were inconsistent with other local writers. AUTISM framed these efforts in terms of “advancing style”—improving the quality of graffiti—by breaking from the established aesthetic order/formula but “still painting tight shit” (participant observation, 2013). Writers might use this strategy in order to produce the vandalism view by eschewing rules and regulations related to style as well as ownership but, in this case, I argue that AUTISM’s efforts to improve graffiti by challenging existing aesthetic standards represent attempts at producing the art view through resistance directed toward strategies that produce homogeneity in the appearance of public space, rather than resistance directed toward aesthetic standards themselves. In this context, AUTISM’s practices suggest possibilities for producing the art view in ways that involve attempts to include the aesthetic efforts of toys and non-writers rather than marginalization and domination of these actors. However, AUTISM’s efforts in this example do not involve actual attempts to include toys or non-writers as active agents in the production of the art view.

In at least one instance during my fieldwork, writers did attempt to include toys and non-
writers in their production of the *art* view. A group of writers, in this case, chose to paint a mural on the side of a building rented by friends. Rather than simply painting their names or aliases in graffiti style, these writers incorporated graffiti styles into a mural designed to represent a history of the neighborhood where it was painted. These writers also encouraged and invited the involvement of neighbors, particularly children, in creating this mural. At least one writer, AUTISM, justified these choices in terms of difference: “[Graffiti is] not non-specific, that’s why you have to gear it” (participant observation, 2013). While this project came to an end without neighborhood residents actually participating—the writers ran out of paint and both neighbors and writers lost interest—it illuminates possibilities for writers producing the *art* view in ways that include toys and non-writers as active agents, rather than in ways that lead to marginalization or outright domination of these actors.

When I asked W to define “graffiti,” W answered: “Putting things where they don’t belong” (participant observation, 2013). In this context, graffiti might be considered a “process” of “challenging things” and “advancing style” by “putting things where they don’t belong.” Practiced uncritically, this process produces marginalization and domination of toys and non-writers. However, writers’ engagements with the fishermen and the neighborhood mural indicate possible new ways of practicing graffiti as a process of negotiating and representing difference by critically engaging the production of public space.

**Articulation**

If writers fail to address the materialization of multiple views through their practices, they may render their own practices of resistance ineffective. In addition to the vandalism and *art* views, writers can produce a variety of *other* collectively held views through their practice of graffiti. For example, in the course of my fieldwork, I often observed gendered practices of graffiti writing. The writers I worked with were overwhelmingly cis-male and they often considered female writers first as women, then as writers. These attitudes extended to my role as interviewer: when I asked T for opinions on female writers, I was assuming his opinion would be different than his opinions of male writers. Similarly, T gave an answer suggesting that women become interested in graffiti because the men they date are writers. R’s use of “king” in celebrating his quantitative superiority in painting in and walking the length of a tunnel serves as another example of highly masculinized practices in graffiti. Highlighting the normalization of
gendered views in graffiti writing, MacDonald (2001) describes many similar attitudes and practices among graffiti writers operating in New York and London. So, actors who do not address these views when attempting to resist the vandalism and art views may practice resistance in ways that lead to the marginalization and domination of women.

I also observed the materialization of neoliberal norms through graffiti writing. In the case of the neighborhood mural, writers obtained free paint as a group and used it to begin the mural. After depleting that paint supply, writers abandoned the mural and returned to buying their own paint with which to write their own graffiti names in other locations. Neighbors, presumably lacking either the resources or the will to contribute materials, abandoned the project along with the writers. This example demonstrates how writers’ production of the vandalism view can become neoliberalized through a focus on unrestricted, marketized, individualized competition. Further, the abandonment of the mural in the face of neoliberal competition demonstrates one way that resistance can be rendered ineffective if actors fail to consider how multiple views might materialize in their practices.

Writers’ failure to address the materialization of views similar to the vandalism and art views in related contexts may also lead to ineffective resistance. Just as graffiti writers’ practices might materialize multiple collectively held views, graffiti writers’ efforts to claim ownership of and improve public space may articulate with similar practices in other contexts. Notably, writers’ production of the vandalism and art views closely resembles other public and private efforts to control the appearance of graffiti. Such efforts often involve public or private actors either adopting zero-tolerance “graffiti abatement” strategies or implementing more tolerant “harm minimization” programs aimed at encouraging sanctioned public art (Iveson, 2014). Abatement strategies involve attempts to eradicate graffiti entirely, where various actors mirror writers’ production of the vandalism view through efforts to establish and maintain ownership of public space by claiming as much of it as possible. Likewise, harm minimization strategies involve municipal and private actors’ efforts to install sanctioned public art, mirroring writers’ production of the art view by seeking to improve public space through aesthetic standardization. So, actors seeking to effectively resist the marginalization and domination resulting from graffiti writers’ production of the vandalism and art views should also consider how these views are produced in the context of graffiti control.

Writers’ practices may also articulate with efforts directed toward neighborhood
development. On one hand, the presence of graffiti can render an area disorderly and in need of redevelopment. In this context, graffiti writers’ efforts to claim ownership of public space might serve to justify government officials’ and developers’ efforts to claim ownership of property in these areas, thereby restoring order. On the other hand, McAuliffe (2012) suggests that public art often “contributes to the reputation of places as creative,” driving investment and gentrification aimed at a “creative milieu.” Further, artists who spark these processes of arts-based redevelopment often find themselves displaced by wealthier gentrifiers “as these areas move from being places of artistic production to places of artistic consumption” (McAuliffe, 2012, p. 194). In this context, graffiti writers’ efforts to improve public space might serve the interests of officials and developers attempting to improve property in these areas. Actors’ failure to critically engage these connections between related problems and contexts could result in resistance being rendered ineffective or becoming co-opted. Returning to the example of the neighborhood mural, this mural may have contributed to rising property values in an increasingly creative area, potentially leading to the displacement of both the writers’ friends and their neighbors.

**A Better City Through Graffiti?**

The case of Columbus graffiti offers one example of how governmentalities materialize in the practices of counterpublic actors, and to what ends. In this context, my research indicates that writers produce the *vandalism* and *art* views by claiming and improving public space, leading to marginalization and domination of inexperienced writers and non-writers. Writers, though, do not always produce these views according to normalized “codes,” sometimes choosing to critically engage difference in public space, leading to less marginalization and domination. Thus, relations of power and resistance permeate counterpublics such that counterpublic actors materialize more *and* less alternative views of public space in their practices. Further, identifying and exploring people and practices at the margins of the margins can illuminate possibilities for practices of resistance aimed toward materializing collectively held views in less harmful ways. However, like techniques of power, techniques of resistance are not always effective.

Actors may render their own resistance ineffective if their strategies targeting particular collectively held views fail to target the materialization of many *other* collectively held views in a given context. Further, connections between materialization of collectively held views in one
context and materialization of similar views in related contexts may also render resistance ineffective if actors fail to address them. So, in this thesis, I draw attention to graffiti writers’ production of sexism and neoliberalism as well as materialization of views that resemble the vandalism and art view in similar contexts such as neighborhood development. However, I have only begun to explore these connections, and many more such connections may exist. Future research might fruitfully engage the articulation of mentalities and contexts in order to explain how counterpublic actors such as graffiti writers become enrolled in, and thus might effectively resist, the materialization of harmful mentalities such as neoliberalism and the normalization of marginalization and domination through projects such as neighborhood redevelopment.
References


