

## Conclusion

This book was about graffiti, but it was really a story about the (male) young and the nameless and their search for voice, masculinity and status at a time in life when this is often hard to find. With a spray can and a little dedication, we saw them find all this and more. By writing their name, they earn fame and respect. By doing it illegally, they build a masculine identity. By excluding girls, they protect this identity. And by excluding the 'outside' world, they add power, ownership, autonomy and escape into the mix. In this subculture, young men gain the freedom of possibility, the chance to go beyond the limits of 'real life' and be who they want to be.

Graffiti's rewards are manifold, but there is a thread connecting them. Put together, they articulate a process of change and development, transition and progression. Like the army (Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978; Coote, 1993; Morgan, 1994; Rutherford, 1988; Segal, 1990), the Boy Scouts (Hantover, 1978) or the sportsworld (Messner, 1987, 1991), this subculture could be viewed as a modern-day 'rite of passage', a transitional vehicle which helps its mainly male members journey from one status to another (Eliade, 1958; Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Raphael, 1988). They enter as a boy and a nobody, and having completed its illegal tasks of endurance and fed off its rewards, they emerge as a man and a somebody. The contribution this subculture makes cannot be underestimated. Finding a meaningful route to adult/manhood is not an easy task for young people today. Material resources like money or a career are not yet accessible or relevant. And traditional avenues via public displays of physical prowess or bravery are all but obsolete (Raphael, 1988). In this day and age, the young have to be a little more creative and find ways of building

their own props and operating their own rites and rituals. This sub-culture provides us a wonderful example of this creativity.

Approaching graffiti from this personal angle helped me paint a human face back into the subcultural picture. Graffiti writers are not just dots on a class landscape, as the CCCS's work would sometimes imagine them. They are people, more specifically, male adolescent people with their own concerns, hopes and desires, and their own particular way of tackling and satisfying these. Although the CCCS made similar claims about the agency of their subcultural members, the hegemonic theory they used to do this paradoxically revoked them. The concept of 'false consciousness' lies at its heart, portraying their members as somehow blind, working to remedy a situation that they do not even realize exists. Similarly, the working-class contradictions these members suffer depict their response as inevitable, activating structuralist notions of overdetermination. Their social agents, as Willis (1990: 157) remarks, 'may not be seen as passive bearers, but they have still not become much more than brightly coloured cardboard cut-outs pushed around the hegemonic boardgame'.

While hegemony is a theoretically important notion, alone, it leaves little room for the conscious and creative processes we have seen in play here. Using these, I join Willis (1990) in his move towards a more dynamic model of cultural practice:

Rather than see humans as lumps of 'labour power', meaningful only in work or altogether 'redundant', we will then need to see them as full creative *citizens*, full of their own sensuous symbolic capacities and activities and taking a hand in the construction of their own identities.

(Willis, 1990: 145, italics in original)

This shift in vision would take us beyond the faceless landscape of the Marxist world. It might also help to dimensionalize the flat and sometimes 'meaningless' landscape of the postmodern world. In its full-blown form, postmodernism would have us believe that we are inscribed positions in provided texts and artefacts. I have argued against this. We are people, not robots, and, as such, we come endowed with the creative powers to construct, adapt and reformulate our discursive positions to our own gain. Being human, as Willis (1990: 11) contends, 'means to be creative in the sense of remaking the world for ourselves as we make and find our own place and identity'.

By stripping us of this agency, postmodernism consigns us to an existence which, while plausible on paper, does not *always* fit with the one we live out in the 'real world'. Yes, it has pushed us in some positive and enlightening theoretical and epistemological directions, but at times, it pushes a little too hard and asks us to accept its own metaphors for reality (Willis, 1990).

I used ethnography in an attempt to 'stay in touch' and avoid these pitfalls. Its strength lies in its ability to balance theory, analysis and grounded experience (Wulff, 1995; McRobbie, 1994; Redhead, 1997). And its beauty lies in the way it provides 'rich' empirical material and reflection woven together with the lived meanings and values of those it studies. It was the backbone of my study. Without it, I would have been unable to access and present the writers' voices, and without these, I would have been unable to understand their world as they live, see and experience it. The CCCS group offered us some very sophisticated arguments concerning subcultures and their functions. But we rarely heard the members themselves contribute to this thesis. Their silence will always bewilder me. How can one document or interpret a cultural slice of life without referencing the people who create, sustain and live in it? Reading *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall & Jefferson, 1976) is, in many ways, like going to see a play with no actors. The scene is set, but it is not animated or brought to life. I tried to remedy this in my work by casting these often unemployed subcultural actors in a central role. The part they played made all the difference. With their input, we gain a vivid and radically different interpretation of the CCCS's script, one which makes themes of masculinity and adolescence, rather than class, central to its plot. As an ethnographer, I played a directorial, as opposed to a leading, role. I made these analytic lines prominent and I knitted them together to narrate a compelling story. However, it was the actors who initially delivered them. By making the actor/insider's voice and habitat its first port of call, ethnography fleshes out the fine-grained complexities of social life that other methods can sometimes miss.

Ethnography may reach the parts other methods cannot, but it cannot always reach all of them. I conducted a fairly thorough study of the graffiti subculture in London and New York, but there were areas which remained beyond the scope of my research. I did not, for instance, explore any of the subculture's rural or suburban scenes or, indeed, those in other countries and cities around the world. I met a writer recently who learnt his trade in Johannesburg, South Africa. The story he has to tell is the subject of a whole other book.

Nor did I look at how this subculture is changing in line with technological developments. Difficulties in painting trains and ensuring these 'run' has prompted many writers to find other ways of exposing their work, for example through the use of magazines, videos and the Internet. These communications media have extended their potential audience, but they have also enhanced writers' abilities to network and interact with other writers in other 'scenes' and countries elsewhere. It might be interesting to look at how these advances are affecting this subculture's sense of 'worldwide' unity, and, indeed, its traditions. Already there is debate over whether graffiti belongs on the Web. From what I have heard, there are also cross-out wars now raging in cyberspace! These new developments are rich and weighty and open up a whole new chapter in this subculture's evolution.

Lastly, I did not delve very deeply into life as it exists beyond subcultural boundaries. Like most studies, I spotlighted the public sphere, life on the subcultural streets as it were. Taking a closer look at a writer's life at home, school or work could be immensely valuable and enhance four areas of our understanding:

1. It could show us, 'up close', some of the 'real life' restraints that graffiti supposedly counterbalances, thereby clarifying the significance of its claimed rewards.
2. It could help us appreciate the complex interplay between writers' multiple identities. A graffiti identity is not all-embracing. In some contexts, such as home or work, it is played down or even concealed. A look at these 'private' spheres would show us how this identity exchange is negotiated and why.
3. It could also, as McRobbie (1980) proposes, reveal some of the ways in which these different worlds cross and merge:

The family is the obverse face of hard, working-class culture, the softer sphere in which the fathers, sons and boyfriends expect to be, and are, emotionally serviced. It is this link between the lads' hard outer image and their private experiences – relations with parents, siblings and girlfriends – that still needs to be explored.

(McRobbie, 1980: 41)

McRobbie (1980) asks us to look at how working-class masculine culture manifests itself in the 'softer sphere' of home and family. Extend these class boundaries, and this would be an important goal for future studies on graffiti.

4. Finally, a dip into life outside of this subculture might help future theorists tackle some of the questions I left untouched. Namely, if all young men are striving for masculinity and some sense of autonomy, why is it that only some of them get involved in graffiti? Apart from opportunity and inclination, what, if anything, is present or absent in their lives that is/is not in the lives of other young men? A look at their experiences at home, school or work might give us these answers.

It was not possible for me to take my readers on this trek across non-subcultural terrain. Although this represents a valuable project for the future, it might have to remain a 'nice thought'. There are boundaries and thresholds that we cannot always cross as researchers and relative strangers, and expecting to gain access to a writer's life at home could be deemed an over-ambitious project. One's home is a relatively private confine, as McRobbie (1980) recognizes. But, in this case, it might also house people who are unaware that their sons, daughters or husbands are even involved in graffiti. Issues like these will ensure that certain doors are closed on us, and closed doors will continue to emphasize the importance of the insider's voice. If we cannot see or experience these things for ourselves, then we must take our visions from the words of those who can.

It has been about nine years now since I first opened my eyes to the world of graffiti. In this time I've learnt a lot. Not just obvious lessons about its ways and practices, but also some pretty revealing things about myself. This world took me by surprise. The people I met, the sights I saw and the stories I heard, each one reached into the back of my mind and cracked apart a distorted preconception. While I consider myself an open-minded person, like anyone I can be lazy. I was happy to entertain the images of testosteroneed mayhem I was fed. I saw graffiti as a random destructive act; enjoyable, yes, but not one with any far-reaching implications. My perceptions of the people who wrote it were just as skewed. Simple-minded tearaways and menacing ones at that. Before my first meeting with a writer, I left the house and a scribbled note to my flatmates telling them what I was doing, when I should be back, and where to come and look for me if I did not return! I was ignorant, but I was also lucky, because, unlike most people, I got a closer and more informed look at this world. What I saw crushed my initial assumptions and left me with a really valuable lesson – something I hold with me now and something I hope this book has also relayed. That is never to take things at face value. Constantly challenge

stereotypes and always interrogate the surface view of things. Because while the writing may be on the wall, its words do not always speak for themselves. Sometimes we have to work a little harder if we want to hear the story they have to tell.