“Nations”, identity expression, and symbolic power: the complex practice of graffiti-writing among Chicago working-class youth “gangs”

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“Nations”, Identity Expression, and Symbolic Power: The Complex Practice of Graffiti-Writing Among Chicago Working-Class Youth "Gangs"

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Arts

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Photo Source: “Chicago’s ‘Cold War” via Flickr.com

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I. Introduction

The objective of this project is to explore and analyze the prevailing cultural practice of graffiti writing among Chicago working class youth “gangs”. Through a combined methods approach of ethnographic field work, interactive internet research, and a literature review of existing academic texts; this project seeks to answer the following questions: 1) What is “gang” graffiti in the Chicago context? 2) What purposes does the graffiti serve? 3) Why is the graffiti valued to such an extent that it has been practiced within this culture for decades? 4) What further insights can the graffiti provide into the logic and values of “gang” culture? In addressing these questions, this project will provide a more in-depth exploration of an often misrepresented culture; seeking to de-construct the myth of the gangbanger and place these youths in a more humanizing framework as culture builders and critics, not merely thugs and killers.

Labeling the Experience:

While these Chicago groups have been labeled in many ways historically by both insiders and outsiders: such as social-athletic clubs, youth political action groups, crews, and street gangs; in recent decades these varied networked “street” groups have expressed a re-occurring term for how they identify their collectives,
which is as "Nations". This concept was similarly validated by Conquergood in his Chicago ethnographic field research in Albany Park in the late 1980's. “Many gangs now affix “Nation” to their title. In some cases this acknowledges the size and scale of organization complexity of a gang, whereas in other cases it is simply self-aggrandizing” (Conquergood 1989: 32). While individuals who are part of these Nations might accept externally imposed labels for the sake of conversational simplicity or as a badge of outside validation, the Nation as a title and concept is the most enduringly relevant way to identify these groups in recent decades. Beyond its use as a group title, the Nation also represents the most ideal, noble vision of how these youths see this collective experience. It is with this in mind that this project utilizes “Nation” going forward as an authentic way to refer how the participants define themselves.

**Rejecting the “Street Gang” Designation**

“We r apart of da same gang going thru da same struggle y fight each other likke da Maniac ur talkkin about is phony if he always talks about his "Nation" but talks shit about other sets den he dont got love for his Nation cuz ur Nation is ur whole Nation not just da blockk ur from u kno. dats exactly how I see it man we are a Nation but I call ourselfs a gang too bcuz u have to be realistic but we are one Nation united going thru da same struggles”- Gio “Trust’None”-Insane Ashland Vikings, 20th/47th (Cicero)-via private Flickr message

“Street Gangs” is a generically used designation in mainstream news media, entertainment, and academia that does not adequately capture the complexity and nuances of Chicago Nation culture, and therefore will be treated as an expendable term as we move towards a deeper understanding of what these groups are in a locally specific way. While it is often necessary when sourcing academic literature to
source material that refers to these groups as “gangs”, and even the participants in these Nations might interchangeably use the term “gang”, we do so with the understanding that our exploration of the Nation construct transcends the ambiguous, one-dimensional model of criminality and social deviance often presented as the “street gang”.

A blanket definition of “gangs” is highly contested among academics and law enforcement, as it is attempts to lump culturally diverse groups under a single umbrella on the basis of “crime”, or the crimes of those who identify with certain groups. This on-going academic debate with “defining gangs” and characterizing youth groups using one standard as “street gang” has been highlighted by Bursik & Grasmik: “Some contemporary researchers have expressed a more general discomfort with all definitions that assume generalizable group structures and processes or that equate crime with gang behavior” (1993: 5). This dissertation will refrain from participating in this discourse, but will still need to attempt to at least define and describe “Chicago Nations” in order to analyze the cultural practice of graffiti within this local context.
Almighty Ambrose graffiti, self describing as a “Nation”, circa 2011. (Source “Old Skool” via Flickr.com)
Insane Gangster Satan Disciples’ “War sweater”, Circa late 1970s, self describing as a “Nation”. Source: “Mr. Woo” via Facebook.com
Insane Deuces “Compliment Card” self-describing as “Nation”-Circa 1987 (Source: “Chicago Cold War” via Flickr.com)
Almighty Imperial Gangsters self-describing as a “Nation” in their clothing; (picture courtesy of Sir Razz G, Belden/Monitor IGz, circa 2010, sent via private Flickr mail)
Nations and Youth Emphasis

“The teenage and early adult years are important from a cultural perspective and in special need of a close qualitative attention because it is here, at least in the first-world western cultures, where people are formed most self-consciously through their own symbolic and other activities. It is where they form symbolic moulds through which they understand themselves and their possibilities for the rest of their lives” (Willis 1990:7).

These Nations can be generalized as primarily youth-oriented, as they were not provided as a framework by adults, but rather as a way that they conceived and codified their own friendship groups and networks. Both current and former Nation members I interviewed described Jr. High and High School as being the era that they “turned” and were “out there” as active participants, but some also described their identity adoption as beginning sooner more informally as an aspect of family heritage and neighborhood association. To “turn” is to “become” it represents a symbolically transformative point in time when they went through the necessary rites and processes to be considered a formal member by the collective and its leadership. Their status in the Nation as they age is often drastically affected by how they proved themselves during their initial years of involvement-making youth involvement essential to being able to be considered legitimate by their peers.

While it is true that the Nations can be said to be primarily youth-oriented groups and that they demonstrate this identity more intensely as youths; this does not justly describe the extent and impact that this culture has had on how participants view themselves in later years. These identities adopted by these
youths are so compelling and shaping, that for many of them they continue to provide a lens through which they orient their lives long after many of them have considered themselves “active”. “Active” is a status term that is used by Nation members to describe those who are currently participating in the group, engaging in the type of self-identification, communication, and practices that are considered consistent with shared ideas about what being part of a Nation is about.

While many consider the time period prior to one “growing up, getting a job, and starting a family” as the time period that Nation youths are the most “active”, this isn’t always the case as the Nation often becomes considered more legitimate within a certain community. In addition, for those in correctional facilities where Nation leadership structures have become more formalized, older participants often come to rely heavily on their Nation identities as their primary source of status and influence—as they are in a sense “frozen in time” while incarcerated. So while this project will often refer to Nation participants as “youths”, as that is the demographic that is the most active in shaping this culture, especially in relation to practicing graffiti, for many there is no “aging out”, at least not fully. There are many older individuals who may have families and “a real job” with a house in the suburbs, but still see themselves as, for example, a “Cobra” or a “Gangster” and under certain circumstances and settings may identify as such, engaging in the posturing and practices that reflect a strong personal connection with the identity that they adopted as young people. Evidence of this can be found within social networking sites like exclusive Facebook groups, at Nation reunions and picnics,
and visits to “the old neighborhood”, where some of the older members attempt to re-connect and to some extent experience this identity that was a strong part of their formative years and still has meaning to them personally.

**The Chicago Context**

Sociologists such as John Hagedorn and William Julius Wilson characterize Chicago as a landscape historically shaped by ethnic enclaves, racial segregation, gentrification, “gang suppression”, class oppression, recidivism, and long-term joblessness-“intersectional oppressions” which coalesced as “facts of life” and in turn facilitated what has been termed “informal economy” in working class and poor communities. It was within this urban climate; especially in the post-industrial era, that Nations seemed to gain more relevance as an identity that is seen by some youths in these communities as a source of status and empowerment. While this project does not deny that there can often be a strong economic aspect of Nation involvement; they seem to function more significantly, at least initially, as a valuable source of identity, status, and social network-bonds and positions which sometimes allow participants greater access to both legal and illegal forms of economic capital.

Similarly positioned youth groups in many other cities have been considered by scholars as mostly “interstitial” (see Hagedorn 2007:2), or temporary constructs serving one group of youths at a specific point in time. Chicago’s youth community, while also continuing to produce its share of temporary group identities as well,
have also created more enduring identities and practices that have become more or less embedded in the social fabric of many neighborhoods. Hagedorn describes Chicago as being a city where these youth groups have “institutionalized”, noting that many of the so-called gangs who are currently active have existed “for over fifty years”. He goes on to further characterize institutionalization as possessing five features when applied to these “gangs” constructs: “Institutionalization means that the gang’s show goes on despite changes in leadership, has organization complex enough to sustain multiple roles of its members, can adapt to changing environments, fulfills some need within the community, and organizes a distinct outlook for its members (sub-culture)” (Hagedorn 2008: 9,10).

If the characterization of Nations as institutions is accurate; how do these groups sustain themselves over the span of decades to such an extent to become “institutions” despite pervasive social and legal repression? This project proposes that while these Nation groups do have specifically assigned roles and consistent practices within their membership as an “organization”, involvement is less about an actual highly regimented bureaucracy or militaristic structure puppeteering its members, but more accurately, transitional friendship clusters based on individualized identities and larger symbolic collectives. In other words, Nations are more valuable as an identity “shell” for each generation; giving additional layers of significance to smaller group relationships and interactions. While different degrees of recruitment might take place in various ways, youth mimicry and appropriation of Nation identity often takes place based on inherited neighborhood culture and family lineage, rather than as a consistent, cohesive
conscription effort on the part of older members. This means that the younger generation is socialized to “inhabit” the existing shell, revitalizing it and giving it new life within neighborhoods. One enduring way that Nation identities are often re-inscribed, mimicked, and adopted in these neighborhoods is through the practice of writing graffiti.

**Project Focus: Graffiti Writing as Cultural Practice of Chicago Nations**

This project focuses specifically on the practice of graffiti writing among youths who identify within these Nations as a multi-functional method of cultural production. Chicago Nation graffiti has been created, practiced, and sustained as one of two main systems of “Gang writing” found in the United States, the other having originated among similarly positioned youths in Los Angeles. As Chicago Nations have changed through time and been expressed in different era-specific ways, graffiti has endured as a relevant way for both insiders and outsiders to remain connected to the values, priorities, politics, and identities of these youths. Each new generation inherits an existing system of writing but interprets it in ways that are relevant to their own group and identity arrangements, and then may incorporate new symbols and words into the existing lexicon. This means that in order to understand what the graffiti means in an ever-changing discourse, the lines of communication must be kept open with those who are living and creating it every day.
Many people have at least a general understanding of what graffiti looks like, depending on their own experiences and background. Typically presented as evidence of “urban blight”, graffiti is often cited as evidence of an area’s decline or abandonment. Graffiti is not often seen by “the Mainstream” as being distinguishable or recognized as having different types having different meanings to the diverse groups who create it. For many, all graffiti can be summarized and dismissed as simply “vandalism”; the defacement of public and private property that results in the loss of time and money to the owners and tax payers. Others see graffiti as a rebellious method of creative expression, or simply as art, the application as a skill that they hone and value. This project will refrain from weighing in on the potential moral or social value judgments of graffiti; but instead will focus on one specific type of graffiti that is created as a ritualized practice of Nation culture.

Chicago Nation youths have developed a unique system of graffiti—a way that they write their graffiti that distinguishes their culture from similarly embedded groups in Los Angeles, as well as other types of graffiti writers in Chicago. It is a complex arrangement of writing letters and symbols in a way that is simultaneously public and private. It is public in the sense that it is often written in public space and anyone who happens to pass by it can see it. It is also private because even though it can be seen by many, it is often either overlooked as no different from other types of graffiti, or simply dismissed as “marking gang territory” and nothing more. As a
system of information it functions to both include those who have been locally educated enough to understand it while simultaneously excluding those who haven’t, in other words “hidden in plain sight”.

Although very simple on the surface, the meaning behind Nation graffiti is often as complex as the culture that creates it; a practice that serves multiple purposes even as its own creators and participants downplay it’s significance. As this project will show; a single piece of graffiti can have multiple layers of symbolic meaning, not only based on what is written, but why and where it was written.

While writing graffiti is seen by many Nation youths as a poor substitute for what is known as “real Bangin”, it is often cherished as part of their cultural tradition, incorporated as another way that these groups articulate and inscribe their identities; it is an undeniable, enduring facet of this culture. Writing graffiti can not be said to be the “focus” or priority of Nations collectively, but it has persisted as a cultural practice for decades despite social and legal repression.

The following chapters will elaborate on the varied ways that Nation graffiti has meaning in their world:

I. Nation Graffiti as a Form of Artistic Expression: How writing Nation graffiti for the writers is a creative, artistic endeavor-even though they are working within a very specific framework.
II. Nation Graffiti as a Method of Unique Communication: How writing Nation graffiti functions as a way to pass information to one’s own Nation, allies, rivals, and even outsiders.

III. Nation Graffiti as a Method of Creating Symbolic Distinction: How the graffiti helps characterize not only who the group “is”, but who it “isn’t”.

IV. Nation Graffiti as a Method of Building and Re-Inscribing Identity: How the act itself articulates and re-inforces the group identity and the writer’s place within it-embodies the group within the neighborhood as more “real”.

V. Nation Graffiti: Changes in Method and Meaning (Old School vs. New School): How Nation graffiti isn’t static, but has meaning that changes over time and is interpreted differently depending on what generation is reading it, even the same symbols.

VI. Nation Graffiti as a Method of Symbolically Claiming Urban Space: How graffiti is one method that Nations use to embody themselves in an area, symbolically “claiming” hoods within neighborhoods.

VII. Nation Graffiti as a Method of Establishing Symbolic Boundaries: How graffiti functions as a method to help define and articulate boundaries of claimed symbolic space.

VIII. Nation Graffiti as an Expression of Symbolic Conflict: How graffiti becomes an on-going method of symbolic interaction and conflict between rival groups.

IX. Nation Graffiti as an Expression of the Symbolic Sacred: How graffiti expresses what is considered sacred by the group: an homage to the dead and can be an expression of what they see as divine favor based on their shared group identity.

Additional Project Goal: Contributing to the Humanization of the “Gangbanger”

“Academic literature has failed to address mainstream concerns with gang violence; pervasive is the notion that gang members have no regard for human lives, including their own.” (Phillips 1999:65).

“And now, another ABC news special report on hidden America. Chicago is a great city, but there are some neighborhoods there where small children live in battle zones. Listen to this number. 419 people killed this year. Across a dozen neighborhoods. More
than the U.S. Troops killed in Afghanistan this year. And the cause? Rival gangs, creating anarchy.” (ABC News: Oc 20th, 2012)

As Sociologists why should we care about Nation graffiti? What value does it bring to our understanding of urban communities and “street gangs”? It is important because it serves as a gateway to understanding how segments of urban youths in Chicago continue to re-create a culture that they developed as a response to inherited social conditions. By focusing on graffiti as a “product” of these groups; it allows the youths themselves to explain why it is significant to them; interactions that in turn allow us to analyze the logic and practices of Nation culture without demonizing and dehumanizing them as individuals. It allows them to decide not only their, but our level of involvement, and in doing so we give them the opportunity to focus on the more creative and historic aspects of their culture. Furthermore it allows Sociology to move beyond trying to codify and document “what is a gang” and “gang crime” statistics and try to delve into the codes, practices, and symbols that make certain violent outcomes contextually acceptable, logical, and “just the way it is” within their framework.

This project aims to humanize the so-called “gangbanger” by showing how complex Chicago Nation culture really is through an in-depth analysis of the practice of graffiti writing. While it cannot be denied that a violent orientation is a component of this world, the physical expressions of violence that are often the focus of mainstream news and media reporting does not encompass their entire cultural experience. Although Nations can provide an existing network for informal
economic practices (such as drug dealing and burglary), they do not exist solely as rational economic platforms. Often presented as self-evident examples of anti-social behavior shown in disembodied ways without further analysis, the drive-by shootings and drug dealing are manifestations of more nuanced symbolic processes and interactions at work. By engaging Nation members to explain the practice of writing their version of graffiti, we can gain insight into the politics, values, and logic of Nations, and show that their experience cannot be neatly summarized as “all about the money” or as an expression of “community self-suicide” in “hopeless” neighborhoods.

This project proposes that this culture has evolved to fulfill important identity and status needs beyond the pursuit of economic gain and demonstrations of frustrated “inner-city rage”; instead serving as a source of improvised empowerment in marginalized communities. Furthermore, this project will show that these so-called gangbangers are not merely fanatical cogs in a well-organized corporate style drug empire, but are creative culture builders and critics. These youths and adults personalize their Nation identity in a way that defies not only the glamorized mainstream “thug” construct, but also shows that these Nations are more important to these youths as identity constructs than as cohesive, regimented organizations dictating their actions.

Chicago Nation culture is often defined by outsiders in static, clearly defined terms; a binary of extremes that is ultimately anti-social and self-defeating. The
reality of how it is lived is more complex, and therefore requires more thoughtful analysis and portrayal. It is a social world that is constantly in transition, which is not only perplexing from a research perspective, but can be just as puzzling to those that are immersed in it. These working-class youths, so often presented as ignorant and heartless killers, when communicating with each other about their culture; have demonstrated tremendous social code flexibility, historical insights, artistic appreciation, and respect for each other despite being “rivals”. By re-casting them through this lens, this project aims to contribute to the de-construction of the gangbanger mystique and myth; and perhaps generate further discourse about creating more effective and compassionate bridges between social worlds.
II. Project Methods

“...What we call our data are really our own construction of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to-is obscured because most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, custom, idea, or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined” (Geertz 1973:9).

“To grasp concepts that, for another people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with experience-distant concepts theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life, is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else’s skin. The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to” (Geertz 1983: 58).

In my own work, I was able to bridge these worlds more or less successfully through my focus on graffiti. I developed a strategy: I would give people photographs of their graffiti and establish my links through those photographs-through my images that captured the images they created of their gangs. The things they were making were objects already. That meant that I didn’t have to dehumanize my subjects to find out about their culture” - Susan Phillips (1999:6).

Methods Introduction

This project began with simple questions about Nation graffiti: what does the graffiti mean? What purpose did it serve? How could it be connected to what it means to be part of a Nation? With these questions in mind, it was necessary to go to the source—the youths themselves, and try to understand the graffiti by engaging in dialogue with those who created it and were affected by it. It was crucial to ask questions about the graffiti in the period of time that it was being created so that its meaning and relevance could be explained by those who it affected when it was the
most visceral and current for them. The foundation of this project’s research therefore is based on independent fieldwork that was meant to engage temporary graffiti in a direct way by “capturing it” and locking it into an environment where it could then be explored and analyzed.

The following section details this project’s overall research process; which can be divided into four sections: 1) photographing graffiti (documentation) fieldwork, 2) interactive flickr internet hosting platform fieldwork 3) supplemental data sources (internet interactions and in person conversations beyond Flickr) 4) research of relevant academic text (literature review).

**Methods Timeline 2008-2013:**

- Take Nation graffiti pictures in various Chicago neighborhoods.
- Consistently post pictures to Flickr, organize, and describe them as accurately as possible.
- Over time attract viewers, some who began to interact; ask questions and correct some of the graffiti descriptions
- Continue to take graffiti pictures and accumulate a larger, diverse collection of Nation graffiti occurrences
- Attract people who had a similar interest who took their own pictures of Nation graffiti and engaged in discussions and posed questions.
- Create a “Chicago Gang (Nation) Graffiti” Flickr group in order to provide a focused environment for discussion.
• Over time develop a “community” of consistent users, most who were either raised in neighborhoods where Nations were active, or themselves currently or historically claimed Nation identity.

• Interact with users through private messaging in order to exchange even more in-depth information.

• Conduct digital interviews with certain users who were interested in contributing insights to this project.

• Join exclusive “old school” Facebook groups where historic Nation photographs and histories were shared by those who lived it.

• Read relevant academic literature and social theory in order to provide theoretical framing.

**Nation Graffiti: Ethnographic Gateway**

As graffiti is often publically written, it becomes an accessible way for outsiders to begin to understand the culture that creates it. While it cannot offer a blueprint of the entirety of what being involved in a Nation is, it shows us that there are codes and language that are unique to the culture “behind” the graffiti. While the writing on the walls and the signs in many cases is easy to see, it can be difficult for outsiders to make sense of any of it. While one can often get a feel for some of the basic symbolism and that there are different groups interacting using the graffiti, our comprehension typically ends there without the guidance of insiders. As the
culture itself and by extension its graffiti, changes, staying current requires a certain level of consistent, on-going immersion. First one has to understand what distinguishes the Nation pieces from Civilian. Once this is understood, there then must be the baseline understanding of what the Nation symbols mean in a general sense. Third, one’s knowledge has to be up to date, as the same symbols can have different meaning over time. And finally one has to know how the graffiti is used in a locally specific context; even two different sections who identify as the same Nation may use symbols differently depending on the local history and politics.

Nation culture fosters a general disposition of inclusion through exclusion; the youths build tighter social bonds through becoming more self-enclosed with those that have participated in the necessary rites of passage to be considered authentic participants in the group identity. In addition to building closer bonds, it also serves to screen out outsiders and those who pose different degrees of threat to the group. These threats can include members of other groups trying to covertly gain acceptance, as well as “snitches”-those who are not trustworthy who are colluding or would collude with law enforcement. They see this shared group identity as a form of sanctuary from a world of enemies that is out to destroy them, and at the same time as a platform to fight back.

Aggressive posturing and projecting violent potentiality are therefore mechanisms to deter potential outsider threats, so just approaching participants on the street and asking questions can prove to be not only humiliating, but realistically
dangerous. Even acknowledging in person that you “know” that someone is involved in a Nation can be difficult, as the youths would view this brazen confrontation about their exclusive and somewhat secretive identity with a high level of suspicion. With this in mind, it is extremely unrealistic (and unfair) to just approach people on the street and assume that they have a Nation identity. Furthermore, even if they demonstrate this identity in obvious ways, that doesn’t mean that they would be receptive to being confronted about it. The dilemma then becomes; how can researchers gain access to these groups in a relatively safe way that allows them to share this aspect of their culture with outsiders in a way that is comfortable to them.

**Introducing The Flickr Platform**

The solution that was devised was to find Nation graffiti, take photographs of it, and show it to enough people until eventually more could be learned about it. While it might be argued that engaging residents on the street about the graffiti could yield richer local information; it would be logistically impossible to cover the same ground in the same amount of time and take the amount of photographs necessary to create a citywide network of in-person “informants”. Through the utilization of the internet, these photographs could be exposed to a wider audience and create dialogue in a faster and more efficient way.
Although there are various internet sites that could offer a basic understanding of some of the symbols used beyond my own personal experience, this information also appeared incomplete, obsolete, and contradictory from one site to the next. It seemed that these sites took a few photographs and symbols and “locked them in” as in a static way without consideration for the way that graffiti and the symbols that they convey change in meaning. These sites also failed to analyze the potential significance behind this graffiti; it was portrayed as almost self-evident indications of “turf”, with limited invitation for commentary or debate by those involved.

The field research for this project consisted primarily of photographs of Nation graffiti that I took in various neighborhoods in Chicago and the suburb of Cicero during the time period of February 2008 to August 2013. I took approximately 9000 pictures of graffiti occurrences, including 78 pictures of memorials for Nation member deceased (which typically included graffiti), as well as 584 instances of concrete etchings. I also took approximately 18 videos of larger graffiti pieces that were sprawled in such a way that a video was a more sound method of capturing it. In addition I took photographs of a few Nation members who were encountered and wanted to be photographed and featured on my web page. I also took approximately 100 pictures of various Nation historic memorabilia that I had collected, especially the 1970’s and 80’s “compliment cards”, which helped to bring the older Nation participants into the discussion with the younger ones, and
through which other ways of cultural representation could be explored in addition to the graffiti.

The photographs taken for this project were uploaded to a publically viewable, interactive on-line photo platform called Flickr. Flickr is a photo-sharing platform that allows individuals to host their photographs and videos in a way that can be publically available. There is a pay version which offers more features, but there is a free version that is available for anyone with internet access and an email account. Flickr was ultimately selected because at the time it seemed to offer more organization features, a more user-friendly interface, and a way to directly link to search engines in a way that social network sites with photo sharing options like Myspace and Facebook couldn’t. I decided to name my Flickr page “Chicago’s Cold War” in reference to a song of the same name by Chicago hip hop emcee Vakill, who referenced Chicago Nations in the song hook.

“It’s the city of broad shoulders, home of them GDs, and BDs, and Vicelord soldiers. Who ever told ya’ll the Cold War’s over, tell em’ bring they ass to Chicago”

Descriptions, location, and commentary could be provided for each photograph, which is publically viewable and can be found by searching keywords in the Google search engine. Anyone with a free profile could leave comments on each picture and engage each other (and me) in dialogue. Many people who claimed various Nation identities began participating in the site, as well as knowledgeable locals and various types of outsiders. Even Nation members who viewed the graffiti as childish often still had insights into the various groups that produced it; and still
considered it a traditional part of their culture. In the same way that they “self-police” their own on the streets, they are similarly concerned with how their Nation’s graffiti is presented on the internet, and thus they became active cultural filters through this site.

The internet allows for a more secure way to engage this material in ways that would be very difficult in the context of the neighborhoods themselves as part of everyday encounters. While actually going to each neighborhood and engaging residents could potentially yield richer information, it could also put residents at risk for openly discussing Nations with outsiders. Flickr creates a digital buffer where through the use of a chosen avatar one can engage in dialogue, ask questions, give answers, critique, debate, and argue—without breaking established local codes governing silence and omission on certain matters.

The method of choosing neighborhoods, sites, and “focus Nations” can be considered a “snowball method” in the way that it developed, because it was so closely linked to the commentary and messages I received on Flickr. I began taking photographs in my neighborhood and outside my residence in Logan Square in 2008, as well as what I found in my routes to visit friends and family in various neighborhoods: specifically Humboldt, Hermosa, Cragin, East Village, Ukraine Village, Bucktown, Wicker Park, Little Village, Pilsen, South Shore, and Back of the Yards. As time passed and I became more familiar with where to find graffiti, I would circulate the areas and the locations that I knew had a higher chance of
yielding graffiti based on precedent. If I knew certain sections liked to write graffiti more than others, I would spend more time in their part of the neighborhood. In addition if I came to learn that certain alleys, walls, and corners were “hotspots” where graffiti was written, responded to, and removed in a fairly regular cycle, I would make sure to pass by.

I uploaded pictures to Flickr on a consistent basis; often every week, sometimes twice a week. As commentary was left and the site grew in popularity, I often received comments from Nation members who wanted me to go to their neighborhoods. As an example, comments such as “You should stop thro here after tomorrow” and “Ay, the Maniacs hit up Deuce hood by Hamlin, you should gothro and get the flicks” became very common.

I also received comments from people who felt like I was ignoring their neighborhoods and felt slighted by it. As an example: “Ay, why don’t you ever come thro my hood, you scared”? This inspired me to go to the neighborhoods and areas that I had not been, as I felt that I had to expand my coverage to provide a more comprehensive sampling of Chicago Nation graffiti in a way that could give a sense of how things were in a way that was specific to parts of the city and certain locations in certain neighborhoods. Thus I began to spend more time in neighborhoods that I would normally not spend much time in, such as Gage Park, Marquette Park, Austin, Garfield Park, Canaryville, Greater Grand Crossing, South Chicago, South Deering, Roger’s Park, Ravenswood, North Lawndale, Jefferson Park,
Old Irving, and Albany Park. I tried not to spend too much time in one area, but my method of choosing where to go often had to do with time constraints, if I was told graffiti would be there, and if I felt that I had not been to a certain area in a while.

Another method of site selection that was common was based on other Flickr photograph takers. As the site grew in popularity, others joined Flickr in various neighborhoods and began to take and post photographs of their own. In this way we developed a loose network of people located in various parts of the city who were more readily available to take pictures of the graffiti before it was removed. Based on this network, if I felt like certain areas were receiving too much traffic, I would select an area that was being overlooked at that time, or at least focus on a different Nation territory within that neighborhood than was being focused on. Through other Flickr participants, it both expanded the opportunities for discussion, as well as provided deeper insights into what was happening in neighborhoods that I was not as familiar with.

I also received viewer submissions; people who either were responsible for the graffiti themselves and wanted to have them put on my page, or viewers who did not want to have the photos featured on their own page for various reasons, but thought that they could contribute to the site and discourse through their submissions. I collected and posted nearly 200 viewer submissions; and in each case I indicated that they were actually viewer submissions, and listed any name that they wanted as a source.
Both the commentary and the private messages through my Flickr page and the network of Flickr users yielded a wealth of information, and allowed me to build relationships that further opened doors to a better understanding of Nations. I received invites to “invite only” Facebook groups from some of the “old school” Nation members where pictures from their era were uploaded and discussed. This led to building relationships with a few of the more trusting (or at least, less cautious) old schoolers that led to meet ups “in real life” where we would have lunch and walk through some of their old neighborhoods and discuss landmarks and history as they remembered it.

Ultimately the graffiti served as a way to start the conversation with Nation members in a way that allowed them to explain to us what their culture means to them. This not only allowed invaluable insights into the meaning behind the graffiti itself, but led to discussions about other aspects of the Nations that were often denied to outsiders. This created a platform where residents and Nation members can decide their own level of involvement: it gives them the ability to engage the material and each other in a way that is comfortable to them because it can occur on their own time in an anonymous way. That doesn’t mean that there is a lack of accountability and “fact checking”, however. Because information is shared publically and there is a significant amount of on-line viewers, the people who fake knowledge and experiences are often quickly exposed by those who are legitimate,
and there was consistent weeding out of information that didn’t stand up to the scrutiny of those who had been accepted as more or less credible.

Over time these discussions would develop into commentary about neighborhood demographics, gentrification, history, landmarks, restaurants, music, religion/philosophy, and politics. In this way this site meant to research the Nation culture became its own community wherein perspectives about the Chicago urban experience could be discussed in general. This created a level of cultural immersion, where knowledge brokers from different neighborhoods and personalized Nation experience interacted in such a way that the vocabulary, codes, and logic of the “streets” became translated on-line, and in doing so, helped forge a new set of standards for how the material should be discussed based on this opportunity to present their piece of the Chicago experience to the world.

**Flick Features That Were Beneficial To This Project:**

- Pictures could be made searchable on internet search engines
- Free Flickr profiles allowed access to anyone with internet access and an email account
- Users can create profiles under any alias they choose, allowing for anonymity and a digital “buffer” allowing for a more comfortable exchange of information.
- Pictures are automatically date and time-stamped to create a timeline
- Pictures can be “geo-tagged”; the location where it was taken added to a map to give viewers the exact location, and which over time can show area trends.
- Photos can be “tagged” with search terms that are not explicitly in the title or description to make searching by concept easier.
• Photos can be organized into detailed, nested folders called “sets” and “collections” which allows users to organize photos by Nation and by Section.
• Users can leave Notes on pictures, creating a box which offers an opportunity to translate certain words and symbols and have it be easily understood.
• Pictures can be given titles & descriptions
• Users can leave comments on each picture and create conversation threads; this was an essential feature that I needed for this project.
• Users can create their own “group” where members can add and view similarly themed pictures, as well as create group specific questions and discussion topics

It is through the internet and by extension the Flickr platform that this research has been and will continue to be possible. This project has relied heavily on input from people within these neighborhoods—many of whom were currently or historically involved in some capacity with these nations, or are at least are residents with a certain amount of exposure or interest as a result of geographic proximity. This platform has allowed for a strong level of cultural immersion, where there is enough participation across demographics and locations that one can gain a sense of the logic and shared practices of Nations overall, as well as more regionally specific identities, symbols, and histories.

**Literature Review**

Sociological and anthropological graffiti research has been revitalized in recent decades as a response to urban youth cultures who have either formed around or adopted the practice of graffiti writing. While there are notable
differences between these youth groups and by extension their corresponding research, the following connections and themes can be identified in existing academic scholarship across graffiti genres and differences in geography: 1) Graffiti writing is primarily a youth-oriented pursuit which has experienced a contemporary resurgence in urban areas. 2) Graffiti writing is generally practiced as a form of artistic and creative expression. 3) That it is illegal makes it socially stigmatized, and is considered a form of cultural resistance and rebellion against the status quo. 4) It serves as a source of status and notoriety for the youths. 5) It serves more or less a a method of communication 6) There are different types of graffiti that have different values and contextual meanings within the sub-cultures that write graffiti, who then create status systems and inclusionary/exclusionary filters about who they are and who others are not.

Much of the existing academic scholarship in recent decades relating to the practice of creating graffiti within youth sub-cultures has generally focused on what is considered “Hip Hop” graffiti culture (see Cresswell, Castleman, Lachmann, Ferrell, among others) as a global phenomenon that is also practiced in locally specific ways-ostensibly because it is more pervasive and accessible than “gang graffiti”. It is valuable therefore to not only rely on what exists within the relative lack of academic research on gang graffiti specifically, but to focus on the commonalities between these distinct forms of graffiti as practiced within youth sub-cultures in general. While there are multiple differences in form and function between Chicago Nation graffiti writers and their local Civilian counterparts, there
are also many similarities-for starters, they are both primarily youth pursuits, both are forms of “art”, both are argued to be forms of rebellion and of “resistance”, both serve as ways of gaining status, they often use the same “tools” and both typically utilize the urban landscape as their “canvasses”, and both communicate values and meaning relative to their own groups.

Existing Sociological (especially Criminology) research has generally approached “Graffiti” and “Gangs” as two separate topics, but has rarely connected the two in a meaningful way. “Gangs” are rarely approached from the vantage point of understanding cultural practices outside of trying to define gangs in a universal way, gangs as the alarming “cause” of crime, and recommended suppression strategies. Graffiti is rarely mentioned in connection with gangs outside of its inclusion as “vandalism”, which is included in crime statistics but is not often analyzed for its significance within the groups and communities where it is created.

As an example, a currently popular collection of gang scholarship compiled by Egley, Maxson, Miller, and Klein called “The Modern Gang Reader” in its third edition release in 2006 contained 33 articles on “gangs”-with topic sections focusing on “Gang Definitions and Distributions”, “Race/Ethnicity and Gender”, “Gangs, Violence, and Drugs”, and “Programs and Policies”. None of these articles mentioned graffiti or gang cultural practices in general, but instead were focused on the “History of Gang Research” which has led to “problems with defining gangs” in order
to “measure gang crime” to then discuss “New approaches to the strategic prevention of gang and group-involved violence”.

In contrast, Susan Phillips in her text “Wallbangin” has provided a thorough ethnographic documentation and analysis of graffiti use as an aspect of the Los Angeles gang world in the late 1990’s; and is a pioneer in the sense that she has recognized the depth of meaning and value that graffiti has as a complex and enduring practice among these groups in that specific context. While her text is unique to the local neighborhood histories of those groups; many parallels can be drawn between the practices of LA gangs and the similarly positioned Chicago Nations. While the style of the graffiti and what is written differs according to their own geographically specific codes and symbolic meaning, the significance of the presentation, the importance of location, and the varied uses of the graffiti can be connected with how graffiti is similarly utilized in Chicago.

In a similar way, Dwight Conquergood’s ethnographic work in the 1980’s on gangs (Nations) in Chicago’s Albany Park neighborhood has been locally informative and provides a rich account of the practice and meaning of their graffiti from their perspective as it was when he encountered it during that time period. His “Heart Broken in Half” documentary as well as his articles “Homeboys and Hoods: Gang Communication and Cultural Space” and “Life in Big Red: Struggles and Accommodations in a Chicago Polyethnic Tenement” show that through his localized, micro-level ethnographic research, he was able to not only gain insights
into the complexities of the local Latin King experience, but with their participation and guidance, get a sense of how the local groups viewed themselves in relation to the larger city-wide gang “theater”. In his research, it was the Nation graffiti that served as an important medium for the Latin Kings to explain their world as they saw it, and in turn, convey that to his readers as part of his analysis.

Graffiti writing is primarily a youth-oriented cultural practice which has experienced a resurgence in urban areas.

While people of any age can (and do) write certain versions of graffiti (such as what Alan Dundes referred to as “Latrinalia”-bathroom stall graffiti), Sociologists and Anthropologists have identified the cultures that produce a certain skilled, meaningful graffiti in a consistent way as being primarily comprised of youths, having a stronger importance and intensity of practice among younger people, and it is in youth that the direction of graffiti writing trends and eras are decided. Even for people within these cultures who continue to write graffiti beyond their twenties, they tend to identify it as a practice that they admired and adopted as young people that helped shape their identities, is something that they continue to practice and develop, and provides an ongoing “lived” connection to their past.

Graffiti academics in both the Jeff Ferrell repeatedly asserts that graffiti helps “shape youth identities” and referred to the Hip Hop style as “a new form of youthful graffiti”, and “activities of the young” (1995). Susan Phillips in her text “Wallbangin”, does not specifically refer to graffiti in terms of it being age specific,
but often refers to many of her Writer sources as "kids" and "young men"-both in terms of the LA gangs and "Hip Hop" crews (1999). Adams & Winter in their study of gangs in Phoenix, Arizona, referred to most gang graffiti Writers as "younger" members attempting to prove themselves and stand out among their peers and older cohorts (1997). Acker asserts that contemporary graffiti writing as an aspect of "youth culture" arose as the result of both the post WWII economic boom and industrial decline, where "youths" has more free time available to "get into trouble" (2013).

It is indisputable that both Hip Hop and "Gang" graffiti writing in the last several decades arose within urban centers. New York birthed and exported "Hip Hop" graffiti as a now international practice with distinct city-specific styles, yet Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia were seen as being responsible for originating their own unique systems of Gang Graffiti which both preceded, accompanied, and then later influenced "Hip Hop" graffiti. Aiker asserts that graffiti in a western context can found in urban centers as early as ancient Greece and Rome (2013). Phillips claims that while historically ancient urban centers gave rise to forms of writing and literacy, contemporary graffiti writing is often incorrectly framed as an example of urban "illiteracy" by its detractors out of cultural bias (1999). Even in small rural communities where barns and abandoned buildings are tagged with "Hip Hop" and gang style graffiti, it is often in mimicry and adoption of the style, method, and meaning of graffiti that arose in urban centers among the concentrated poor and working class.
Graffiti writing is generally practiced as a form of artistic and creative expression.

The artistic and creative aspects of graffiti writing has been discussed in both the Hip Hop and Gang academic literature to a varying degree. The Hip Hop graffiti academic literature stresses this aspect more, as the Hip Hop form is more likely to be deemed as artistic by its creators and admirers. This has been especially true to recent years, as artists like Banksy have been able to successfully emerge from “Vandal” designation to mainstream gallery artist through the success of “Exit Through the Gift Shop”. It is not that Gang graffiti is not artistic or that the writers don’t see it as artistic-but because it is seen as part of a “gang” framework it is more readily dismissed, even and often especially by Hip Hop graffiti writers. It is this perception bias of what is “art” that could partially account for this lack of academic focus.

Susan Phillips’ text “Wallbangin” contends that gang graffiti is also art in the same way that Hip Hop graffiti is art in that the Writers are similarly creating pieces with their own style and flare, and that discussions about what is “art” often deteriorate into debates about the illegality of graffiti (a separate issue) as if that designation automatically disqualifies graffiti as creative practice. Halsey & Young describe even the Hip Hop graffiti culture as having its own forms of distinction internally, in that those who create larger, more elaborate pieces define themselves
as “artists”, and hold those who only write smaller tags as being less skilled, and therefore they are not creating art.

Lachmann notes that the respectable “art world” who initially rejects a form that they deem lower status (such as graffiti), at a later time accepts it—demonstrating that what qualifies as art is subjective and subject to the times; therefore it is not that graffiti isn’t inherently “art”, its that its only art when the cultural gatekeepers decide it is. Ironically, it is this mainstream cultural acceptance of certain graffiti writers as true “artists” that causes people within graffiti culture to label them as sellouts and anti-artists in the “true school” sense.

That it is illegal makes it socially stigmatized, and is considered a form of cultural resistance and rebellion against the status quo

Graffiti scholarship has asserted that it is in its illegality that graffiti writing has become so alluring for urban working class youths, and its social stigma has created a climate where stronger bonds are forged through shared rebellion against the status quo wherein their art is not accepted. For Masilamani, global graffiti culture embodies what it means to be a rebellious youth, and is an avenue for participants to gain “street credibility” (2008). Phillips asserts that it is the illegality of graffiti writing that inherently produces “politics of criminality” and alienates the writer as an automatic outsider to the mainstream. (1999). She goes on to stress that while graffiti writers see themselves as operating without the “constraints” of society, what they view as an ongoing act of creative, environmental transformation
is seen simultaneously by the mainstream as “cultural production through destruction” (1999). Without this mainstream opposition and its agents and mechanism of suppression, Masilamani’s “street credibility” could not be gained.

Ferrell notes that graffiti writing serves to simultaneously “resist” current social arrangements, even as it serves to build new arrangements-it is an appropriation of what already exists in order to create something new. (1995) It is not only the appropriation of actual physical space that is so threatening to the system, but its appropriation of symbolic space-graffiti presence implies lack of social control because it has not been prevented or removed. Ferrell’s belief is that graffiti is used in various global contexts as a way that “mostly kids” resist the existing structures of authority in whatever form they take-graffiti becomes a symbolic dividing line between the world of youth and the world of adults; what is resisted is not only grown up notions of property ownership and boundaries, but the loss of youth itself to older age and responsibilities.

Ferrell’s youth sources on graffiti also describe how it is not only the illegality of graffiti that is the allure, but the often very real dangers posed in the process. Outside of gaining status, it is in their defiance that they feel an adrenaline rush, and seek to go to further extremes in order to experience this thrill. Ferrell describes an ongoing “dance” of authority and resistance in that the more severe the system of control, the more intensely the youths work against it, therefore the system itself is responsible for creating its own future youth resistance. Without the
“thrill” of evasion, without the danger, there is far less incentive. In this sense this arrangement is symbiotic, where both sides revile each other, they are entwined and sustain each other in this binary configuration.

Hebdige provides the system’s solution to what is described by Clarke as “counter-hegemonic character of a subculture”, through first labeling the practice as “deviant”, it becomes stigmatized and therefore more alluring, and rather than create more resistance through increased suppression, the dominant culture absorbs the resistance method as “commodity form”, to be sold back to the public and render its original use and meaning as resistance obsolete, as it is now of the system and acceptable. This is the opposite of the acceptance by the art world, as the art world is elite and exclusive, whereas the commodity form is for public consumption, and it is in its consumability without any risk that the street credibility is substantially diminished.
III. Characterizing Nations

“The essence of being ‘one of the lads’ lies within the group. It is impossible to form a distinctive culture by yourself. You cannot generate fun, atmosphere, and a social identity by yourself: Joining the counter-school culture means joining a group, and enjoying it means being with the group.” (Willis 1977:23).

Almighty Imperial Gangsters posing in front of a mural near Belden/Drake St., 1978. (Photo source: Chicago Sun Times)

In order to clarify which specific groups this project is concerned with; it is important to attempt to describe what Nations are. Academics have traditionally struggled with defining “gangs”, as who or what constitutes a “gang” is subjective and culturally relative. Would an upper-middle class, mostly white college fraternity be viewed and defined as a “gang” in a comparable way as a working-class, mostly Latino “Nation” set in the inner-city? John Hagedorn notes the difficulty of defining and distinguishing these groups in his text A World of Gangs: “The search for a more precise gang definition by criminology is, on the one hand, an old-fashioned positivist venture, trying to tack down and quantify gangs as a static, clearly
delineated form...the best definition of gangs, as I have argued, is an amorphous one: they are simply alienated groups socialized by the streets or prisons, not conventional institutions" (Hagedorn 2008: 30-31).

Instead of continuing the academic tradition of trying to develop a universally applicable, static definition of a “gang”, the following chapter will describe and analyze Chicago Nations in a localized context in terms of how they are generally described by participant insiders.

The first segment will discuss cultural characteristics of Nations in contrast with Crews; which are considered different in status; even though they may orient themselves in similar ways with similar practices as Nations, and may be “future” Nations themselves. The second segment will describe the purpose of Nations as an empowerment identity and source of status which both precedes and transcends “economic driven criminality’ as emphasized by criminologists. And finally this notion of “Realness” can give insight into how we can better conceptualize Nations in a coherent way; how do they attempt to order and make sense of their own groups? It should be noted that the following descriptions are by no means all-encompassing and exhaustive, but can give a sense of the identity traits that are both informing and informed by the graffiti that will be analyzed later; giving us perspective for our analysis.

**Characteristics of Nations and Crews**
Chicago Nation culture is a highly competitive world, within which these different groups are assessed and ranked in various ways by both participants and affected outsiders within these neighborhood. While many groups might claim to be Nations, they are not all considered equal in status—and some might not even be considered legitimate Nations by other groups, being dismissed as lower status “Crews”. This ranking does not occur formally, but is a matter of opinion—a highly contentious subject that is played out on the blocks, in the schools, in social media sites, in the workplace, and in the jails and prisons—where these different groups are measured up to each other in various ways according to a “street logic” that emphasizes this notion of “Realness” based on various criteria which will be elaborated on further in this segment.

There are no definitive criteria to distinguish which groups qualify to be considered Nations, but there are similar characteristics that can be associated with groups that self-describe as Nations and behave in ways that take into account other groups’ similar claims to “Nationhood”. A group who chooses to pursue this idea of Nationhood in our current context is doing so with a working knowledge of what that means based on precedent, as in Chicago there is an established notion about how a Nation will self-identify and how its members will view how they should “be active” in this pursuit of Nation-ism.

**Nations**
While each individual might have a different take on what their Nation means to them, there are common characteristics and themes that can be identified as signifying one participating in this shared understanding of Nationhood. The theme or essence of a Nation identity is generally reflective of the piecemeal influences that its members incorporate over time. Historically groups that came to be known as Nations incorporated their racial, ethnic, and religious identities, musical influences, and aspects of popular youth culture to create an amalgamation identity that they felt reflected or should reflect the group orientation as a whole. This identity is not static, but changes over time as older members “age out”, are incarcerated, and die-and youths adopt them in a way that is personalized to their own era and experiences. In 2013-popular “gangster culture” and aspects of hip hop music-such as particular slang words; are often incorporated into the ever-changing dialogue and presentation of self; but often with the existing background of what has already been laid out and inherited by previous generations of participants.

**Nations: Notable Characteristics & Practices**

1) **Group Name:** The single “umbrella” identity of the group; all participants assume this as an identity. They take this identity as part of who they are in an essential way in the same way that someone identifies as being a “Christian” or “Muslim”, one would not say “I am a member of the Black Stones”, or “I am a member of the Latin Kings”, but-“I am a Black Stone” or “I am a Latin King”. This greater group identity may change over the years as certain groups become absorbed, or they may take on additional
“supplemental” names or titles in order to describe a change in how the group wants to present itself or based on an alliance. For example, the “Milwaukee Kings”, a smaller northwest side Nation-at one point went by “Maniac Milwaukee Kings” to reflect its participation in the “Maniac Family” alliance headed by the Maniac Latin Disciples. It has since dropped the “Maniac” to reflect the breaking of this relationship.

Older members may or may not still identify themselves with obsolete monikers that are no longer used by younger members. For example, in the late 1970’s to the early 1980’s there were certain Simon City Royal groups within the larger collective that called themselves “Insane Simon City Royals”. Today the younger, active members exclusively refer to themselves as “Almighty Simon City Royals” to reflect their participation in the loose “Almighty Folks” alliance. While it is true that this is an alliance, these monikers can become more significant as representative of one’s own qualities. This was expressed emphatically when I informed a few younger Royals about some of their Royal predecessors from the early 80’s being “Insane”. One of them became emotional and said “Fuck that we aint Insane, we Almighty!” For him the “Insane” was associated with other Nation groups who are part of the “Insane Familia” coalition, but it seemed that he also personalized it to be a characteristic that he valued. He went on to say, “I’m Almighty, Almighty don’t like nobody”. He was not just referring to the alliance; his use reflected personalized qualities of group superiority and
self-reliance. To these youths, these distinctions matter and are not simply trivial labeling differences.

1980's Simon City Royal compliment card self describing as "Insane". (Source: "Chicago's Cold War" via Flickr.com)

1980's Simon City Royal compliment card self describing as "Almighty". (Source: "Chicago's Cold War" via Flickr.com)
2) “Set”, “Section”, or “Deck”: most Nations are comprised of smaller groups who all identify as part of the larger collective but may in reality have limited or no contact with each other depending on geography and the unique relationships formed by their members. Sets at any given point can have anywhere from a few members or dozens. When I asked an active member of the Gangster Two Six how many guys are needed to start a set, he said “All you need is three down brothers, a strap, and a trap”. In his own way he is saying that a set needs three devoted members who choose to pursue opening a set, “a strap” or a gun, and to have some kind of residence devoted exclusively to the group needs. He went on to say that what he means by “Trap” is not necessarily to sell drugs as is commonly thought, but a residence that is an exclusive set Headquarters or “HQ” that can be abandoned at short notice if necessary, such as a board-up. The “strap” he said is needed to potentially physically enforce their symbolic claim over a “hood”, which will be discussed in greater detail later. Sets are considered more or less legitimate if they are started with the blessing of older Nation leaders; starting one without this “green light” positions the set as “renegades”, considered a lesser status position which may lead to being rejected by other groups as a street equivalent of heretics.
3) **Organization**: This varies among Nations; but Nations can be said to be “semi-organized”, in that each Set tends to be more or less self-governing for the most part. Each set might have clusters of more intimate friendship groups that compete with each other for status and dominance within the group. Each set generally has at least one leader or “Chief”, or regardless of title, someone who “calls it” for the set. To “Call it” is to be recognized as the ultimate decision maker for the group. This person may be formally voted to lead, but more typically it will be someone already recognized as an informal leader based on experience, charisma, wisdom, and “stripes”, or being known for “putting in work” for the Nation. The Section Chief tends to be older than most of the active members, as most members will only respect a veteran enough to defer to them to lead.
Depending on how many sets a Nation has, there may be further organization based on “region”, the time period when they were formed, or if their members generally get along with each other. For example in 2013 there are at least 26 active Gangster Two Six sets in the little Village neighborhood. These are all part of three distinct and recognized “branches”: “Chi Town”, “KK-Town”, and “Darkkside”; there are no sets in Lil Village that do not identify with one of these three branches. For these larger Nations, there are additional layers of leadership that vary in title and structure on a case by case basis, but they are generally appointed by existing leadership both on the streets and in correctional facilities.

Early 1980’s Almighty Imperial Gangster compliment card. Notice the use of “President and Vice-President”, in this case their section leadership
titles modeled after commonly used leadership titles. (Source: “Chicago’s Cold War” via Flickr.com)

4) **Claimed Territory or “Hood”:** Symbolic territory claimed by the group, but is not indicative of actual property ownership, although members and their families may own property within this area or live there. Boundaries become fleshed out informally, creating “hoods within neighborhoods”. These hoods become “the Field” where the group acts out identity practices and implements symbolic codes in order to compete for status. This will be discussed in greater detail in the chapter “claimed space”.
The importance of official streets in designating symbolic boundaries; street signs modified to reflect the local Gangster Two Six section “24th/Keeler” as part of “KK-Town”, or “King Killer town”. (Source: “Chicago’s Cold War” via Flickr.com)

1980’s Spanish Cobra compliment card: showing that the listed members are part of two distinct sections: “Ridgeway N Thomas” & “Central Park n Schubert”, reflecting a specific concern with identifying themselves not only as part of a Nation, but as part of sub-groups within that larger identity that distinguish themselves by claimed area surrounding two intersecting streets. (Source: “Chicago’s Cold War” via Flickr.com)

5) **Opposition**: Nations never exist in a vacuum; and their culture is a constant flux of status competition between one’s own group and other groups. There are no Nations without opposition groups or “opps”; as one of the primary ways that they define and empower themselves is through the binary arrangement of contrast with the “other”. This competition plays itself out in different “arenas”, one of which being graffiti-which will be elaborated on at length in later segments. This understanding of the arrangement of oppositional groups is foundational to even beginning to describe Nation orientation. Although there are times when Nation groups are less “actively”
in conflict with other groups, they still orient themselves through symbolic expression of enmity towards rival groups as a fundamental practice of creating cohesion.

6) **Aggressive Orientation:** The willingness, capacity, and potential to commit physical violence becomes built into the way Nations represent their identity; and the practices of the group become instilled with an aggressive orientation. It is not that these youths have to constantly be violent, but it is important for them to express that they could potentially be violent if necessary, even if only defensively. This aggressiveness as “possibility” is embedded in how these youths walk, talk, dress, and position themselves in their hoods and in the school yards. Violence is also symbolically represented through the use of certain language, handsigns, and the way they write their graffiti. It is partially through this expression of lethality that they construct a mystique around themselves, their group identity becomes associated with a volatility that while necessarily having to have some basis in historic violent encounters, functions more effectively as a defense mechanism and source of status.

7) **Identifying Symbols & Colors:** Symbols and colors that are chosen to represent the collective; usually qualities or characteristics that the group meant to characterize the Nation in a powerful way. Over time these
identifiers become re-inscribed and are treated in a semi-sacred manner, treated with reverence as a symbol of collective experience and struggles. Symbols appropriated from other sources are usually modified in a way that distinguishes and personalizes it in a locally specific way. For example, one of the symbols of the Almighty Imperial Gangsters is The Pink Panther. This is usually represented as a "Gangster" version with an angry visage, with face tattoos, teardrops, a seven point crown (another AIG symbol, 7 being for the "G", the seventh letter of the alphabet).
An example of a mainstream, well-known symbol/icon The Pink Panther, appropriated and re-purposed for local use with new meaning. (Source: “Rafiki G” submitted via private message on Flickr.com)

These symbols and colors are represented in various ways in order to create stronger bonds of solidarity through shared symbolic identification, distinguish the collective, and legitimize the group to others.
Their colors are typically chosen to represent certain characteristics or are assigned certain values, but over time this is less important as the colors themselves become associated with the experience of the group and part of their overall embodiment and representation of self. “King gold” or “Viking green” become an augmentation of other practices and methods of representation, and are not often examined further beyond their inscribed association with a particular Nation. These colors may be worn in subtle ways as part of an outfit—such as in shoelaces, hats, or layered shirts, as well as incorporated into tattoo designs and graffiti pieces.

Colors were traditionally worn in a blatant way so that by sight one could more easily assume which group one identified with based on known location. For example, to see a youth in matching black and pink in Logan Square near Fullerton and Kimball, one would assume that he or she was identifying as an Imperial Gangster, based on their association with that particular neighborhood. Another youth standing at a bus stop a few blocks east on Fullerton and Albany, however, wearing brown and gold—would be assumed to be identifying as Orquesta Albany.

While wearing colors in an obvious way was typical in the 1970’s, 80’s, and 90’s—it was less common in the 2000’s. While the colors may still be presented in overt ways, the youths more often wear them in a subtle fashion, or not at all. For example, youths may wear area “neutral” colors, colors that are not
associated with a particular Nation in their neighborhood, or “civilian” clothes that are considered “dressing down”, or dressing in a way that is not associated with how Nation youths dress. This practice has developed over time as a cultural response to youths being targeted excessively on sight by opposition, as well as by “heat’ brought down on them by local law enforcement because of the association with Nations and crime. Wearing neutral colors and civilian clothes can be a method of camouflage and misdirection, not only as a form of protection used by Nation youths, but as a way to gain a strategic advantage when aggressively approaching opposition.

“Colors are more old skool back when they would box it out still…I dress down, it keeps niggas guessin...me and all mine know what it is (translated: “who I am/what I am”) - if I’m decked out in colors them boys (cops) stop me every block and it puts a fukin target on my head for opps. Real niggas move in silence u feel me” - An anonymous Wrightwood Park Insane Unknown, sent via private message on Flickr.com

Nation appropriate colors are still often used when they create their graffiti, however, this has also changed to a degree since the 1960s-80's. A Chicago ordinance in 1992 banning the sale of spraypaint in the city changed the ease of accessibility, and therefore the color schemes became less important. Prior to this, elaborate graffiti pieces were created very deliberately using Nation specific colors. After this ban, it became more acceptable to “use what you can get” or in the words of a former Nation participant from the 80's “These kids use whatever falls off the back of the truck”. At first glance, this can create confusion for the viewer, but in that
case one has to consider the symbols and the words being used-this will clarify the meaning beyond one’s color palette.

Insane Ashland Vikings (Ashland/Walton St "Lowrider City") representing with their Nation colors, green and black. Hats are also cocked to the right signifying their Nation’s Folks identity. (Source: “Young Shadow” via Facebook.com)

Certain clothes may be purchased with logos that are similar to Nation symbols. Symbols and words that mean something in one context are appropriated and utilized in another way. As an example, the Almighty Latin Kings section of St. Louis/LeMoyne (streets) tend to wear St. Louis Cardinal hats and shirts that say “STL”. Although their “official” Nation colors are black and gold, their specific section deceptively wears black, white, and red
Cardinals gear to symbolically mislead both police and opposition groups, while still representing their hood in a subtle way through the STL. This personalizes the St. Louis Cardinals clothing for their members and is a way that they set themselves apart as a distinct group from other sections within the Latin Kings.

“King Trigger” from St. Louis/LeMoyne St. Notice the “LK” on the face, as well as the appropriated St. Louis cardinal logo on the neck, re-purposed to represent the importance of his particular section identity. (Source: Facebook.com via “Free King Trigger”
Symbols and colors are also put on the body through tattoos; which is meant to demonstrate the depth of one’s commitment as a (semi) permanent physical modification. In previous generations, such as the 1970’s and 1980’s, tattoos were in some cases seen as a superficial way to try to “appear” to be “down”, and were usually intentionally kept smaller or put in places that could be concealed by clothing. In a recent demonstration of the cultural shift over the years, the younger generation of Nation youths have embraced face, neck, and hand tattoos. This reflects a response to mainstream attitude changes towards tattoos in general, where it is seen as more acceptable-and therefore more extreme locations are seen as being more rebellious. It is also a show of resonance with mainstream hip hop culture which has popularized face tattoos in general; leading the youths to mimic their musical heros through a similar demonstration with their own local, unique twist featuring their Nation iconography. Finally, face tattoos represent a higher level of commitment to “the Life” as one cannot hide them, and therefore those who get them are often showed respect and gain status by their peers.
Recent popularity of Nation tattoos—particularly face tattoos—which also reflects the growing acceptance and popularity of tattoos in mainstream culture. (Source: Flickr.com via “Mr. B 106th”)

Finally, Nation symbols and colors are often expressed through graffiti. This is both a specific and elusive method of revealing group identity. It is specific in that it articulates a specific collective represented through symbols and letters, but elusive in that it requires a certain amount of insight in order to translate and understand what makes those symbols and letters different from any other type of graffiti. This will be discussed in later segments in much greater detail.
Insane Orquesta Albany from their “Darwin City: ~Lyndale/Sacramento section-demonstrating the complex arrangement of symbols and letters, each with specific meaning. An additional caveat is that they used yellow paint on brown brick in accordance with their Nation colors. (Source: “Chicago’s Cold War” via Flickr.com)

8) **Slogans:** Each Nation has slogans that are customized to reflect the group identity and characteristics, said and written to build group solidarity. The slogans are typically structured in rhyme and are shorter in length, but are often joined together in a chain. Slogans generally present one’s own Nation in a superior way from other groups; For example, an Almighty Latin King might say “Black and Gold never folds”, as their Nation colors are black and gold. Rival Nations tend to appropriate and subvert a Nation’s own slogan for its own use as a way to disrespect the other in a play of call and response. For example, as a Latin King yells “Black and Gold never folds”, a rival might yell back “Black and Gold ALWAYS folds”.
9) **Handsigns**: Handsigns are another way that Nation participants represent their group identity through body language. Handsigns are a way to physically mimic the symbols or letters of one’s own group, known historically as “signifying” or “flagging”. Shadow G demonstrates this in the picture below by “throwing up” the Gangster Two Six “bunny” handsign with each hand, positioned with the trademark bent ear.
These handsigns serve three primary functions:

1). They serve as a way to build group solidarity and familiarity among one’s own group, as they are used in greetings, goodbyes, moments of exaltation, and reverence for the dead. They become another way to distinguish themselves
from outsiders by symbolically representing themselves in a way that shows inclusion with an exclusive group.

2). They are used to “check” unfamiliar people who might look like they in a Nation and are passing through their claimed hood. A way to symbolically validate that one should be allowed to be within the area. One’s ability to get a “pass”, or be allowed through uninterrupted is based on one’s response to verbal questioning in tandem with handsigns. When checking someone, one typically throws up one’s own Nation symbol and dips or throws down opposition symbols. Dipping opposition symbols is meant to expose someone’s Nation identity by inciting an emotional reaction to the display of disrespect. An even more complex extension of this is “false flagging”, where one initially pretends to be of a certain Nation identity by throwing up a handsign. If an unknown person responds in kind, the rivals then consider his/her identity “confirmed” and reveal their true identities. This is a method of ambush or catching opposition “slipping” through this ruse.

3). They become part of a symbolic exchange between rival groups to augment their verbal interaction, part of the dramatic “play” between youths who recognize each other’s participation in Nation culture. While it can sometimes lead to more serious, violent exchanges, it is more often a way that rival and allied groups show off their own identities and participation in this culture throw this ritualistic bravado.
A Note About Nations & Incarceration:

It isn’t appropriate or realistic to discuss Chicago Nations without mentioning their connections with correctional facilities. While it can be said that “crime” does not define or encompass the entire Nation experience; there are a significant amount of incarcerated youths and adults who claim a Nation affiliation, and it is the Nations who are said to influence and dictate the power and politics among the prisoners within the jails and the prisons. Some Nations even began behind bars, as is been said that the Conservative Vice Lords were originally formed at St. Charles juvenile detention center. As this section attempts to establish the groups that can be considered Nations, it is relevant to at least mention the connection to correctional facilities, because it is that connection that gives some group identities more status than others on the streets.

It must be further understood that with a high rate of recidivism; there is an active cultural exchange between the “the streets” and correctional facilities. The rules and codes that work on the street, however, do not always transfer to these institutions, and vice versa. Nations that are “at war” in the streets who have members that become incarcerated are expected to bracket that rivalries in many cases due to a more rigid, established structure. As the context changes, so do the rules of conduct and interaction, and law enforcement has often exaggerated the
extent of control that incarcerated Nation leaders have on the day to day activities of their corresponding groups in the neighborhoods.

One of the most obvious of these exchanges is that the older Nations have established “Lit” or “Literature” that was written by members who had been incarcerated. Lit defines how the founding members or the acting leaders envision Nation conduct and structure. Lit has historically been passed to the streets, and enforced to a varying degree by street leadership. Some Nations include in their Literature their attempts to regulate the practice of writing graffiti, discouraging its members from tagging their own neighborhoods unless it is to correct or “fix” tagging by opposition. It has been said that the influence and importance of Lit has diminished in recent years, and is only considered nominally relevant among Nation youths in 2013.

As this project is concerned primarily with the cultural practice of graffiti in Chicago neighborhoods, I do not have the bandwidth, experience, or interest in exploring this subject outside of necessarily acknowledging that it exists. I have seen footage and pictures of Cook county jail, where Nation graffiti adorned the walls. An interesting future project would be to explore the use of graffiti by Nations within these institutions where many of their familiar street codes do not apply, or are not applied the same way.
A Note About Nations and Race

“Yeah we are Mexican mostly but we even got two white brothers and a black LP, and they are some of the most downest brothers. I know it seems funny becuz we are Pachucos but if you got heart and prove yourself to the hood that’s what counts”-“2 Tall P”-Almighty Latin Pachucos, Belden/Lorel (Hanson Park) (Source: Flickr.com Private Message)

“It’s well known that the King brothers from Lathrop were mostly black”-King Eastvill, Huron/Hoyne Latin Kings (Commented on Flickr.com)

“The Dz from LeMoyne/Maplewood were originally an all black section, they called it “MonkeyLand” back then for that reason, but I think someone thought it was bogus so they changed it to “MonkLand” for the Maniac Monk.”-Logan Square Kid-Maniac Latin Disciples, Barry/Spaulding St. (Source: Comment on Flickr.com)

Many of the Chicago Nations that exist today were originally conceived during the 1950’s, 1960s and 1970s during an era of race-based neighborhood segregation and the struggles of the Civil Rights movement. Initially Nations became another way that youths could express racial solidarity as an aspect of neighborhood solidarity. For many of these groups, race and ethnicity based language and symbols became incorporated as ways that they conceptualized and presented their Nation identities.

Some of the older Nation participants described their groups as a “necessary” form of protection from the racial and ethnic based violence of the time. The group was seen as being a mechanism to both protect members when outside of their own neighborhoods, as well as protect their own neighborhoods from “invaders”, or outsiders seen as undesirable. Some of the older participants of the time claim that despite the stereotypes, their particular groups actually deterred “crime”, and had generally positive relationships with other members of their
community outside of their Nation. Other groups were involved in some capacity with the race and ethnic-based political action of the time. For example, its been said that the Black Stone Rangers provided protection for Martin Luther King when he came to Chicago, and groups such as the Young Lords worked towards developing community programs for the poor, and were concerned with the Puerto Rican national struggle for independence.

Some groups were more explicit about this racial presentation than others. Some African-American groups adopted “Black”, such as “Black Disciples” and “Black Gangsters”, while others such as the Conservative Vice Lords and 4 Corner Hustlers did not. Many Latino groups adopted “Spanish” and “Latin” as part of their identities, such as “Spanish Lords”, and “Latin Eagles”. Although comprised primarily of Puerto Ricans and/or Mexican youths, the “Spanish” and “Latin” presented a more all-encompassing “Latino” based orientation. There were many exceptions to this for the primarily Latino groups as well. For example, “Imperial Gangsters” and “Party People”, were not explicitly Latino although both were known as being primarily Latino in membership. Even the “Puerto Rican Stones” would later drop the “Puerto Rican” and adopt the more inclusive “Familia Stones”. Many of the primarily White Nations would not make “White” part of their monikers, but turned their names into well known acronyms reflecting a disposition that could be described as racially oppositional. For example, the Gaylords who were formed in the 50s was expressed as “Great American Youth Leading Our Resistance to Destroy Spics (or Spooks). In a similar way the Popes became “Protecting Our People
Eliminating Spics”, and the C-Notes was “Notorious Organization To Eliminate Spics (and/or Spooks”).

Two members of the primarily White “GayLords” from Lawndale/Altgeld. Notice their use of the Nazi swastika as part of their presentation as a WPO or “White Power Organization”. While such groups often appropriated white power symbols, there were varying opinions about the consistency of their membership in regards to this apparent cut and dry ethos. For example it was known that the Lawndale/Altgeld Gaylords had a few ethnically Mexican members, despite their use of the Nazi swastika and Klansman head or “GayLord Ghost”. When I asked one of their members why they allowed Mexican members into a supposedly WPO group, he said “they lived in the hood...had good weed, liked metal, and hated Puerto Ricans as much as we did”. (Source: “Slick” Via Facebook.com)

With this history it is important to stress that Nations are not exclusively “a Black and Latino” phenomenon, (as is often shown as the face of “the gang
problem”) but a shared culture among the poor and working class youths of Chicago. Especially prior to the White Flight of the 80s, White Nation groups were very common. As White Flight changed the ethnic demographics of neighborhoods, primarily White Nations either “retired”, receded from prominence, or began recruiting outside their race in order to remain relevant in these neighborhoods. An example of this is the Insane Ashland Vikings, originally a Polish group, who over time became dominantly Latino.

Nations may retain their identifying ethnic demarcations as part of their heritage in 2013, but there is less emphasis on race and ethnicity as far as determining acceptance and membership into Nation sections. Existing neighborhood demographics seems to translate to the diversity or lack of diversity of any particular Nation set. Albany Park for example is considered the most ethnically diverse neighborhood in Chicago. Therefore the Nation sections that are active there are comprised of a membership that reflects the diversity of the larger neighborhood, despite a Nation’s ethnic identifier. For example, the Almighty Latin King section of Lawrence/Ashland currently has active youths of Mexican, Puerto Rican, African-American, Cambodian, Arabic, and White descent. In Little Village, a dominantly Mexican neighborhood, the Latin King sections are mostly Mexican-but in the 1970’s when there was still a strong European presence, Nations such as the Ridgeway Lords had membership which reflected this “ethnic blend”.

It can be argued that although Nation identities are another arbitrary division, it can provide an opportunity for the youths to some extent transcend traditional racial and ethnic animosity. While Nations in the 1960s and 1970s were heavily focused on racial and ethnic solidarity, the Nation youths of today seem to place more emphasis on the bonds within their own neighborhoods and peer groups, regardless of what that person might look like or what their heritage is—although that may play a significant role in the interactions and dynamics within specific sections. Even as early as the 1980s there were mixed race Nation groups that seemed to be breaking Chicago’s traditional segregation patterns. The Simon City Royals, a primarily white Nation historically, have according to an older member “had Latinos and Blacks from the beginning”. He explained that in his time, his section was run by an African-American, “who was the downest brother I knew”. He didn’t see race as being an issue because it was that they were both Royal that mattered.

There is the other side of the spectrum, when Nation groups comprised primarily of one racial group are in conflict with a Nation group from another can exacerbate existing racial tensions, and to some extent perpetuate historic hatred and animosity. While this animosity may only manifest itself as it’s directed towards the opposition group, it reflects a conditioned default towards racialized divisions and threats posed by “the Other”. In this sense opposition groups are seen as a “double-threat” to the neighborhood posed by a group being both a Nation rival and a racial rival. A racially different Nation group is seen as simultaneously weaker and
threatening; a contradiction that is often not addressed. These tensions can be high when the accepted racial boundaries are maintained on both sides, but if one side of the racial divide starts moving into the other, and bringing with it its respective Nation youths, then the “defending” side can see them not only as being a threat to one’s one Set, but as a destroyer of the cultural heritage and unity of the greater community.

II. Proving Authenticity: Nations and the Practices and Qualities of Being “Real”

In order to work towards a more specific analysis of the cultural practice of graffiti writing, a defining framework must first be established. What makes a Nation identity different from other types of urban youth identities? How do we know a Nation when we see it in today’s context? How do these groups define themselves in a general sense? What common characteristics do they share? How do Nations compare to other groups? In order to attempt to answer these questions and provide clarity for the remaining text, the following section will introduce the importance of authenticity or “Realness” to Nation youths. As this chapter will show, Nation practices and characteristics allow these youths to distinguish themselves in ways that prove that they are “Real”, granting them the status of being legitimate participants in this world. In engaging in these practices, these youths contribute to building their culture that over time has narrowed or streamlined what being in a Nation means, and thus by understanding these practices outsiders can gain a sense of what they are doing.
Demonstrating authenticity is an on-going expectation of youths who take on a Nation identity. The Nation role itself is held to higher scrutiny because it presents itself as an elite position-those who take it on claim to be the toughest or “hardest” that the community can offer, bound together by a loyalty that one is expected to carry for life, even after one “retires” from being Active. This notion of “Realness” being that one is fully committed to living out this life and representing the qualities and engaging in the practices of one who is Real. Realness is not viewed as being a single action, but an “essence” of someone, the quality of one’s character. The more one represents the Nation through correct practices, the more “Real” one is considered. Respect is gained or lost through how effectively these groups and individuals execute Nation practices, with everyone trying to prove who is more “real” in the public space of the streets, parks, and the schoolyards.

Since many of these youths do not come from high income families, being Real is not about showing up with the correct outfit-you can’t buy your way into it. While money can be used to augment an authentic Nation identity, for example; being able to buy a certain in-fasion clothing brand-it is not how Realness is defined. On the contrary, dressing like a you without actually having proven oneself in that role can have both social and physical consequences; instead of fitting in one will get dismissed as a “wanna-be” or Fake, and even become a target of violence for “false flagging”; a multi-use term that in this context means that one pretends or postures to be part of a certain Nation or any Nation without having gone through the correct rites of passage to be accepted as legitimate.
Who qualifies as “real” Nations is a matter of perception; but to be “in the books” and “on count” are prison terms indicating that some groups have been formally accepted as legitimate by both one’s own Nation leadership and similarly positioned groups. Which groups qualify to be considered actual “Nation” groups is a matter of perception—there are some factors that allow groups to “earn” this acknowledgement by other groups over time:

1) Were in existence during the 1978 formation of the Folks and People alliances and were part of either side’s initial formalization. Failing this they joined either side at a later time.

2) Longevity-age of the group as a whole. A group that has been in existence for one year will usually have less status than a group that has been around for twenty years; although this is not always the case. If an older group is perceived as obsolete or “not on it”, then a younger group may rise to be considered dominant. An example of this is the relatively new LAFAs (Love Anna Forever Always) in the Jeffery Manor neighborhood, which was formerly considered an exclusively Gangster Disciple territory. The popularity of the LAFA identity among the youth in the area has divided and created conflict in the neighborhood between the mostly older Gangster Disciples and the recently formed LAFAs.

3) Quantity of Nation Sections.
4) Geographic spread/territory that a group claims and can be considered legitimately “holding”. Claiming too much land without sufficient presence is considered detrimental to overall status. “Yeah they claim Damen to Racine, but you never see them past Western” or “Yeah they claim that land but they got no heads anymore, everyone and their momma stays in their hood, they can’t keep anyone out”.

5) Known for “putting in work”, “handling Nation business” and all that entails. Generally maintaining a visible presence in the neighborhoods that they claim and being appropriately aggressive. The amount of Nation related “hits” that can be attributed to them can be considered beneficial to status as a sign of greater commitment by its members (having “gunners”), but may also give a reputation for “bringing too much heat” if sufficient time does not pass between “hits”. In general terms, too many bodies will bring too much police attention, which generally results in incarceration of members and may precipitate a set “falling off”, and losing status.

6) For smaller groups: prevailing over groups with larger numbers for an extended period of time. “Outnumbered but never outgunned”.

While there are varying degrees of organization depending on the specific Nation, there are established prison-based alliances that were formalized in 1978,
known as “Folks” and “People”. The original “Folks” and “People” alliances were also known as “Nations” and were originally comprised of a collective of individual street Nations who attempted to order themselves into collectives based on existing relationships between leaders, creating this binary of opposition where in order to “survive” behind bars your Nation had to align or “ride” with one side or the other. As time passed, more Nations joined either side and as a result, one defining characteristic of a group’s pursuit of Nationhood is what “they ride” when they are locked up. It is already understood that this adoption of “Nation” identity will require participants to be incarcerated, as they engage in practices that validate what it means to be “about that life”. While in 2013 these prison based grouping are still strongly relevant behind bars, on a street level these identifiers have become more significant to identity rather than as a formalized collective/alliance. For example, an Ashland Viking who I consulted with often referred to his fellow Vikings as “my Folks”, he described his Nation as being “at war” with other Nations in the area that were also part of the Folks prison alliance, such as the Harrison Gents and Satans Disciples.

Proving “Realness”-Joining a Nation

“When it came to joining, it was different from nation to nation and set to set. If you were down, you walk in or get violated in. Enough said!”-Ralphie G, Almighty Imperial Gangsters, Belden/Drake St. (Field Notes, October 2013)

“I grew up in it and never felt like I "joined" per say, I felt like the neighborhood was UnKnown and I/we were all part of the neighborhood. That’s not to say, I never officially joined, I did. When I was in my early teens I got my "V" in, 3 other members hit me repeatedly and I was not allowed to hit back. They hand pick 3 of the biggest brothers and the only rule they had was no groin shots. It only lasted
a couple of minutes but it felt longer, I’m sure this was done so all the guys that joined wouldn’t be afraid to take a punch -I’m sure that is the same reason for most other nations”-“Old School Ghost”-Almighty Insane UnKnowns, Grand/Monitor.
(Source: private message on Flickr.com)

“When I joined I had to do dirt with some of my seniors. Then I got violated in after. But then our initiation process became like this: you had to hang around and do dirt then we would vote if you could walk “the Wall”-20 brothers on one side and the same length of our wall. And you had to walk from one end and back.head to toe no face or balls.”-Old School “Taylor Jouster” (asked to remain anonymous, (Source: Facebook private message)

When it comes to taking on a Nation identity and joining a group;
authenticity and “being down” is demonstrated by using the currency that everyone can afford; their own actions, physicality, and street smarts. Youths prove themselves and “Earn Stripes” (gain status) through actions of loyalty, courage, and simply being physically present with the group or alone in one’s neighborhood, positioned with a certain orientation. A significant piece of being accepted is actually “being cool” with other members of the group; joking around, drinking, playing ball, going to parties-it is the camaraderie formed in the blank space around “Banging” practices that is equally significant. Being Real is not about fulfilling a checklist of requirements, but considered an aggregate of how one is perceived. One can assert themselves verbally as being, to quote the popular Chicago rapper Chief Keef “bout that life”, but the youths must “show and prove” to be considered legitimate, which is an endless process of presentations and “representation” of self through the group identity.

The youths prove themselves as “Real” in the following ways depending on expectations and existing frameworks:
1) By going through the appropriate rites of passage to gain acceptance into the Nation via a Section-which varies depending on the group itself; usually consists of a combination of the following elements considered as a whole:

I.) Conforming with the walk, talk, and style of the group; the subtle flow that doesn't seem forced or contrived. Being a comfortable fit with the group's rhythm, (which is important in any social group). Not alienating oneself through awkward or out of place actions.

II.) Having an existing familiarity with active Nation members in their neighborhood-being recognized and known to some degree on the block and in the schoolyard. There may be already existing friendships or family connections that make a prospect more likely to gravitate towards a Nation identity; as outsiders are generally not trusted.

III.) Possessing known character qualities that are not overtly detrimental to the group’s reputation, status, and survival. For example, “the neighborhood snitch” would not be considered a good candidate, because he/she would not be trusted to keep silent during questioning by school authorities and law enforcement. As another example, if one is known to be timid and run
from fights, then he/she would not be considered a good candidate.

IV.) A declared loyalty oath and/or prayer-as one’s “word is bond”, a symbolic gesture affirming commitment to the group; often viewed as having a spiritual or sacred component tied in with the group’s existing religious orientation.

V.) Possessing a general knowledge of the group’s history, symbols, structure, and having a general sense of its internal dynamics.

VI.) Carrying out an action or “Mission” or series of Missions, also known as “doing dirt”, decided by the group to show commitment and courage. Missions are appointed tasks that the younger group members must complete in order to be considered “Down”, or showing that they have the right disposition to be accepted and trusted as part of the group. Missions can either be formal, as in older members assigning them to younger prospects, or in some cases depending on the dynamics of the specific group-more spontaneous actions initiated by the younger prospects for “fun”, to build camaraderie, and impress members of a Nation that they are trying to gain acceptance in. An example of a
Mission might be to target a member of a rival group for a beating, stabbing, or shooting, being look-outs and back-up protection for other members doing missions, writing graffiti or “tagging” in a rival group’s Hood, firebombing a rival member’s car, etc. In these cases the act(s) are meant to demonstrate one’s commitment to the group by engaging in a dangerous action that could have both physical and legal consequences. These types of demonstrations may not even be necessary depending on one’s history, as members may be deemed as “proven” in other ways that meet the same criteria. For example, if a youth is not a member of the Nation but is living in their neighborhood, and by virtue of this is targeted by a rival Nation group by Hood association by virtue of where they live, they may already prove themselves through physically defending themselves from attacks by the rival group.

VII.) A timed beating or “walk-the-line” known as a “Violation” or “getting your V’z”. This act consists of multiple older members administering a beating to some capacity, to which the recipient can block but is not supposed to fight back. This process is a symbolic form of submission to the group authority where one
suffers at the hands of his/her peers with a trust that
they will exercise restraint. These beatings also reflects
the value of physicality in these neighborhoods, and are
meant to show how well one approaches the process
and if they can withstand them, to prove “toughness and
heart” when in potential physical confrontations with
opposition groups. Despite the recipient being bruised
and bloodied, this process is not considered hostile, but
is engaged in as a bonding ritual and once it is complete
the mood is more celebratory, especially if the recipient
handled it well.

VIII.) One can also “Walk In” if one’s family prestige/lineage is
well respected in the Nation, for example-being the
nephew or son of a founding member of a Section,
Nation identity then being considered part of one’s
heritage. This does not mean that someone who Walks-
In is not expected to prove themselves in other ways,
but similar to what a Fraternity would consider a
“Legacy”, the candidate has more initial status than
someone coming from an unaffiliated background.

IX.) While one cannot simply purchase their way into a
Nation, having access to things that the Nation section
finds valuable, when taken into consideration with
some of the factors previously listed - can give certain prospects an edge into gaining acceptance. For example a male candidate that is known to hang around attractive girls, have good weed, or a weapon connection can make him more popular with the group, but if he is a “Lame” he will be tapped for his connections and kept around but will not likely be Turned Out (initiated) as a legitimate member.

2) If a prospect is accepted as part of the Section, he/she is expected to continue to prove themselves, especially during one’s teenage years which is considered a time that members are most Active. While one may continue to engage in some of these actions well into their 20’s, 30’s, or 40s - these practices are considered the most crucial as characteristics of younger members. As members age they continue to be assessed by their peers in retrospect based on their exploits during this time.

1. Referring to the self in the frame of the group identity, showing that one “is” their Nation, not just a member. For example one would say, “I am an Imperial Gangster”, not “I am a member of the Imperial Gangsters”. It is a subtle
difference, but represents an essentialization of one’s Nation identity, a merge between the group identity and the self.

II. Being given or taking a nickname, one’s “Hood name” that represents this other identity-another version of self.
Nicknames are typical given by others based on a certain characteristic.

III. Embodying one’s Nation identity in different personalized ways; from wearing subtle color schemes in clothing utilizing the established Nation colors and wearing logos that resemble Nation symbols, and getting tattoos utilizing the symbols and text of the collective.

IV. Simply being present with other members of the group; most of the time these sessions are typical to what other youths do. Strengthening bonds of friendship and camaraderie through attending parties, playing video games or sports, engaging each other on social networks like Facebook and Twitter. This time is valuable, as it enhances the affinity they have for each other and the significance of their “groupness”. The more time that is spent with each other in this way creates more profound feelings of trust
because they see each other outside of the context of Bangin; in turn making the Nation practices more personalized as deeper, more “risky” demonstrations of friendship bonds.

V. Positioning oneself with a disposition of vigilance, or “hanging out”/“busting out”, which are terms used to describe being available to clash with opposition if the opportunity presents itself. To be physically seen in the Hood is an important way of building status, to be seen as Real by others groups and outsiders. This is also known as being “On It” While this presentation of “busting out” is important, this time is mostly about building solidarity with each other in the Hood.

VI. Engaging in forms of competitive conflict with rival groups meant to distinguish and bring status to oneself and the group. The most obvious form that this competition is played out is through successfully pulling off “Missions” on rival members—“catching them slipping” in their neighborhoods, engaging in beat downs and shootings where one Nation section builds their reputation and status by overcoming other Nation members or group in a given scenario. Sometimes this exchange is more of a dramatic
display of violent potentiality-stare downs, verbal threats and put-downs, flashing one’s own Nation handsign and “dipping” or “throwing down” a rival’s symbol. While this can be a precursor ritual to melee clashes or gunfire exchanges, it is just as often a symbolic show, or “flexing”. Flexing in this way is a publically “safe” way to be seen by outsiders as part of a Nation without exposing oneself to the consequences of following through with an actual clash. It shows that one is ready for what comes next, but is still measured, it puts “the ball in the other court” to see if they will take it to the next level. Another form of competitive conflict plays out through the practice of writing graffiti, which will be discussed in greater detail later.

VII. Nation culture has been heavily targeted by law enforcement historically, and therefore an ethic of silence and not cooperating with formal authorities-be they school administrators, case workers, or police-is heavily engrained in Banger orientation. Phrases such as “Snitches end up in ditches” become an informal mantra, and being known as a “Snitch” is considered a status worthy of expulsion from the group, beatings, or death. It is therefore expected that active Bangers continue to prove that they are trustworthy by not
only refusing to give information about actions and other members to outsiders, but through the acceptance of legal charges against oneself if necessary.

The Purpose of Nations

Nations as an Empowerment Identity

“I argue that gangs are exactly the opposite of a suicide machine. Though I don’t deny their life-threatening components, gang membership works most powerfully, though perhaps counterintuitively, as a form of empowerment and protection, a net that people have woven to keep themselves from falling any lower (see also Vigil 1988a)” (Phillips 1999:65).

Nations serve an important function as a source of individual and collective identity in working class and poor neighborhoods; as it allows for individuals to re-define who they are within this group framework. One's involvement in a Nation can bring with it several names and titles, which shows how important identity is in this world. There is generally one's Nation “nickname”, the general Nation name that one assumes, one's specific grouping with the Nation or “section” identity, and one or more alliance identities. These groups allow marginalized and alienated in multiple ways from access to what the mainstream would be considered “legitimate” sources of empowerment identities; to in a sense re-invent themselves as “more” through their participation in this world.

In order to create these identities, a crucial aspect is naming their collective-and to do so the youths have creatively sourced iconography and language from mainstream media, history, religion, political movements, ethnic cultural heritage, and aspects of their
local neighborhoods. These symbols and concepts are meant to convey rebelliousness, ruthlessness, toughness, strength, loyalty, and nobility—qualities that are seen as empowering and desirable. Thus instead of seeing oneself as a poor black, poor white, or poor Mexican high school dropout wearing hand me down clothes, driving an old car, with low wage job prospects, one can symbolically transform into a “Lord”, “Royal”, or a “King”, made significant and powerful within the context of the group.

Nations as a Source of Status

“Respect is the number one commodity in the hood. It is something that is bartered, bandied, achieved, actively sought, and created. It is nothing that the law can take away, or that the bank can repossess. Land is important, yes, as a locus for resources broadly defined. But respect and reputation: these are the resources that count”– (Phillips 1999:237).

In order to be considered authentic or “real” within this world, it is not enough to consider oneself a member, the youths have to engage in the types of practices seen as desirable by the collective, both prior to and after they “turn”. The youths are expected to orient themselves and behave in ways that reflect favorably on the group, as the group itself also defines them. There is a significant amount of self-monitoring and regulating occurring within these collectives; because one is not only responsible for one’s own reputation, but that of their Nation. In these working-class neighborhoods, “respect is everything”, and the names and titles that one adopts bring with it the responsibility to confront those who are seen as disrespecting the collective. Because these youths often lack other sources of status, such as through expensive material possessions, the reputation of their name and their group becomes that much more crucial; as for many of them they feel that that is all that they have.
There is competition for status that occurs both within one’s own Nation group, or “section”, between sections within the context of the greater Nation identity, and between one’s own section and sections of rival and allied Nation groups. There is no formal ranking or scoreboard, but status is measured in informal ways within the Nations themselves and by outside observers within the schools and neighborhoods; it occurs within the realm of peer opinion. While it can be said that Nations are exclusive groups, the youths are concerned about how their identities are perceived by outsiders. While they do not typically grant outsider access, they want to be recognized and known as being part of a group that is “better” than other similar groups. Because these group identities are inter-generational, the status of a group in one “era” can be residually transferred to how the younger generation is perceived.

Nation youths compete with rivals in different ways, and there are various practices that can be considered beneficial or detrimental to one’s status. Because the youths identify themselves as part of this greater group identity, their personal status is directly affected both positively and negatively by the actions and reputations of their Nation peers. As their Nation identities are their primary sources of positive status, they engage in a form of self-policing in an attempt to regulate the practices of those who share their group identity. Through verbal critiques and at times physical intervention, they strive to control how other members represent the collective whole. As their Nation identity is so crucial to the youths, this leads many of them to engage in practices that may ultimately be physically and mentally detrimental to themselves in order to maintain or increase their Nation
reputation. In this way the fear of “social suicide” and rejection by the group can eclipse fears about physical and legal consequences of their actions.

**Nations as a Resource Network**

Nations serve as an important alternative source of resources in Chicago working class neighborhoods; this network provides the youths with a stable framework through which friendship clusters are imbued with an added layer of identity obligation which helps shape a stronger sense of being responsible for each other. This resource network serves the youths in a material and emotional capacity in three primary ways: it offers the youths a defense mechanism for environmental threats, an emotional/therapeutic circle, and connections for material resources.

In many Chicago neighborhoods, an “us against the world” orientation exists through both larger social marginalization of class and often race/ethnicity, historic patterns of segregation, as well as local logic through which neighborhoods have become divided into smaller symbolic islands, wherein the residing occupants feel threatened on all sides by demonized “others”. These historic and arbitrary categories of “other” have helped shape the identity construct of Nations, through which additional categories of difference perceived as “essential” becomes inscribed, internalized, and recreated. It is within this existing symbolic arrangement that the ethic of “working class physicality” more significant. Working class physicality as a source of status and empowerment has produced interactions and results that have had a profound impression on how the local
youths view their place in the world. It has fostered a shared perception that they are under constant threat of violence, which is both real and “more than real”. Because incidents of violence do occur on a frequent basis in their neighborhood, their perception of its possibility becomes amplified and dramatized through pre-emptive and reactive practices, exchanges, and dispositions that ironically over time become associated with violence and in a way serve as methods for the youths to “invite” violence. It is in this social climate that these groups become more tightly bonded through a shared hyper-vigilance as a response to the generally held notion that violence is a “fact of life” and unavoidable.
IV. Introducing Graffiti as a Cultural Practice

Graffiti-noun

1. Plural of “Graffito”
2. Markings, as initials, slogans, or drawings, written, spray-painted, or sketched on a sidewalk, wall of a building, or public restroom, or the like: These graffiti are evidence of the neighborhood’s decline.
3. Such markings as a whole or as constituting a particular group: Not much graffiti appears around here these days.

“But while I was sitting down, I saw something that drove me crazy. Somebody’d written "Fuck You" on the wall. It damn near drove me crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other little kids would see it, and how they’d wonder what the hell it meant, and how they’d all think about it and maybe even worry about it for a couple of days. I kept wanting to kill whoever had written it”-J.D Salinger “The Catcher in the Rye”

“Filled with a sense of euphoric kinship with his unseen brothers, the unknown hands who had left their marks, O’Rooley scrabbled in his pocket and, passing by the page he’d torn from the back of “L’Histoire de la Langue d’Oc, fetched out his pen. He looked around for a spare stretch of wall”-Brigid Brophy “In Transit”

Graffiti: General Origins

Graffiti in various forms has been found in the oldest civilizations, a version of it being said to have been found as early as 1 BC, although depending on your definition, it may be as old as mankind itself. According to Christian Acker “the very practice of graffiti has Latin roots tracing back to early Rome. Graffiti has been preserved in the city of Pompei, on walls underneath years of Mount Vesuvius’ dust. It has been preserved in the catacombs beneath Rome, where early Christians worshipped in hiding scrawling prayers on the walls. In fact, graffiti has been found in almost every civilization with some sort of urban culture. Where there are walls, there are defacements-of varying artistic merit”(Acker 2013:8).
The use of the term graffiti here in the broadest sense is a way to describe the act of using some type of material to modify a publically viewable surface. Traditionally it was implied that graffiti was always created without permission, and/or illegally in violation of social norms and acceptable society. In recent years some forms of graffiti became considered more “artistic” and its creators were given sanctioned “permission” walls to write and draw in a way that they see fit. In more extreme examples, some graffiti artists have joined the mainstream and produced their work commercially; promoting products and appearing in style books and high-end art galleries. This has made the definition of graffiti a little more complicated, if the style has graffiti origins but is now sanctioned, does it cease to be graffiti and become merely another facet of the world of acceptable Art? This question has been fiercely debated, but there can be no denying that at the very least there is a creative, artistic element to the creation of all graffiti; and is generally considered an act of youthful rebellion, even when practiced by adults.

**Graffiti as a form of Social Rebellion**

There seems to be a general sentiment that authentic graffiti creation has always been a form of rebellion against the established order. For many people it is not only the act of creating it that matters, but the circumstances under which its created. The thrill and adrenaline that result from the potential consequences and social stigma creates a heightened intensity and is its own form of status. Among
many graffiti circles, the “riskier” the location (both in terms of legally and/or physically risky) and the complexity of the graffiti created there are considered ways of gaining status. There is “dangerous fun” found in sneaking around under cover of darkness, engaging in clandestine tagging on public property while evading police and commissioned “anti-vandal” squads. This element of rebellion against the status quo of notions of property and its appointed guardians cannot be overlooked as a compelling element of what it means to create graffiti to many people. It is even as simple as looking over both shoulders before writing one’s name in simple messy scrawl on a viaduct—it is the danger presented by formal authority figures, the potential repercussions that heighten the experience of creating graffiti.

It is this use of graffiti as a way to reject the status quo and method of rebellion against authority figures that strongly appeals to many urban youths, especially in communities that have been historically marginalized and segregated. They may in many ways feel alienated and excluded from participation in mainstream “acceptable” creative outlets, and find excitement in re-defining the environment that they find themselves in. They do this by improvising their neighborhoods and schools using pieces of the cityscape itself as simultaneous forms of creativity and rebellion. They may be rebelling against authority figures both externally and internally. The external authority are the school teachers, police officers, judges—all who are seen as emissaries of a mainstream system that they may feel do not represent them or their families. In many cases, their family and neighbors are also seen as a form of “internal” community authority, and they
engage in the graffiti in defiance of their home grown conditioning and expectations about what respect for community means. While tagging a bus or a wall is not an act against a judge, parent, or teacher per se, these pieces of the environment represent a way to defy collective authority, “adulthood”, and what is taught as legitimate and proper use of public and private property. In this way the act of creating graffiti becomes an outlet of defiance as well as creativity, all occurring within the context of what it means to be a young person, especially in an urban environment.

The Accessibility of Graffiti Making Materials

Graffiti today is valued by many youths within working class neighborhoods as an easily accessible method of creative expression. One does not require permission from school appointed authorities or need to enroll in a formal, costly art class in order to participate; one must only have the desire, a method of writing, and a canvass. For the working class and the economically disenfranchised; cheap materials for writing and painting such as markers and spray-paint can be procured fairly easily; and their canvass is free and exists all around them: it is the walls, fences, and signs in their neighborhoods. These materials offer an immediate creative outlet for young people who might not have the money or the status to benefit from more formalized art settings; allowing them to utilize the means at their disposal to project messages and creations to a forum that will be instantly seen by others. This isn’t to say that there are not many middle class and wealthy youths who also create graffiti, or that working class youths don’t also participate in
art classes, but it can be generally understood that graffiti in its current incarnation evolved at the very least as a distinctly urban cultural practice of creative improvisation and expression.

**Graffiti Methods**

Graffiti can range across a spectrum of writing one’s name stylistically on a sticker and slapping it on a stop sign, to spray-painting an elaborate multi-colored cartoon character 8 feet tall, to drawing a crude rendition of a penis in chalk on the sidewalk. As this is a form of personal expression-what is created is contingent upon the individual’s abilities, influences, taste, discretion, and motivation. In recent years the methods of creating graffiti have diversified beyond the traditional brush, aerosal, and etchings (using an object to scratch graffiti into surfaces) as a result of innovation and technological advancements. Graffiti is now being created using fire extinguishers filled with paint, blowtorches, elaborate stencils, etching paste, and pre-made wood and glass pieces bolted to signs. As these methods are used by more “traditional” artists, for our purposes; we will work with the understanding that it is not the methodology that makes it “graffiti”, but the context of it being created as “street art”, in a way that is illegal and in violation of social norms about how public and private property should be treated.

**The Post World War II Era, “Gangs”, Hip Hop, and the Global Culture of Graffiti Writing**
While the creation of graffiti in its various forms seems to be both ancient and universal, the United States experienced what was considered a surge in the creation of graffiti in the socio-economic climate following the economic “boom” of World War II. According to Acker, “changes in income across socio-economic lines led to more free time for youths, who a generation earlier would likely have been working. This allowed for greater educational opportunities, as well as more time to explore art and music—or to get in to trouble” (Acker 2013:10). Acker argues that these youths built upon an already existing awareness of migrant worker or “hobo” graffiti that existed during the Great Depression, expanding upon this notion of leaving one’s name written in one’s wake, and mimicking widely recognized characters, such as Kilroy.

While in the 1950’s graffiti creation was seen as being more casual, there was another form of graffiti which was more systemized which has been traced back to both Chicago and Los Angeles, respectively. Both were being created as early as 1940s by youth groups that have been characterized as “gangs”, and involved a more disciplined application of letters and symbols. While both utilized what is considered an “Olde English” font or script, the system of meanings and symbolism that were utilized represented two separate and distinct cultures. These forms of “gang graffiti” began to have significance in ways that transcended the more transitional and personalized “sign of passage” graffiti that had preceded it. According to the history provided in Christian Acker’s “Flip the Script”, the Chicago style of “Gang Graffiti” was in a sense exported to such major local cities as Kansas
City, St. Louis, Detroit, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia—which were then appropriated and modified in ways that reflected existing local culture and interpretations.

The Emergence and Popularity of Hip Hop

Graffiti writing went through a resurgence in the late 1970s and early 1980’s as an aspect of Hip Hop culture; which exploded in New York and quickly spread both nationally and internationally. Graffiti writing became known as one of the four “Elements” of Hip Hop, and was adopted by many as a form of urban expression and youth culture. While in the 1960’s the Chicago “Gangster” style spread to Philadelphia, was modified, and in turn was moved from Philadelphia to New York; with the advent of the “Hip Hop era”, Chicago found itself on the receiving end of the New York influence. This Hip Hop style was not adopted in a vacuum, but was incorporated into an already existing Chicago style which had been established by the Nations historically. In this way graffiti writing had come “full circle” in Chicago in the late 1970’s and 1980’s, with the use of aerosol cans often replacing the more limiting brush and roller style painting of the traditional Nation style graffiti.

Graffiti Writing in the Chicago Context

There are essentially four types of graffiti that one can find in Chicago. While none of them are exclusive to Chicago, two of them can be said to have distinct “Chicago styles” that are recognized within their cultures; characteristics that
distinguish them from similarly oriented practitioners in other cities. While for many outsiders all graffiti “looks the same” and is often dismissed broadly and simply as vandalism, these different types are vastly different in the minds of the ones who are creating it and participate in these worlds. Therefore in order to find meaning that is specific to Nation graffiti, it is important to not only show what it is, but what it isn’t.

The first is what can be considered **Casual** graffiti. This is graffiti that is written by individuals as more of an act of impulse, and is characterized by spontaneous messages, doodles, or one’s name—often written in pen or marker. This graffiti can become a personal ritual, such as someone writing crude jokes every time they are in a bathroom stall or drawing abstract symbols in pen on a bench while waiting for the bus. It is not practiced as part of a group experience or an identity as it is often completely isolated to personal acts, but it can still be said to be an act of creative expression. One major distinction from the other two types is that typically the person writing it does not consider oneself an “artist” or “graffiti writer” and often does not even acknowledge to other people that they leave these marks.

The second is what can be referred to as generalized **Political** graffiti. This is graffiti that is written as an expression of a political message or a lifestyle ethos; such as spray-painting an Anarchy symbol, a “Satanic Pentagram”, a Nazi swastika, or “Meat is Murder”. They may be a concerted effort by a group to raise awareness
or cause property damage/inconvenience to the buildings or property of businesses that they are morally or politically opposed to. These are generally symbols and phrases that are widely recognized and are considered self-evident in meaning. While interpretations and “schools of thought” may differ, symbols such as the Anarchy sign will be interpreted in a generally similar way globally, as long as one has a basic knowledge of what the symbol represents in the first place.

Found in the Noble Square neighborhood near Ashland and Thomas. (Source: “Chicago’s Cold War” via Flickr.com)
The third type is associated with the “Graffiti Writer” culture that evolved in large part due to the popularization of graffiti writing as a cultural practice of Hip Hop in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. This form of graffiti involves a variety of application methods—such as markers, spray-paint, etch bath, and fire hydrants. Using these tools, the Writers develop style(s) through countless hours of repetition and trial and error. Often writers will mimic, at least in private, the writing of their peers, predecessors, and heroes through copying what they see in their neighborhood and what is captured on video and photograph. Many writers are self taught, while others may find mentors who help them develop their own craft and identity.

Graffiti Writers are motivated to create graffiti for various reasons unique to the individual, but can be generalized primarily as creative rebellion. They seek to create their own form of art using the limited resources at their disposal; transforming blank, often neglected surfaces into their galleries. Many graffiti writers describe graffiti writing as an addiction, an obsession that is further amplified by the adrenaline rush of clandestine graffiti outings under the cover of darkness while evading police, security, and anti-vandal squads. It is through these shared experiences and their mutual appreciation of the craft and result of graffiti that they build their culture, with various practices, representations, and customs
developed in a way that binds them together in community with the graffiti as the focal point.

Choosing a Writer identity or alias is an important aspect of what it means to be a graffiti writer. One’s chosen name is meant to reflect who they are and serves as a signature for their work. Writers do not ask each other what their real names are, but rather, who or what they “write as”. Writers gain status as their alias through developing a signature style through repetition, and “getting up” or writing the graffiti in a consistent way over time in various locations. While Writers can often specialize and focus on the smaller “Tags”, “Throw-ups”, Etch paste “Scribes” and sticker “Slaps”-these are traditionally meant to emphasize and augment the larger, more elaborate “Pieces” (which also have their own niche categories, such as Wildstyle and Blockbusters).

Writers develop reputations through competition with other Writers, where they distinguish themselves over time through mastering different applications and by successfully placing their graffiti in noticeable but challenging locations. They gain glory among their peers by constantly striving to create superior pieces, and the more dangerous the foray, the more they build their legend. The risk of fines, jail, injury, and even death (often from falling) is seen as part of the process, and adds to the mystique and thrill of its creation.
This form of graffiti writing, while globalized, has its own unique representation in Chicago through signature writing style, slang, and graffiti collectives, or “Crews”. While crews can be neighborhood based, they can also be more about which side of the city (North, South, or West) the crew is sourced from, as well as “All City” or considered representative of Chicago as a whole. Crews become a way that Writers can form close friendships and “family”, watch out for each other while writing, collaborate on larger pieces, and earn status. The crew can become another more exclusive field where the writers try to outdo each other in the spirit of friendship and competition, as well as part of the larger city scene where the writer’s identity becomes linked with that of the crew, and the various crews compete informally with each other through their individual and collective work.

While Graffiti Writers refer to each other as “Writers” and their culture as “Graffiti” or “Graf”, this style will be distinguished for the purposes of this project as “Civilian” graffiti for the sake of clarity, organization, and distinction. It must be noted that the Writers themselves do not refer to themselves or each other in this way, as they feel that what distinguishes themselves and their work from Nation graffiti writers is self-evident in the end result, the style and “flair” of their work. As it is not as clear to outsiders, “Civilian” is being used inauthentically here because their work is often generalized and lumped in with Nation graffiti collectively as “Gang Graffiti”, and therefore they needed their own demarcation. As both Civilian and Nation graffiti Writers can be said to create “Art”, simply calling Civilians “Artists” would be dismissive to the Nation writers. Civilian was therefore chosen to
demonstrate that the “Hip Hop” style graffiti Writers emphasize the graffiti writing over the local conflict politics and symbolic and physical exchanges of the Nations, while at the same time acknowledging that they themselves are not immune from their environment, and often get caught up circumstantially as they move through and sometimes violate the symbolic codes and boundaries of the streets.
“Civilian” Graffiti captured on the Orange Line to Midway. (Source: “Chicago's Cold War” via Flickr.com)

Almighty Latin Kings’ graffiti from their Ridgeway/27th section, aka “BorderTown”. Found near 26th and Ridgeway. (Source: “Chicago’s Cold War via Flickr.com)

The fourth type of Chicago graffiti is Nation graffiti, which as a basis of comparison with other cities could be called “gang graffiti”. While Nation graffiti is often not stylistically or aesthetically as rich as Civilian graffiti, it is highly complex both in the meaning of what is expressed and the functions that the graffiti serves. Larger Nation murals and crests became utilized beginning in the late 1950’s, and were meant to symbolically mark both one’s group “clubhouse” as well the surrounding neighborhood as being identified with Nation group identity. Murals would take hours and often involved large, meticulous lettering spelling out the
Nation name and section (specific group location identity), crests (coat of arms), and the Nation symbols. Rival symbols might be included upside down “dipped”, or cracked. The names of those who participated in creating the mural as well as other section members were usually written in much smaller letters, as well as tributes to dead and imprisoned members.

Smaller writing, or “tags” were written on buses, in the schools, and throughout various neighborhoods as a way to communicate this identity, and over time, became a form of symbolic competition and source of status as rival Nation groups would find ways to disrespect enemy identities wherever they were found, and accompany these forms of disrespect by writing their own Nation and nickname over or next to it. This layering became an ongoing way that symbolic boundaries were created, challenged, and destroyed in the streets, the buses, trains, and schools.

The style of Nation writing was more or less standardized and uniform, and consisted of the use of Old Englishe or a modified Old Englishe script, Roman numerals, and characters often appropriated from more mainstream sources, altered in certain ways, and “reinvented” with new meaning. A classic example of this was the adoption by several nations of the “Playboy Bunny” logo as their Nation character or “Master”, adding additional details and symbols to distinguish its use among them. The attention to these differentiating details became important to those who wrote the symbols, as no one wanted to be confused with another
group identity, especially if they were rivals. This appropriation in some cases was so widespread that it became a source of feuding between the various groups, who each claimed to be the “originators” of the appropriation, and who are in fact “the real” bunnies, or whichever icon was in question.

Despite there being a traditional, established code and framework for writing which was more or less adopted city-wide, there were regionally specific differences in terms of the language used, as well as the symbols which were unique to smaller groups that were isolated from contact with the larger groups that had a wider presence. And as much as there was a large degree of social marginalization, the youths of the day would update the style of the symbols, lettering, and slang according to broader social, political, and cultural trends that resonated with them. For example, the classical use by the Gangster Two Six Nation of a bunny with one bent ear outfitted in a Fedora and Suit would be updated by some of the younger members with the bunny in baggy jeans with a hoodie, to reflect the “Gangsta/Thug” presentation found in Hip Hop. This would then evolve into an internal source of identity distinction, as in Little Village the newer “Darkside” Two Six sections adopted the bunny with hoodie as a way to distinguish themselves from the older “Chi Town” and “KK-Town” sections.

Nations and Civilian Graffiti: A Blurred Binary
While the practice of Nation graffiti preceded the emergence of Hip Hop and its development into the Civilian graffiti culture, they were both influenced and simultaneously influencing to it. Both cultures became embedded in working class and lower income areas, where the youths found sources of creativity, status, and empowerment in these expressions and communities. While many of the Civilian writers of the 1980’s and 90’s credit their version of graffiti as keeping them away from “the gangs”, many do not deny that they were influenced by the characters and script of the writing that they saw in their neighborhoods growing up. In the same way, many of the youths in Nations adopted the style, slang, and music of Hip Hop-and this translated into how they saw themselves within the context of their Nation identities-it changed how they interacted and expressed themselves.

Civilian graffiti writers and crews also found themselves adopting a methodology that reflects their Chicago heritage and nation influence by using the classic “Flip” or “Dip” of rival abbreviated crew lettering, both in terms of the letters being upside down, as well as the reversal of lettering. This “affirmation through negation” technique validates one’s own persona and group identity through the disassembly/reframing of another’s. It doesn’t deny the existence of legitimacy of the other group, but shows that it is seen as inferior to one’s own and therefore not worthy of respect. While many Civilian crews keep their graffiti battles on the walls, and it was considered a more competitive aspect of “the game”, there were others who escalated “graffiti beef” (conflict) to physical altercations, which made it easier
for outsiders to consider these cultures as indistinguishable in their “violence and vandalism”.

There were also youths who were part of a Nation who found themselves possessing enough artistic, social and cultural capital to able to navigate and participate in both worlds; taking up different aliases to write in different ways depending on which they chose to represent at that point. For example, one might have one alias that they wrote graffiti with as a Civilian, and another that was their Nation moniker for their Nation writing.

In other circumstances, Civilian graffiti crews found themselves targeted by Nation groups or desiring a different kind of status, and over time developed into Nations themselves-such was the case with the Almighty KGBz or “Krazy Getdown Boyz”, who began as a Civilian graffiti crew, and eventually adopted the Folks identity and the “Almighty” sub-alliance with the guidance of their former allies (now rivals), the more established Almighty Ambrose. While Nations who begin as graffiti crews have been considered by their rivals to be weaker for this reason, many of the traditional Nations began as something else-such as the Insane Orquesta Albany, who were a local salsa band prior to a fatal altercation with the Latin Kings, which led them to develop as a response into a Nation in their own right.
Almighty KGB Nation tag (61st/Troy)-shield and two swords, numeral six in the “B, and the six “rays” emanating from the sword and written again numerically in the pommel demonstrate their Folks identity (6 being the traditional numeric representation of the Folks alliance). Local rivals the Almighty Party Players’ “rising sun” symbol (five points indicate their People identity/alliance, in contrast with the Folks identity of the KGB) is dipped here (disrespected) in a way that is traditional to Chicago Nations. (Source: “Chicago's Cold War” via Flickr.com)

It is necessary to distinguish between these two cultures that create graffiti, as they are considered different social worlds and are each bound in an identity based on a different logic. For the Civilian graffiti writers, they see the graffiti itself as the basis of their identity, capital, and status; from which all of their other customs and practices emanate from and are linked to. In this world, it is necessary for everyone who participates to create graffiti in order to prove themselves and gain credibility based on their own name regardless of any crew identity or lack thereof. Their place within this culture is based on an aggregate of their ability to
write using certain techniques, having a unique “innovative” style, how many years they have been writing, and the extent that they have “suffered” for their art-fines, incarceration, etc. They build their own status over time based on their own exploits, and any crew identity is seen as being secondary to their chosen identity which is their alias, their legend which is crafted over time by “getting up” this name in a way that is seen, recognized, and respected.

For Nation youths, graffiti is but one aspect of their culture-and is one of several ways that they can choose to represent their identity(ies). In contrast to Civilian Writers, there are many Nation youths who do not write graffiti, and it can be dismissed as a lesser valued practice despite its historic use and continued relevance. It is often portrayed as a safer substitute for “real bangin”, practices that involve the use of one’s own body directly in the environment in a way that leaves one exposed and accessible to opposition groups. As a primary difference from Civilians, Nation participants can earn their respect without ever writing any graffiti. Despite what is often said, Nation graffiti still serves different expressive functions depending on when, where, and why it is being written, and therefore must be valued enough that its creation is still so pervasive. The graffiti often augments and gives meaning to the other things that Nation youths do, and so becomes a way to cohesively articulate their identity to others in a way that links individuals and their actions with a collective experience.
Creating graffiti in general is an ancient practice, and in recent decades due to cultural changes and increased ease of access to more progressive means of creating it, has become associated most notably with youth rebellion and Hip Hop culture. While this Hip Hop form of graffiti has become more or less globalized, graffiti takes on more nuanced meaning in local contexts. There are different types of graffiti that are created in Chicago from different frameworks of meaning, the two primary cultural sources being the Nations and the Civilians. While there are many ways that Nations and Civilians distinguish themselves from each other, as they developed within similar communities and social circles, they can often blur into each other in terms of how they identify themselves and act out what it means to be part of their distinct communities. While these differences are obvious to those involved, it is not as easy for outsiders—and therefore more exploration is required of the meaning within Nation graffiti and the culture that produces it outside of stylistic differences. We must discard previous academic mistakes of categorizing these groups as one in the same as simply youth “deviants”, “delinquents” or “criminals” based on their shared practice of “vandalism” as if that convenient labeling self evidently reflects any shared logic or framework between the cultures.
V. Nation Graffiti as a Form of Urban Artistic Expression

Nation graffiti is often presented by law enforcement, criminologists, and mainstream media as only serving the purpose of marking territory or disrespecting rivals, but like other forms of graffiti: these youth writers are also creating “art” in how they conceptualize and bring to life these codes and symbols. This contradicts strong feelings among many outsiders, even within the Civilian graffiti community, who reject what they view as “gang crap” and “territorial pissions” with no redeeming value; often placed as an example of “bad graffiti” vs their own “good” graffiti; and in general see it as lacking in technique, imagination, and variety. Nation graffiti is even more despised by many residents, who view the presence of Nation tags as blight in the community, indicating that it leads to property depreciation and fosters violence. This external, mainstream and simplistic labeling merely as “gang tags” and what that stereotypically implies does not eradicate the reality that unique Chicago street art is being created using this medium; and the writers themselves view what they do as an expressive, creative endeavor, regardless of whether its recognized or respected by outsiders.

The Nation writer is also creating art, in the sense that he is reinterpreting and reviving symbols and letters in order to depict them in a certain way according to his own vision-albeit within the constraints of a far more limited figurative pallet. Within the loose cultural current of Chicago Nations there is a baseline of how one should properly present words and symbols-and within this paradigm even the
colors used have significance and meaning—they are not neutral. Within this realm of presentation: nothing is neutral, everything that is presented on the wall will have meaning and will be subject to dissection by Nation members—therefore the tags are not merged with meandering thoughts and abstract shapes without relevance to the collective presentation of identity. In this sense this particular version or “school” of graffiti is not conducive to what could be considered free expression and the unbridled pursuit of one's imaginative whims, but nevertheless there is still a creative vision in how the code is presented. The Nation writer is painting and drawing within the constraints of a core set of imagery that has been inherited, and a preceding style that he is under pressure to mimic by the collective; but it is within this framework that the individual can still add his own flare and “version” of sameness—a signature presentation that becomes recognized as unique to him; combining elements of computerspeak, hip hop terminology, and popular youth slang to enrich the offering. The resulting piece is an amalgamation of their lived experience, lineage, and a portrayal of neighborhood specific interactions; but almost as a form of visual entertainment by how it is brought to life. For them the creative urge is satiated not in necessarily inventing anything wholly new—but in their ability to present old symbols in a new way. It is in the creation “now” that they resurrect old corpses, stitching fresh faces over what has decayed with time.

Just as many “legitimate” mainstream artists find inspiration and source from a certain artistic era or a mentor’s preferred style; Nation youths draw upon their own influences in order to compose their works. Many younger Nation writers rely
on older members in order to learn the core symbolism that will be the framework of what they produce. This mentorship does not have to be formal, it may never even be vocalized-as it can be seen and mimicked within the neighborhood. It can be as simple as kids watching the older boys piece up walls, looking up to them, and recreating their own versions. In other cases there is a true mentorship in that older members who write might recognize the artistic qualities of younger kids and draw them in, offering style and technique guidance to make them more effective Nation representatives. The ritualized self-training of sketching in notebooks is often just as present for Nation writers as it is for Civilians; and through repetition they gain the aptitude to recreate their envisioned symbolic assemblies quickly and under stressful conditions-in this way their process becomes more mechanical and consistent.

There is a ritual of exchange between rivals upon the wall-on ongoing interaction with paint where tags are modified and “fixed”, gives each side’s writer the ability to improvise as the “conflict” piece progresses-the goal is to take what has been changed and add your piece with the assumption that it is the final say. A certain vision has to come into play to take words and symbols that are already placed, and decide in the moment the most impactful alteration-they are creating for an audience and therefore customize what they make in order to have the most significance to those viewing it-whether it is other guys from their group or their enemies.
The hood is transformed into the gallery in constant transition—the creations do not remain stagnant but expire quickly—often within a few days they are modified by other writers, buffed by the city, or painted over by residents. Despite this very fast alteration or removal, this does not prevent Nation writers from persisting in their efforts, often in the same locations. There is a degree of irrationality and stubborn artistry at work when they persist in tagging at great physical, legal, and financial risk to themselves; and as artists they go truly unappreciated in their time. Many may be driven by a strong sense of spite; as there is so much resistance from others it fosters a competitive, aggressive drive to defy their detractors. There is the allure of exciting conflict and the insatiability of ego that entices them to participate in this push and pull over public surfaces; and this play of adornment and removal can continue for weeks or months at a time. There is an understanding of temporality which often drives the writers to add their “last say” as quickly as possible—so that their rivals have the opportunity to view it before it is removed.

They combine elements and forge results which reflect their “artistic” vision—often not even realizing that it is art themselves. It becomes “sick” to them because they turned what they envisioned and practiced into a piece of the “gallery” in their neighborhoods—for them it is art in an everyday sense because it is considered so far removed from mainstream notions of what is “art”-it becomes a form that is relevant and exclusive to their neighborhood—wherein they are fulfilling their part as a component of their Nation’s lineage.
Art, Method, and Adaptation: Changes in Nation Graffiti Over Time “Old School vs. New School”

Many present day Chicago Nations have existed in some form since the 1960’s or 1970’s-and writing graffiti has been a decades old cultural practice among many of them. From the 1960s through the early 1990’s these youth groups would create large, elaborate murals that were composed with the idea that they could be protected and preserved over weeks or months—therefore justifying the effort and resources that they required. Creating a “master wall” in one’s hood was a way to both create and represent group identity in an enduring and impactful way. While the Nation itself was the collective and “umbrella”; they were typically comprised of different sections, also known as decks, clubs, or sets. Each set had its own unique identity within the larger identity; and each set could potentially have its own Master mural. Nation specific colors were used and complex emblems and characters were crafted as a way to demonstrate pride, showcase artistic ability, and as a competitive display. Section specific identity would also be exhibited as another way to distinguish themselves from the greater collective. There was often tribute paid to fallen brothers and sisters in the form of memorials—an immortalization of the slain as a focal point for collective mourning and remembrance. Enemy symbols were inverted and sacred icons broken; a method of negation through symbolic violence. The names of the rival deceased were also inscribed as a way to glorify what were considered collective victories while simultaneously mocking the memories of the “weak” who had fallen in combat...
against them. Master murals were in a sense a way to create an ongoing record of the history, values, and politics of the Nation using artistic imagery.

The methodology of creating the walls was often based on collective effort; it was common for several members to plan out a wall so that each member had a specific responsibility and role within its creation in order to create the most visually impressive piece possible. Nation colors were utilized to create large, modified old English or square lettering-and highly detailed Nation emblems and “master” characters. Members would still write an abundance of smaller tags using markers and spraypaint, but ultimately they all pointed towards the Master mural as the best visual representation of the set’s existence and its greater Nation identity. As these murals represented the collective notion of what these groups valued, they became priority targets for rival groups. These highly competitive murals would often lead to “missions” that were carried out in rival neighborhoods in efforts to either incite violent confrontations, or failing that, leave evidence of their passing by painting over existing Master murals. Protecting and fixing murals became incorporated into the “agenda” as far as what was expected of Nation members, and public locations were designated that were ideal for protecting the murals from rivals who would attempt to paint over them or hit them with paint balloons.
“Old School” Milwaukee Kings’ graffiti piece near Huron/Noble st. (Source: “King of all Kings” via Flickr.com)
“Old School” Insane Spanish Cobras’ graffiti wall. (Source: “Lil Man C” via Flickr.com)
“Old School” Almighty Latin Eagles’ graffiti at Gill Park. (Source: “Grey E” via Flickr.com)
“Old School” Insane Unknowns' graffiti from their Hirsch/Karlov section (Source: “Old School Ghost” via Flickr.com)

“Old School” Almighty Simon City Royals’ graffiti from their Southport/Fullerton section. (Source: “Mr Stooge” via Facebook.com)
“Old School” Insane Gangster Satan Disciples’ graffiti from their 18th/Oakley section. (Source: “Lil Man C” via Facebook.com)

The style, methodology, and approach to writing Nation graffiti drastically transformed in Chicago in recent decades, as younger generations of writers adapted to changes in greater community attitudes, law enforcement, and technology developments. As violence and drug-dealing were often associated with Nations, and many communities were enduring nationally high homicide rates—there was less tolerance for the blatant Nation murals that were present in many of these areas. The elaborate and highly decorated pieces became targeted by religious organizations, community activists, and the Chicago Dept. of Streets and Sanitation for rapid paint overs. It became less feasible for Nations to create elaborate murals
that would be defended and fixed over several weeks or months; but because these groups still had to respond by hand; larger graffiti walls were still going up in many neighborhoods that received less attention by alderman and developers. The most dramatic policy shift would be enacted in 1993, when Mayor Daley commissioned the Graffiti Blasters program through the Dept. of Streets and Sanitation; putting dedicated teams to work who would be utilizing trucks containing highly pressurized baking soda and paint. In addition, a spraypaint ban was put into place within city limits, and penalties for graffiti were drastically increased - in some cases resulting in felony charges. As Nations or “gangs” were considered highly threatening, by extension their graffiti became the focal point of these initiatives. Calls to 311 for graffiti reports that indicated they were “gang” related would result in priority removal, as they were considered to be representative of a more insidious criminal element at work. Nation graffiti was seen as preceding and facilitating violence in these areas, so police would host resident workshops to educate citizens about Nation graffiti so that they could respond in kind to this priority initiative. Graffiti removal in the late 90s and 2000’s became special priorities in communities who desired to increase gentrification. Aldermen and developers knew that in order to create belief in an area as being “up and coming” they would have to put pressure on the city to remove graffiti, especially nation graffiti; in order to conceal or reduce the impression that Nations had presence there.
"Mayor Daley's Graffiti Blasters" graffiti removal in progress. (Source: "Chicago's Cold War" via Flickr.com)
These city and community response strategies did not eliminate the practice of writing Nation graffiti, but they did transform it in several ways. It became unfeasible for sets to find, steal, or buy large quantities of paint and devote hours of time on murals that would be removed by graffiti blasters within a couple of days; for this primary reason the traditional Nation murals became publically obsolete, although they would still be created within abandoned houses and in the basements of Nation members; locations where they would not be quickly removed. While this
did not wholly eliminate the community aspect of multiple members meeting to work on a massive graffiti piece, it did change the context; therefore eliminating the competitive public aspect of Nation master mural creation that existed between different Nation sets, both within the same Nation and between rivals. There was also no longer a public “hood centerpiece” banner that would be a “sacred” unifying focal point that required protection, now only existing in private locations for group reflection and reverence only.

Insane C-Note’s basement graffiti. (Source: “Chicago’s Cold War” via Flickr.com)
Another change that occurred was that due to the reality that Nation graffiti was despised the most and therefore by extension its creators, those sets that continued to tag consistently became higher priority targets for law enforcement, and were more likely to draw the ire of residents, especially if most of the tagging occurred in their own hoods. Those sets who had what they considered “higher priorities” and wanted less negative attention from both police and cooperating neighborhood organizations (such as Blockwatch) would more or less discourage or ban tagging by younger members, especially in their own neighborhoods. The idea
was that even if the graffiti only lasted a few days, it was still a visual representation that they existed; it brazenly announced their presence and attracted in many cases unwanted attention; for some it became less viable when viewed practically from a “cost/benefit” standpoint.

For many shorties the cost of being caught up tagging by police and potentially charged with a felony, in addition to it being more difficult to procure spraypaint-has led many Nation younger Nation members to change their views and approach to writing graffiti. The increased use of police cameras in many neighborhoods, as well as business surveillance in general-has led them to adopt this clandestine approach, hooded and under cover of darkness. Instead of creating elaborate, multi-colored murals-they practice a more “hit and run” approach; tagging quickly and as efficiently as possible, often sacrificing the use of multiple colors, layering, and technique. This approach emphasizes the communicative aspect and devalues the artist endeavor, although in some cases writers still cultivate a unique, practiced style-the resulting characters are less complex and coordinated. This newer reactive methodology has lead to less emphasis on practicing and cultivating their style-as the graffiti itself is viewed as being more temporary and therefore often not viewed as worth the effort-but it has also changed how the members themselves view tagging. While it has persisted within many Nation sets as an aspect of how they communicate and build their culture, there are many members who view it with disdain-either from the perspective that it “ruins the hood” because it “looks bad” as less effort has gone into the
presentation, or because it is viewed as being a weak alternative to “real bangin” which they feel consists of fighting and shooting. A common slogan that has emerged among younger members is “stop taggin, start bangin”; ironically, this is often tagged as a response to rival tags that go up in their neighborhoods. In a way; the stricter methods of social control that have been put in place against the Nations has led to the members themselves adapting, but often not giving credit to the greater social forces pushing this change, often citing “reckless shorties” or not wanting to be labeled as “tagbangers”; which is a derogatory term used by Nation members to describe sets or individuals who “just tag” and don’t back it up by “really being out there”.

There is an additional tension that occurs between the younger generation and the older ones; an alienation that has occurred as a result of these social and cultural changes. The older generation remembers their own youth and the “glory days” when “it was more real” and the Master murals were created with care. Many of them still have photographs of their old walls, and they have become historic representations of their youth; created with friends who may be dead or in prison. Some of them might only see the aesthetic differences between then and now, and may even still live in the old neighborhood. They see many tags going up that they feel are simplistic and “sloppy”, feeling that they are nothing compared to their time. They might view the younger generations’ efforts as “laughable”, or even disrespectful to the heritage that they feel that they were part of creating. There may not be a full appreciation for the shift in the laws and suppression efforts that
has strongly influenced these changes in style and presentation. This generational rift can manifest itself in a myriad of ways, from disdainful rejection of “the new school” from a distance, to an attempted mentorship to try to instill better style, technique, and historic appreciation-or even more hostile and direct confrontations over what they view as a disrespectful portrayal of Nation identity, either via the internet or physically in the neighborhood.

Despite this “new” climate and cultural shift in the use of graffiti, there are still many sets and members who view graffiti as an important part of what it means to be in a Nation-and they persist in creating it despite both external social consequences and the often negative perceptions within Nation culture itself. Many older members briefly “come out of retirement” in order to make graffiti pieces in their old neighborhoods, perhaps trying to recapture the excitement of their youth and “show the shorties how it’s done”-it tells the community that the old guard is still there and still watching. For younger members, they might view graffiti as a way to emulate older members, as well as exhibit a “cool recklessness” by trying to show that they are not afraid of the possible legal consequences or encounters with rivals while “out in the territory”-that for them it is still valuable to put their Nation on a wall for everyone in their world to see, even if for only a brief duration of time.

Over time; these same symbols might take on new meanings as old interpretations no longer serve the exigencies of the times; and there is a “layering” of meaning that becomes part of their shared legacy and history. While some
symbols become less important and may become obsolete (or only represent a certain “era”), others gain prominence and are more heavily emphasized. Some symbols that were formerly used as a shared “alliance” symbol between Nations become associated with rivals over time, and what was once cherished becomes a symbol of disdain (pitchforks). Symbols, especially “masters” can also go through era “makeovers” and be renewed with an updated style.
VI: Nation Graffiti as a Unique Method of Communication and Expression of Nation “Language”

Nation graffiti utilizes a highly complex system of letters, words, and symbols in order to communicate a message that can only be understood by those with enough cultural access and knowledge to decipher it. There are varied nuances which will impact how the message is read and interpreted. Over time each Nation’s system of symbols has become incorporated into more or less a “universal” Chicago street language—in order for rival Nations in distinctly separate neighborhoods can communicate using this medium, there has developed somewhat of a shared standard as to how to write and position the words and symbols in a way that allows it to be understood. That isn’t to say that the entire “message” will be known by every Nation member all across the city, but there is a basic foundation that exists that can give one the “gist” of what is being said, even if someone doesn’t understand all of the particulars.

Nation graffiti is typically composed of the following characteristics: one’s own Nation symbols, one’s specific set identity, rival symbols presented in an altered way, reverence for one’s own dead, mocking a rival Nation’s dead, and invitations to conflict. While all of these elements are not always intact, there is usually some combination or element of these characteristics. Deciphering Nation graffiti requires an understanding of each Nation’s unique symbols, set identities, and shared “street” terminology. Also, in order to understand meaning in a relevant, up-to-date way there must be a certain level of access to the politics and history.
“behind” the graffiti itself in order to make sense of it in its current context. The language of graffiti is not static, and each region of Chicago has its own “dialects” which require insight into who is active in those hoods. In certain neighborhoods, older sets might “fade away”, rendering their symbols obsolete; and as new ones emerge they might introduce symbols that need to be “taught” as they establish themselves.

For those who understand and write Nation graffiti, every detail is considered for the presentation. While the writer can be praised or shamed based on the style and skill of the lettering and characters, this is secondary to a more important task of how the letters and characters are arranged and placed. The spelling of certain words will be altered to reflect the local sentiments about both rival and allied groups, and care must be taken in order to present one’s one Nation in a way that does not imply negligence or ignorance. Words and abbreviations that are commonly understood by the larger culture as having a certain meaning might be appropriated and used in a different way within this context. For example, the practice of flipping letters upside down, backwards, or omitting certain letters and replacing them with others might be viewed by an outsider as indicative of lack of education or a meaningless display of rebellion against normative grammar, but there is purpose and meaning behind this for those who understand the local politics and the code that accompanies it.
Nation graffiti pieces are typically comprised of variations of these forms of symbolic animosity towards enemy Nations, arranged in a complex, layered way; each piece having its own deliberate significance. There are a few methods that Nations use to demonstrate animosity and disrespect towards rival Nations through tagging, as follows: “Flipping” is a common practice among Nation writers, which is a way of writing letters that are the “main” (primary, or first) letters of their rival Nations or rival Nation alliances either in reverse or upside down. Examples of “main” letters are as follows: Insane Spanish Cobras’ main letters would be “ISC” or just “SC”. This form of disrespect or “dissing” requires insight into the local Nation politics in order to be able to decipher who is targeted by the “flipping”, as there are multiple Nations who may use the same starting or “main” letters. There is no difference of meaning between a letter being written upside down or in reverse, as it conveys the same animosity for the collective behind what the are known locally to represent. “Flipping” is also commonly known as “dipping”, and it doesn’t only apply to the treatment of rival Nation “main letters” but also their symbols. Rival symbols are often aligned in a row below one’s own “correctly” placed Nation symbol, as another way of symbolically showing their lower status. Letters might also be replaced with symbols that look similar to the letters that they are replacing, utilizing either one’s correctly placed symbol, or the dipped version of an enemy icon. There may be multiple “disses” attached to the same letters and symbols, not only as a way to “compound” the insult, but to creatively demonstrate the ways that the writer can malign his enemies. “Breaking” is the practice of putting a “crack line” through rival main letters and their symbols. Adding a “K” to a rival Nation letters
and symbols signifies “killer”, meaning that they are presenting themselves as “killers” of those rival Nations; which can be read as a threat in seeking their destruction as a whole without exception. Words themselves are deliberately mis-spelled in order to both insult and threaten rivals, while avoiding the “blanking” one’s own. Nation members refer to the practice of a rival adding a “K” to their own Nation main letters and symbols as “blanking”, to avoid saying “killer” with their own Nation. For example, a Spanish Cobra might write “Block” as “Blokk” to both insult Latin Kings (double K= King killers) while avoiding blanking one’s own Nation (CK=Cobra killer).

Nation graffiti is typically used to threaten an entire rival group universally, or to a lesser extent; specific local sets.
Nation graffiti found on the La Raza 50th/Hoyne side of the train tracks serving as the borderline between their claimed hood and the hood of the Satan Disciples of 50th/Oakley. In this example they are claiming to be killers of both the street/set specific Oakley SDs and Satan Disciples in general. They also incorporate a dipped Disciples’ pitchfork, which would apply as a “dis” to any Disciple Nation that uses the pitchfork, including the SDs. They doubled up on the “K” in Oakley in order to say “King killers”. The flipped “A” is meant to convey disrespect to all “Almighty” nations, including their rivals the Ambrose, also an “A”. While this writer did not specifically write “La Raza” or one of their symbols and we cannot be sure, by understanding the significance of location, local politics, and the ability to read and interpret how this was written, by process of eliminating which Nations would not have written this based on which symbols and letters were dipped, we are better equipped to make a stronger read on which Nation this writer hailed from. (Source: “Chicago's Cold War” via Flickr.com)

Nation graffiti is also used to send specific threat messages to individual members in rival groups articulating feelings about a certain perceived offense; usually indicating that there is going to be retaliation. The writer might also tag gloating messages about a deceased enemy member by their “hood name”, whether his own
Nation set was responsible or not. Nation members refer to each other by their nicknames or their “hood names” not their legal names. These names may either be given or chosen based on some quality deemed as noteworthy, favorable, or humorous as an “inside joke” but within Chicago Nation culture it is universal that the Nation general identity name’s first letter is attached to the end, or in some cases; the entire word is attached to the front. As examples: an Imperial Gangster might be named “Spookky G”, and a Spanish Cobra “Lil Green C”; while a Latin King might be “King Gordo” and a Traveler Vice Lord “Lord Sin”. If a rival is deceased, typically the language used is standardized as “Rots”(or Rotz/Rottz) and “Burns” (or Burnz)-or abbreviated as “R.I.H” or “B.I.H” (Rots in Hell/Burns in Hell), obviously indicating a negative condition in death.
A Nation tag mocking a Maniac Latin Disciple named “Torta” who was shot by opposition and was in a coma in the hospital, hence “Die Slow”. This message was clearly meant for anyone in the area who knows Torta and will see it. There is no way to tell which Nation was responsible for this tag, but it was written in the hood claimed by the Mobile/Dickens MLDs, aka “Death Trap Pimps”. The comment below suggests that a local rival Nation the Milwaukee Kings might have written this. The commentator claims the identity of a 4 Corner Hustler from Lockwood/Altgeld, another Nation set in close proximity to this area. His simple suggestion that a Milwaukee King ‘maybe’ wrote this might just be a guess because of their relative location to each other, or perhaps it comes from him hearing that the MKs were responsible for shooting Torta, and therefore assumed that one of them wrote it.

(Source: “Chicago’s Cold War” via Flickr.com)
This message will continue to be expressed long after a rival’s death, as a reminder continuously re-inscribed by younger generations of the set. If a rival is still alive, the language will usually be slightly altered but similar “Soon to Rot” and “Soon to Burn” often expressing that his/her end is coming in the near future.
This is an interesting message written by a Satan’s Disciple from the 24th/Rockwell set: while “Frankkie” and “Murder” are rival Nation members from local rivals the Latin Kings sets of 21st/California and 25th/California(indicated by the “25K” and “21CalKK” following their names), John Wilson seems to refer to someone who is not yet deceased who was being taken to the County, perhaps the same John Wilson who murdered 14 year old Kelli O’Laughlin in Indian Head Park. (Source: “Chicago’s Cold War” via Flickr.com)

Nation members often view their own symbols as powerful icons representing their collective history and sacrifices; a symbol that encapsulates the “blood, sweat, and tears” that they and their “brothers and sisters” have shed for their Nation, and by extension for themselves. They often hold their own Nation symbols in reverence, even resembling in some ways a form of spiritual and religious devotion. While these “gangbangers” are often portrayed simplistically as one dimensional characters wholly consumed, (both rabid and mechanical) with their “gang” affiliations; they often demonstrate that they simultaneously participate in multiple roles or identities that on the surface might appear to be contradictory. These different roles and ethos’ might not be easily reconciled, and within the “gangbanger boogeyman” there may be significant cognitive dissonance at work. In this process of sorting through their own socialization and the requirements of their environments, they may incorporate aspects of these different roles and discard others, resulting in a wholly unique “hood identity” that is in constant transition. As much as these Nations have helped to shape their local communities, the Nations themselves have been simultaneously shaped and influenced by local religious heritage and practices: they have not developed in an urban “crime vacuum”. As a result, these Nations have appropriated many symbols and language from the greater community dialogue, redefining and modifying them to suite their vision.
Through the graffiti the Nations then manifest these symbols on the walls, once again returning them to the community to become part of the greater discussion, now with altered meanings.

Significance has been inscribed into these symbols that could be referred to as “sacred” in a sense that is not unlike how religious iconography is utilized. Further demonstration of this parallel or “merge” is the appropriation and re-definition of traditional religious symbolism, concepts, and characters: such as the Christian cross, the star of David, the star and crescent moon, and figures such as Bishops, Angels, Devils, and Saints. Many of these Nations have incorporated symbols and slogans that infuse the religious affiliations and nationalism that is valued in the larger community, so by extension these socialized values become the tools and framework from within these youths have built this other layer of Nation identity. As this Nation identity is passed down through generations, in many instances the original context and meaning behind why these symbols were adopted is lost; and the symbols themselves are effectively transformed by their use as part of this hood “drama” that has eclipsed their origins.

Nation participants reconcile their own religious/spiritual commitments to their Nation identities; resulting in a hybrid “street spirituality”; wherein they can see themselves simultaneously as both a “banger” and “religious/spiritual”, as “Christian” and “Latin King” for example. While there are varying and complex degrees of religious or spiritual identification within Nations; local religious
practices often influence the Nation iconography and language used both in Nation
literature and in the graffiti, regardless of individual “beliefs” or feelings on the
validity of religion. In this sense the Nation identity can allow religious identity (or
lack thereof) to be held simultaneously to one’s own Nation affiliation, but one is
still expected to “perform” one’s Nation role when needed.

As another example of this in practice, the Black P. Stone Nation are known
to utilize the star and crescent moon, most commonly associated as symbols of
Islam; and their name itself is rendered from the “original” Black Stone of the Kaaba
in Mecca. Despite this, many of their members in Chicago identify as Christian as far
as their religious identities. Perhaps this indicates that their Nation identities serve
what they view as the requirements of the “here and now” street reality, and their
religious identities accommodates their transition to “the hereafter”. That is not to
say that those who identify as Christian and a Black Stone do not experience
cognitive dissonance, but many members are able to reconcile that the use of
symbols and terms that have Islamic origin can be cherished as part of their “hood”
identity, while still adhering to what they consider their “Christian identity”. One
Black Stone “Phil Moe” offered this perspective:

“A lot of Stones I knew/know were/are Christian, including myself. Mainly because most
black households seem to be some form of Christianity or Baptist. There was conflict at times
obviously... God/Allah for example. Some of us entertained becoming Muslims, including
myself but I didn’t care for Farrakhan and couldn’t give up swine at the time lol. I just honored
what I liked about both religions and disregarded what I didn't like about either. There are
similarities between the two as both wants you to be both a strong man and provider for your
family. Brothers who didn't have a religious background before plugging or got real heavy
into being a Stone, ended up becoming Muslims after getting older and moving on from gang
banging it seemed. Conflict...yes....but manageable."-Field Notes Interview
“Hood memorials” are often constructed for fallen Nation members. While the cause of death is often homicide, a memorial is usually built regardless of the cause. Hood memorials are generally created in the vicinity of where a Nation member was killed, or failing that; in a concealed location that can be protected. If a member dies far from his/her hood, the memorial might be put up on their set corner. A hood memorial generally consists of a “tribute altar”, featuring send off gifts of flowers, candles, childhood toys/stuffed animals, favorite drinks, cigarettes and blunts, and even a shirt or cap with some significance to the Nation set, such as appropriate colors or symbols. Graffiti and smaller tags are often left, even on a posterboard, that allows mourners to leave thoughts and tributes. These memorials simultaneously serve multiple purposes. In addition to mourning a fallen brother
and sister, there is a celebratory aspect of one’s life and exploits, often accompanied by drinking and drugs. These locations also become a way to bring together Nation members from other sets in order to pay tribute, catch up, and potentially plan revenge. These gatherings become dramatic occasions, further amplified by intoxication. They can become especially volatile and result in further violence if rivals killed the person who they are mourning. These memorials are considered “sacred” and more concern is given to their maintenance and protection.
"OC D' Memorial, an Insane Gangster Satan Disciple from their Huron/Elizabeth section. (Source: "Chicago's Cold War" via Flickr.com)
Insane Gangster Satan Disciples memorial for “Josh D” from their Huron/Ashland section. (Source: “Chicago's Cold War” via Flickr.com)
Insane Gangster Satan Disciples’ memorial tribute for “Gotti D” from their Ohio/Marshfield section. (Source: “Chicago’s Cold War” via Flickr.com)
Almighty Imperial Gangsters’ memorial for “Choco G” from their Belden/Monitor section. (Source: “Chicago’s Cold War” via Flickr.com)
Regardless of the circumstances around a Nation members death, they are automatically “angels” in “God’s care”, “resting in peace/paradise”. There seems to be a generally held view that all members of one’s Nation are destined for heaven, to be “liberated” from this “hood life”; a commonly occurring theme in memorial graffiti. Furthermore; as fellow Nation members are killed as part of their “service”, there seems to be a general projection of this notion of “transcendence”, “ascension” as a “heavenly angel” within the language what goes up on the walls and in the hood memorials that are created. There is an assumption of automatic absolution; it
doesn’t matter how they lived, but because of their Nation affiliation they are “cleansed and forgiven”. Often this notion of being “real” is connected to this idea of spiritual ascension; heaven being granted to those who lived according to the street code set forth by the Nation, not any “legitimate” religious doctrine. And of course, in terms of the streets and how one presents their own group to others, God always favors one’s own Nation; simultaneously condemning one’s enemies to hellfire.

While one’s one Nation symbols are cherished and held in reverence; the symbols of rivals are disdained and modified in an obligatory fashion to show this rejection of the “other” when they are written out. These designations are used as a way to essentialize one’s own group and the rival “others” in ways that further parallel religious dichotomies of “saved” vs. “damned” in that one’s own Nation (and especially one’s own set/hood) is always the “correct” association, and rivals are always “incorrect”. While one’s own Nation members “Rest in Paradise”, those of rivals always “Rot in Piss”, and BIH/RIH (Burn in Hell/Rot in Hell). While some sets are specifically called out in the graffiti, there are generally no exceptions when disrespect is shown to a rival: it is “all or none”, and universally includes everyone within those designations. The enemy in this way becomes projected as uniform and “faceless”, it becomes conceived of as single entities, not allowing for contradictory exceptionalism; at least in terms of how the Nation presents its rivals to others.

That isn’t to say that there is not a complex “grey scale” of attitudes and feelings towards rivals by the individual participants; and as part of the Nation role,
one often finds one bracketing one’s own experiences and feelings when it comes to
the presentation of the group identity and disposition. As an example, an Insane
Ashland Viking who was close friends with an Almighty Harrison Gent when they
were “shorties in grade school” prior to their gravitating towards different rival
Nations, might hold each other in higher regard on a personal level, and even spare
each other’s lives on a one on one basis, would suppress this when they are with
their own sets. It is not as if the Ashland Viking would tag “Harrison Gent killa
(except for Weazil)” because this would convey what would be viewed as weak
compassion, and put one out of favor with one’s own group. So while one might
publically say that a rival “burns in hell” in a celebratory way, one might privately
shed tears and pray for his soul.

Nation symbols possess localized symbolic power that transcends their
origins; as over time the behaviors and experiences associated with those images
become inseparable from them. Violent interactions have been a re-occurring facet
of Nation culture, resulting in many of its participants (and many non-participants,
as well) becoming imprisoned, disabled, or killed. The graffiti can thus act as a
method to further re-inscribe and condition how one views the “others” based on
these arbitrary distinctions, as they become embodied over and over again as these
“proxy” stand in symbols and master figures, where symbolic violence is acted out
upon them. While this type of violence is merely an act, as it occurs over and over
through its written articulation, it contributes to the contextualized consciousness
of conflict that may allow for an easier transition from “saying to doing”. That is not
to say that Nation graffiti in the strictest sense “causes” the Nation violence, but it becomes a way that the violent absolutism fostered by the Nation continuously manifests itself as a form of community indoctrination.

These experiences and the awareness of these common outcomes have become part of the greater neighborhood perception of these Nations. By extension; Nation symbols become closely associated with violence in a general sense, and therefore writing them as graffiti has a stronger impact on those who view and understand them. For many locals in these neighborhoods; the symbols are not merely “teen vandalism” but a representation and signature of violent entities (based on precedent). For many residents; these symbols can inspire fear and/or anger; as they know that Nation members who are “active” in their neighborhood might be capable of reproducing the violence that is part of their reputation, which often spills over to non-affiliates who suffer as “collateral damage”. Although Nations originally may have adopted symbols of locally cherished religious identities; over time for many of the residents these symbols re-created as graffiti come to represent entities that “profane” what they believe the symbols are “supposed” to represent.
II: Nation Graffiti as a Method of Creating, Defining and Re-Inscribing Identities:

Through the use of symbols Nation members create their own identity, solidify the collective using this shared symbolism, and use it to help create distinction. Nation graffiti serves as a method to create and project these symbols that have been instilled with localized significance for the youth collective who devised them. Graffiti is a way to project the collective identity using symbols that allows them to represent themselves by proxy without being physically present. These symbols chosen to represent the collective are simultaneously “redefined” even as they help define the individuals. While choosing which symbols to use is often a more or less formal process when the Nation is formed and throughout its development, there is a more informal assignment of meaning by individual Nation participants who shape these symbols to have personalized value for them. These symbols come to represent how the Nation members want to see themselves and present themselves to others.

By participating in Nation culture; members’ identities become transformed in the urban context of “the hood” through these arbitrary constructs; the collective devises the identity, but the individual in turn becomes the identity; powerfully eclipsing other social categories and roles. Those who participate are in essence transformed into the identity represented by these symbols; they become what they
have chosen to identify themselves with, and begin to refer to themselves as their
Nation “master” symbols. Over time the group is conceptualized by that identity; the
individual participants become absorbed within this greater collective construct;
and they become what they portray in the minds of others. One does not merely
“participate” as an Imperial Gangster or Latin King, one “is” an Imperial Gangster or
Latin King; and those who are in any way connected with Nation culture view each
other through the lens of Nation culture as these constructs. These constructs are so
pervasive and embedded in many neighborhoods that they become “real” and in
many instances are not examined beyond the legacies of “otherness”; and what
begins as an arbitrary construct becomes infused with real emotions and
experiences that re-inscribes these conflicts perpetually. When a Nation becomes
interwined with the experiences of the local neighborhood and with certain
families; the King who is shot is also the son, friend, brother, and father; but it is the
“Kingness” that is emphasized; but as the precedent is established; the Nation
becomes the platform where real feelings of grief and revenge can be acted out in a
similar response. It is through these qualifiers that “friends or foes” become real;
one is not shooting a young man similarly positioned in society but a “King” or a
“Gangster”; constructs that tragically dehumanize both the shooters and their
targets.

Each Nation typically has multiple symbols that they use at any given time;
and each symbol generally has certain “values” or qualities that the Nation deems
valuable which they choose to embody what it means to be a member. While there is
usually a formalized body of Literature or "Lit" that explains the various meanings of the symbols; there are varying degrees of understanding of Lit by participants. The actual attributes assigned to the symbols are not emphasized in the graffiti, as this knowledge is generally considered exclusive to Nation members or "Nation business", and do not want to expose it to outsiders by writing it publically. The symbols and master characters that are chosen are sometimes meant to convey certain self-evident qualities, or may be presented in a way that challenges our normal assumptions about those symbols. A more obvious example is the use by the Satan Disciples of the devil’s head; which is generally understood to represent evil, sin, power, and rebellion. The Imperial Gangsters, on the other hand-use a “Gangster” version of a pink panther wearing a rounded 7 point crown as their Master. A pink panther is not normally received as being an imposing figure, but the IGs have appropriated it and re-presented it as “angry” with face tattoos, sometimes holding a shotgun. In this way they have personalized its presentation to fit how they in turn want to be perceived.

Nation youths also incorporate external notions of what it is to be a “gangster” which shapes how they see themselves and how they “act out” what it means to be part of a Nation to outsiders. Certain actions and characteristics become associated with Nations as these behaviors serve as vehicles to project this identity to others. This process of Nation “acting” becomes so all-encompassing that it creates a very real world where seemingly arbitrary symbols and behavior codes become extremely important to participants, a framing that dictates how they must
interact with others as part of a Nation, simultaneously conditioning them to see this as a reality that is difficult to compartmentalize and “unlearn” in relation to the individuals’ other social roles. When I say acting here, I do not mean in the sense that they are “faking” this identity, but that part of the role itself requires aggressive posturing and non-verbal projection of the group identity. As aggression and competition are considered inherent aspects of what it means to be in a Nation, there are often outcomes for individual members that reflect our typical perception of “gangbangers”: incarceration, hospitalization, and death by homicide. These outcomes can tend to create in some ways more profound kinships within these Nation groups; wherein their In this sense this Nation role can often eclipse other roles as it serves as host and conduit to more aggressive and emotional aspects In many communities the codes that these Nations have created are so pervasive that it becomes part of the assumed and taken for granted reality for the youth who grow up there; they become socialized and trained to navigate their environments in such a way that even if they are not actively seeking to become “members”; they are still affected to such a degree that they must still conduct themselves with an understanding of Nation culture and the rules of conduct and interaction that are in place.

**VIII: Nation Graffiti as a Method of Defining and Contesting Symbolic Boundaries**
“Formless urbanism follows a different and more efficient logic than that imposed by the formal streets, bridges, and viaducts. In this urbanism, parts of the infrastructure become a kind of real estate vulnerable to the redirection of its original purpose” - (Peixoto 2009: 249).

Chicago neighborhoods have historically been divided symbolically into smaller informal neighborhoods along racial and ethnic lines. While these designations were informal, they were seen as being just as “real”, as crossing a certain street into another ethnic enclave’s designated area was seen in many cases as violating a social taboo and could make oneself a target for ridicule and violence. One’s own section of a neighborhood was seen as being an oasis and a sanctuary for one’s own “kind”. An acute awareness of these informal boundaries was part of the community logic, and “groupness” was seen as valuable when traveling outside of the acceptable demarcations. Youth groups were formed both as a practical tactic of defense and strength in numbers, as well as a way to police one’s own neighborhood to keep out undesirable “others”.

Claiming Space-Symbolically Re-Defining Neighborhoods

It is with this foundation that Nations developed as an even deeper layer of identity, where the already formed neighborhood logic was carried over into how
the Nations conceived of their own need to regulate and "claim" shared neighborhood space as their own. Rather than being strictly racially based as they were initially, Nations over time became "area based", constructs that both defined these informal neighborhood spaces or "hoods", and at the same time became defined by them. The status of one’s hood affects Nation status, as it is also simultaneously affected. The hoods become the space where Nations compete for status, and act out in ways that embed their identities in how these neighborhoods are seen and navigated by others. Nation sections symbolically claim these areas in various ways meant to “represent” their group presence and build their reputation: being physically present in the style associated with their group, word of mouth, internet communication, and the use of graffiti.

Nation youths define their hoods using symbolic boundaries within larger, “official” neighborhood borders as an extension of this process of claiming space. As intersecting streets are used as the set identity and the territory radiates forth from this point; boundaries are often created in the context of where other Nation sets are also positioned. Historically; more clear cut racial and ethnic symbolic boundaries made Nation boundaries easier to determine as far as outlining the claimed space of racially based groups; but as there can be various opposing sets within the same racialized neighborhoods in today's context, the process of fleshing out these symbolic boundaries is more complicated. While at times these designations become well known and stay more or less consistent for years, more
often they are highly contested and in transition. When Nation sets claim territory in proximity to each other, often the other group’s claim serves to “check” their own; and these borders emerge from each side working to regulate each other’s designation. Ironically, while borders are often contested and “pushed on”, there is some degree of shared acknowledgement and acceptance between rival groups that each other’s hoods exist in the first place; and the border is often the arena where this mutual recognition is acted out through conflict. In this way rivals serve to validate each other’s existence, becoming more authentic through these engagements-and rely on each other to willingly participate in this act of disputing the borders that outline their respective claimed space. It is in proximity to these other groups that symbolic boundaries become crucial, and effort is made to continuously declare and define them so that the borders become accepted among both participants and residents as “real”; even as they try to expand and absorb rival hood as their own.

Graffiti is one method that Nations use to define and inscribe symbolic hood boundaries; it is used in association with vocalized boundary claims as a way to physically declare what has been verbally asserted. While the tags themselves might not actually “spell out” the borders, writing the graffiti near or on the borderline is a non-verbal way that Nations acknowledge and inscribe these symbolic demarcations. A shared border is often the site where conflicts between rival nations occur, considered “hotspots” where spontaneous violence can erupt; and so the graffiti is another way that these Nations in close proximity engage each other through acts of physical violence, verbal and non-verbal in-person communication,
and graffiti. When a Nation member writes graffiti on the borderline, it serves the following functions. If it is written on his own side of the border; over time it becomes a reminder about who’s hood that side is; it articulates the claimed hood for both residents and opposition; it says “once you are over here, you are in our land”. For opposition; it is written as both a proclamation about who’s land it is in the form of an implied warning not to enter, and simultaneously, is also an invitation to enter. This might seem to be a contradiction, but the purpose is to incite confrontation in two ways. First, the mere act of deliberately writing one’s nation on the border, even on one’s own “side”-is meant to be viewed by their rival and generate a response; it is a way to say “we are waiting for you”, and its location consciously demonstrates that it is directed at that specific bordering Nation set. Second, typically the bordering rival Nation’s symbols are disrespected, or “dipped”; which both reinforces the relevance of the border as the location where the graffiti is being written and its purpose in provoking a response.

If Nation members break the established symbolic boundary by tagging graffiti in opposition’s land, it takes on new meaning just by virtue of this new location; even if the only spatial difference is the east side of a street instead of the west. The presence of the rival Nation name opposing hood, even without accompanying dis tags; is meant as the deliberate disrespect of existing hood boundaries because it was written in an area that has not been designated as appropriate for it. To the Nation members who might read it and claim that hood, it is a representation of an enemy attempting to impose upon their claimed space; and
Its presence serves as the signature to an “invasive” physical violation of that symbolic border. A tag in rival hood implies that they were not diligent enough in regulating traffic in their land through either the deterrence of presence or the use of force; and can be viewed as a sign of weakness as it implies that the rival Nation members were able to spend enough time in this restricted area that they could put up a tag and not be stopped. As they “invaders” have come and gone, with only the graffiti remaining—it continues to attack the home Nation set’s status as long as it remains.

It is in rival hood that the composition of the tag is more significant: how far across the borderline they are found, the number of tags, the size, the level of detail, and how spread out they are throughout the hood sends a message beyond just what is contained, as it indicates how long rival taggers were able to spend in that area without being stopped; and will be judged as a sign of courage on their part if they were able to casually “deck out” enemy land so seemingly comfortably. The converse of this is if the tags are very small, seem sloppy and rushed, are unfinished, and are located just across the border; as it conveys that the writers were quickly passing through, nervous, or interrupted.

Nation sets are not only assessed if they have allowed enemies to tag in their territory; but the degree of a response on their part, how quickly that happens after the initial rival paint goes up, and the extent of their response. It is generally understood that at some point your hood will be painted by opposition, but if you
are able to quickly “fix” what has been written and building on it with your own symbols and words; it can send a message of diligence, and there may even be a “counter” incursion into the set’s hood responsible for the initial tagging. This is a way that Nation sets can maintain their credibility, “save face” despite having their hood borders violated. This “back and forth” can create a running hood conversation for weeks, and these frequent “missions” can at some point result in physical confrontations; which is considered the natural “ideal” progression by Nation participants and spectators. With this understanding of how graffiti is helps define and inscribe symbolic borders; it must be stated that these borders are necessary to create the arenas where status can be gained by violating them; and “acting out” what it means to be a gangbanger upon this stage. Without some kind of definition or “coded” space, banging becomes disembodied, as the boundaries are an essential part of the criteria for creating difference in order to form distinguished, oppositional groups. It is the status gained from proving superiority in difference that is a primary motivation in Nation culture; as even many of the “reasons” commonly noted for “gangbanging” can be traced back to the status of the group and by extension, the self. While it is true that some Nation participants utilize the boundaried, claimed space as a location to sell drugs and guns (as is commonly portrayed), there are many participants who make money working “legitimate” jobs; and draw status from their individual participation within the group, which is in itself an extension of the hood. The hood as a construct then cannot be separated from the construct of a Nation, and as such the construct of the individual member…the “banger”. In this sense it is less about actually “protecting a hood” as
in the actual physical objects and beings who reside within these arbitrary borders as it is often claimed, but to a significant degree it is about protecting the status that is gained by claiming a hood to begin with; and maintaining the symbolic structure that has been created. While some borders are static and others can often be in flux; in a larger sense the hood is a symbolic construct and can always be redefined if necessary; and in some cases, “the hood” can be geographically moved; not just a matter of a block or two, but across the city. There can be a transfer and “conversion” of a Nation set from one hood to another geographic location in order to create another hood. This migration becomes part of their lineage and lore; and can be spun by opposition as “retreat”, or by the set itself as “expansion” or “greener pastures”; it is a matter of perception based on the circulating stories surrounding these moves.

These “incursions” therefore become part of the insider discourse; where it is not merely the message but the circumstances surrounding where the graffiti have impact, the “essence” of these occurrences that are measured and weighed within the realm of perception and local debate. While Nation culture is often painted as only existing for profit and to expand drug territory; in large part these symbolic territory constructs become the arenas where status is gained and lost; and acquisition of territory by “pushing on borders” serves just as much as to enhance reputation and validate Nation identity as it does to provide actual rational functions like provide additional drug territory and a greater recruitment pool. In many instances these “missions” to cross a border are not planned out with the
purpose and belief of total annihilation of their neighboring enemy, but as an excuse to act out their identities as “bangers” by participating in actions and interactions that are associated with that role.
IX: Nation Graffiti as a Method of Symbolically Claiming Social Space

Nation culture has developed as one way that some urban youths react to the conditions of their world; built within the complex legacy of racial, ethnic, and class segregation in Chicago. As an extension of their understanding of their own limitations of access and the real consequences for violating established social codes governing movement, Nation culture is embedded with an acute sensitivity about one’s feeling of identity and place. Many of these youth groups form as a response to the conflict and status dynamics within an environment of limitations as a collective way for individuals to attempt organize as a source of security and empowerment. Symbolically carving out a “space” outside of their homes is at first an attempt to clarify a designated “safe” area for themselves and those “like them” in a similar social location; a sanctuary within an urban landscape where what race you are identified with or what neighborhood you are from alone can be grounds for harassment and violence. This space is also a realm where the youths struggle amongst themselves, creating status authority, and hierarchy, within which this Nation role becomes an important piece. Simultaneously, this same space can be used as an urban realm where youths organize in order to violate established codes of acceptable movement; and this same neighborhood becomes a launching point for incursions into surrounding neighborhoods where they seek to gain status by imposing themselves and engaging with similarly positioned youths, already considered “different”; and in a sense becoming “invaders”. Many Chicago
neighborhoods bear a historic legacy wherein complex social codes are nested and power dynamics are in motion, within which Nations are an added layer; and the shared social space within neighborhoods is the territory that is clarified and given new meaning as the field where participants exercise their influence.

This phenomenon of designating an area is generally known as “claiming Hood”, but when spoken of by the youths themselves the vernacular might differ—for them it might be just saying “this is our block” or “this is our land”; ultimately the essence of the language used carries with it the projection of dominion over a certain space as designated by the youths themselves. Through the process of building Nations, urban youths have redefined what neighborhoods are in a locally formalized way; creating their own hoods within officially demarcated neighborhoods. In the beginning and at its essence they are empowering themselves, formalizing their own authority, and trying to dominate an area of the city because they choose to do so and believe that it’s possible. They are already out there in this space every day, so the Nation serves as a way to implement structure to an urban landscape where victims and victimizers already exist; but through organizing they are able to categorize and impact these existing dynamics. The Nation can serve as a platform to attack and replace feelings of victimhood with empowerment, and the hood by extension is where this power is demonstrated. In this way claiming hood is an urban construct of projected and improvised social dominion; it is part of a process of creating one’s own authority and re-defining
shared space to serve as a field where this power can be demonstrated. In other words, Kings require kingdoms.

This constructed, improvised youth authority brings with it the question of “where does this authority apply”. When Chicago Nation sets develop, they generally have to come to an agreement about the territory; what is the core of the hood they claim; which is typically two intersecting streets, a park, or school; and the territory radiates from that point, usually covering anywhere from half a block to a mile depending on controlling variables which will be detailed at a later point. This designation of territory might just be a matter of re-defining and labeling an area that they are familiar with, they may have grown up playing there, and view it intuitively as an extension of “home”. In other cases, Nation sets form among newly arriving transplants to an area; and for them claiming hood is a way to personalize a new environment and make it more “their own”; it is a way to assert and empower themselves within a strange new environment where they may be arriving as outsiders; within which the hood and the set itself are intertwined as a form of sanctuary.

Although older participants or their families might own or rent property in the area that they have designated; the space that is claimed is not contingent upon legal ownership, lease, or official community boundaries. It is generally understood that “the hood” applies to what can be considered both “public” and “private” property, but there can be varying degrees of understanding about what qualifies as
accessible and usable by Nation members within their designation of the hood.

Furthermore it is not as if the non-participant residents assent to their own inclusion within this claimed area, they are included by default; and so there can be varying degrees of conflict with residents over what the claim over their property means. It’s not as if Nation members don’t have an understanding of the implications of property ownership and the legal consequences of “invading and occupying” resident homes; and so the designation of territory is mostly symbolic and not an indication of what is actually “used” per se. Claiming space is not contingent upon the actual use of the entirety of the partitioned land, but symbolically designating it, and then communicating and enforcing this designation.

There are three recognized methods of communication in order to convey who is claiming an area: Word of mouth (including internet social networking), physical presence (and accompanying expressive actions associated with Nation culture), and graffiti. Verbally and/or digitally claiming an area brings attention to the specific group making the claim; and it is accessible to a varying degree depending on one’s level of access to where this communication is being circulated. This word of mouth communication explains a certain type of physical presence in an area; it gives meaning and articulates identity to certain individuals “hanging out” on a corner, “marching it” down the block, or making multiple loops down the same blocks in “rammers”. The message that a certain area is claimed brings with it an accompanying articulation of the collective identity of those making the claim; and it is through participation and validation by others that the group and their
designation of territory becomes “real”; as they are acting out to a comprehending audience. This connection between the word of mouth articulation of presence and the actual physical presence in the territory must also be pieced together through understanding the physical characteristics, habits, and posturing of what makes a Nation member (which is often not so clear). Positioned within this paradigm, graffiti can play a significant role in demonstrating both the physical and verbal claims on this designated social space. Graffiti thus can serve as the unifying field between physical presence and word of mouth-as it combines elements of both. While each tagged piece will only exist temporarily, it is a “tangible” way to claim an area, and is a physical articulation of the identity of who is claiming it. In this way the graffiti is both physically present and communicative; it is the flag that is flown from the fortress.

In Chicago, graffiti does not occur in a disembodied state, but based on its use-can become “larger” than its actual surface existence and size, as it reflects and leads us to a web of interactions that we assume is taking place in the sphere surrounding where it occurs. Graffiti can have strong impact on viewers because it occurs outside of what is commonly considered “valid” and acceptable use of shared neighborhood space; it represents a clandestine presence that disregards collective views of how objects and surfaces within a certain space should be treated. The use of graffiti creates a temporary statement of presence in an area and over time through a saturating effect, can become considered just another aspect of the neighborhood character.
Graffiti is one method of how urban individuals “act out” what it means to be in a Nation. There is a dramatized role of what it means to participate in this culture, and being in a Nation might only be one of several “parts” that an urban participant plays. It is a projection of self which can encompass how one speaks (and types), uses body language, and dresses within the context of certain scenarios of social interaction. The degree to which one participates might depend on individualized factors affecting the “depth” of how one internalizes and manifests what it means to be in a Nation. For some it might be a casual, surface level engagement that is trendy and recognized as temporary, for others; it might be a more devout involvement similar to how one might conceive of a religious commitment. The acting out of Nation being is often only one layer of several “masks” that may be intertwined to varying degrees, but still leads to a more complex and nuanced social navigation based on these “categories of self”. For example one urban youth might simultaneously fulfill the functions of what it means to them to be a son, brother, friend, student, employee, Spanish Cobra from Central Park/Dickens, and Christian. When in church, this individual might emphasize what it means to be a participant in that environment, to be quiet, to sit, stand, and kneel-to receive communion, to respond appropriately to priest commands, to make the sign of the cross, etc. Most likely this youth will de-emphasize the “Spanish Cobra” in this environment. This same youth within the confines of the “claimed space” will manifest what it means to be a Spanish Cobra when he is with other Nation participants—a certain swagger, scoping passing cars, throwing up signs while walking along the curb, speaking loudly, putting his chest out, and perhaps at some point, tagging a viaduct. This
switching of masks or “code switching” must be understood, because it humanizes the Nation member beyond simply a monochromatic “gangbanger” and positions him as someone who, like the rest of us, attempts to switch codes according to the interpreted requirements of each environment. That isn’t to say that he is able to switch codes effectively, or even choose to.

Beyond the actual message conveyed, the actual act of writing the graffiti sends its own message as an aspect of claiming space. It is one thing to “claim” something, but the graffiti is one way that space is “used” in the sense that it is acted upon in a publically viewable area that is impacted and altered by the Nation members. Because physical aspects of the environment are affected—tagging a surface is a form of appropriation; it is a way to re-present the environment through their own symbolic filter. The act of writing the graffiti represents a disregard for the greater collective community’s own stake and interaction within this space. In this way tagging graffiti is a way that Nation members undermine typical notions of “civic responsibility”; as well as legal use of public and private property. Graffiti used over time can convey an enduring collective presence beyond the specific individuals tagging; use of re-occurring symbols and themes saturates and characterizes a claimed hood, it becomes another defining aesthetic layer that becomes part of the local heritage.

That is not to say that graffiti is “necessary” or considered important by all Nation sets or members, but if it is used, it links the environment to the actual group
presence “beyond” the surface appearance of the tags. The re-occurrence of graffiti within claimed space over time helps inscribe the identity of the group in an area, serving to re-enforce and make the designation of this space more real to both the writers and the viewers. Beyond the graffiti a presence is implied; there is an assumed physicality and watchfulness behind it that gives it the power to impress upon the viewer a sense that when they are in this public space in proximity to the graffiti that they may be being watched, and a different set of rules of behavior and interaction might be implied, especially in terms of how they respond and interact with the graffiti itself. The graffiti serves as a “proxy” projection of group presence in this way, where Nation members might not always be physically present, the graffiti can serve as a present reminder of their existence and claim over a hood.

For neighborhood outsiders passing through an area; graffiti in an area has traditionally been portrayed as being associated with “dangerous”, blighted urban areas; and beyond its role within a Nation context, it carries with it this inherent set of “urban” stereotypical associations. There is an added layer of assumptions if the viewer knows at the very least that the graffiti is “gang” (Nation) oriented, and the understanding of the watchfulness behind it might seem more insidious depending on the orientation of the viewer; there can be degrees of fear of “conjuring” the source and feeling the consequences of invading “marked” territory if they are not familiar with the area, and this sense of “outsiderness” can become more pronounced, it can bring forth tension about what it means to be in certain neighborhoods where one is not recognized, or “does not belong”, especially if they
happen to possess physical characteristics or fall into a class alignment that are
different then most of the residents they see. In this way the graffiti can heighten
and dramatize an orientation already imbedded with an understanding of violating
unspoken racial, ethnic, or class “rules” about navigating the urban landscape in
Chicago; especially a landscape where Nations are believed to be present. The
saturation of graffiti in an area can work in this way in deterring or reducing the
presence of neighborhood outsiders, even if they don’t have an understanding of
what the symbols and words used actually mean.

For local residents who are used to the presence of graffiti; the range of
reactions and feelings about it are as varied as their local experiences with it and
those who behind it. An increase in Nation graffiti in a certain location can stir fears
of escalation; especially if they are familiar with the meanings behind the symbols
and words; it can more ore less give them the feeling of being “on alert”, especially if
there had been an extended period of time of dormancy or “quiet”, with recent “flare
ups”. There may be family discussion about being more watchful for the presence of
Nation participants, an added concern for the safety of children. At this point the
level of comprehension and local access comes into play; as some residents can be
very insulated, and others be connected in such a way that they might try to reach
out to some of the local Nation youths and try to intervene on the basis of
neighborhood safety. Other residents might respond by being active in reporting
the graffiti, activating neighborhood watch, and participating in a CAPS program in
opposition to what is occurring. This can result in an interesting local dynamic, as

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some residents might organize in opposition to what they view as a blight in their community, while others might be family members of those involved and be defensive over what they might see as the demonization of their children or relatives. There are varying degrees of resident inclusion and knowledge of active Nation sets in a claimed area based on how present members are and how “active” they might be, even if it’s just a vague, surface level awareness. In this way when Nation members claim space and conduct themselves in certain ways within that environment; it forces the residents to orient themselves in response.

If graffiti has been written on their own property, such as their garage door; they might work quickly to buff or paint over it; as a way to defiantly remind the writers who’s property it is. This can be an ongoing cycle, where Nation writers over time tag the garages knowing that residents will paint over them. It can be a game of stealth under cover of darkness where they work quickly to tag before they are seen; or it can be a brazen defiance of the sanctity of owner property, and an invitation to confrontation. Residents who’s fences, garage doors, and buildings who are consistently used as surfaces are put in the position where they have to determine if it is more important to maintain their property by painting over it, or risk being confronted by Nation members over what they might see as a show of disrespect by removing their tagging. Typically it is understood by Nation members that residents will remove the graffiti, and that it’s just part of the “game”, but the property owners might still be concerned about provoking Nation members; and even though there might be anger about what has been done to their property; a
concern that they might be seen by "the wrong one" still often exists amidst their defiance.

For the graffiti writers and other Nation members themselves, the presence of their own Nation’s graffiti within their local landscape can provide a sense of comfort and a feeling of security; it can augment the feeling of sanctuary in their adoption and characterization of this neighborhood space as "their own".

When space is claimed there is then a constant struggle to build credibility. Credibility is built through a saturation of the claimed area, and the “proving ground” is the local sphere where Nation participants and peripheral observers weigh the validity of a certain group’s claim. Participants and observer insiders help validate and strengthen a set’s claim by first knowing about their existence, having knowledge about how to physically identify them in this area, and perhaps encountering them in this space. Often graffiti can be a way that adds another layer to making a claim credible, and so Nation members might be inclined to start tagging to “officially” announce that they are claiming an area. It also allows them to articulate their group identity in a way that is more enduring and cohesive for observers; and thus creates a local understanding about how the space has been partitioned. Credibility and by extension, status—is built through observers being able to connect sporadic actions and graffiti in a way that is seems to be cohesively painting an area as “active”, as in actively claimed by a Nation set. Over time events
and certain types of graffiti in this space is no longer seen as random events but become part of the local logic as indicative of credible Nation presence.

As Nation participants generally seek status and to be associated with the traits of what it is to be “active”, this recognition by outsiders works to further feed into their own conceptions of self; particularly in a way that legitimates their own claim as a local authority. Their reputation as being “about that life” by others is a substantial motivating factor for them; even as fairly secretive local group, they still want to offer controlled glimpses of their existence to both locals and outsiders, they allow and invite a certain degree of knowledge and access. For Nation members, it isn’t enough to claim and “be active” in a hood; they want others to recognize and accept their presence as legitimate; it makes them more “real”. Their role is not only as opposition to rival Nation groups, but as a local neighborhood authority. They occupy a position in the local hierarchy where they are able to exert great influence over how locals, particularly youths, navigate this space.

In order for their claim to be effective, they must always be able to create impression that they are available and willing to enforce their claim by violence. The projection of a violent image is essential, because that is the ultimate way that they attempt to show that they are in control over an area and on a deeper level, prove that they deserve to claim it. That is not to say that perceived threats are always dealt with strictly with violence, but the possibility that outsiders who enter and act a certain way within that area will be dealt with violently should be generally
understood and is built into the projected image of what it means to enter a set’s “hood”. The graffiti is built with the incorporation of symbolism, style, and terminology which re-enforces the idea that within the surrounding area there is an armed, aggressive group that is willing to act on what is conveyed through the graffiti; these symbols layered throughout the hood are meant to create a foreboding ambience for oppositional groups entering the designated space.

Nations impose standards of behavior and appearance within the space that they claim; the aim being their ability to regulate traffic within their neighborhood. It isn’t that they are realistically capable of regulating all traffic within their hood, but they strive to be able to regulate it enough that they give the impression that they are “on it”; something to which is continuously debated and disputed in the schoolyards, the streets, the barbershops, and the internet. In striving to make a show of regulating traffic, each group has to work out a standard about which outsiders are “threats” to what they’ve claimed. A threat, also known as “Opps” (Opposition) is always considered a person or people in rival Nations who are violating the space that they’ve claimed, and it is generally assumed that they are there either to try to invade and occupy their hood or attack Nation members. The reason why a “threat” needs to be challenged is simple—he or she is there and by the standard that is set, they shouldn’t be. The ultimate reason why someone considered a threat is passing through is often not questioned; it is their mere physical presence that demands a response. It is the invasion of the symbolically designated social space that is in itself a violation, which is more or less augmented
by the behavior of the person violating that space. They represent a threat to the perception of the Nation’s ability to defend the claim over their hood; which can have devastating results to members.

As “legitimately” claiming space is about controlling perception about who controls an area, if enough rivals are able to move through an area without being “checked”-it challenges the legitimacy of who has laid claim to it; it is an indictment against a Nation set’s presence. The reputation of the Nation set is at stake not because of the mere act of rivals moving through the area they claim, but it is the discussions surrounding this traffic that challenges the image that they have projected about their neighborhood and their ability to effectively control it. If enough outsiders come to believe that there are no consequences for being in a neighborhood, then the claim over it is weak. This translates to the generally shared belief that the Nation set is weak, because they are unable or unwilling to back up their claim with the necessary regulatory action. This may translate to other sets from surrounding areas actively working to move in and assert their own claim. It also may lead to a sets own Nation-other sets, deciding that they are incapable of “carrying the flag” and turning against them for being a poor representation of the collective.

In this way the act of claiming space is grounded in this idea that the set must believe that they can enforce their claim, because it could have long term consequences for their own existence. While repercussions might involve actual
physical death by a rival or even by someone within one’s own set, there is a more common social death that can occur, a destruction of the projected image of what it means to be in a Nation—and in this way there is a fear of not being “real”, of being inauthentic; because being real is about being capable of doing what is necessary to hold “your land”. For many Nation members, they would prefer physical death or incarceration in good standing to the social death that occurs when one’s projected image of self and hood (intertwined) is destroyed by other peoples’ perceptions. A nation set can be dismantled within a relatively short period of time for this reason; if they are viewed as weak, their space might be encroached upon more often, their members attacked consistently, and potential recruits might be deterred from getting involved in a set with a weak reputation, not only for the lack of status, but the greater risk of danger posed by being associated with a group already viewed as ineffective and weak.

Nation culture developed historically through varying degrees of competitive aggression, and as a result; its participant members view competitive conflict as a necessary element of “the Life”. This serves as another layered realm of territory conflict beyond historic ethnic and racial divisions, as in many cases these divisions are occurring within formalized neighborhoods containing more or less racially and ethnically similar people; occupying similar class positions within this stratified urban context. It is positioned against these surrounding “others” constructs that this notion of “claiming space” becomes important; as it defines where one can feel more secure within what they have to come to know as a dangerous world.
Conceptualizing territory and existing social boundary awareness feeds this imperative to not only exercise control over the public areas that the youths find themselves in outside of their homes, but it leads them to question and attack the limitations of this space; which is often represented by the similarly positioned “others” just beyond the hood they claim.

It is this knowledge and belief in the threat to claimed space as posed by the “others” that continues to feed into a series of interactions which further reinforce initial suspicions. What may begin as a misunderstanding of intentions can quickly lead to years of conflict that then become woven into the local understanding of claimed space as social fact; there is an area that you don’t cross into if you fit into a certain age demographic because you could be mistakenly associated with Nation opposition. In this same way the Nation set that is formed as a source of “protection” not only leads to being explicitly targeted by outsider groups as a threat, but by association; all youths living within the targeted groups’ claimed hood similarly positions non-affiliated youths to be targeted by proximity association. There is tragic irony in this result, as historically, many Nation sets were formed in-part to offer a cohesive defensive response to attacks due to violation of racial and ethnic spatial code-breaking. The double irony here is that in the context of present day, there is often just as much if not moreso Nation violence perpetrated between youth groups located geographically within the same “official” community boundary, sharing the same set of class challenges, and falling into the same racial/ethnic categories.
This reputation is never static, a uniform understanding of who “holds” a claimed area is never shared by all, and there is always concern on the part of the Nation set claiming an area that they will “fall off” and become “inactive” over time. When a set is said to have “fallen off” it means that their claim over an area is viewed as weak according to the generally held perceptions of others in the know. There are several factors that can contribute to the perception that a set has fallen off. If certain key leaders, “gunners”, or several members move, are killed, hospitalized long term, or incarcerated within a relatively short period of time; this is the most obvious reason. Another reason could be that members get older and more or less “retire” without being able to recruit younger members; this could also be the result of the gentrification of a neighborhood and/or lack of responsive recruits. A third reason for this perception could be that other Nation sets inflict casualties upon a set, and there is no measured retaliation within a certain period of time. In light of these scenarios about how a Nation set “falls off”, an absence of graffiti in an area that had been typically tagged can be received as another sign that a set has “fallen off”, if taken into consideration with

While it is true that it is possible for a group to revitalize itself over time and restore its status in an area after “falling off”, there is a drive for longevity, to become associated with an area by those who frequent it, and to be able to pass down the proverbial flag to younger generations as a legacy. The conversations surrounding actions that affect each set help inform perceptions of their status. Graffiti can be used as one method that a Nation set uses to revitalize themselves in
an area; it can serve as a useful tool for creating the impression that they are “more active” than their actual number of participants might be. For example, a Nation set might only have a few current “active” participants who live within a certain claimed area, but through consistently “lacing the hood” with graffiti, they can create the impression that there are more members who are “on it”; it can generate surrounding discussion about what all of the graffiti means for an area, regardless of how many participants are actually responsible for it. This saturation of the neighborhood can bear with it its own drawbacks, but it can inspire discussions and revitalize the perception of a set-which can in turn lead to an increase of status, which in turn might allow them to recruit more receptive candidates based on this perception of this status.

The hood designation and the set identities are intertwined; they are host to each other, in that they are both symbolic constructs and take on life based on collective notions of what they are. The set name is based on the chosen identifying intersecting streets, the school, or the park that has significance to the group. It may be that the school playground is where they decided to form, so they chose the school name, or it could be that they started out hanging out at a founding member’s family house near two intersecting streets. Sets typically name their own hoods in a way that characterizes their designated area in a distinguishing way; one that symbolically re-creates how the space is perceived and navigated; usually in a way that is meant to be intimidating to outsiders. For example, the Nation “Almighty Imperial Gangsters” who chose Spaulding and Armitage as their set identity, also
gave their claimed hood an accompanying title, "DarkkSide"; which bears it’s own threatening connotations of danger for those who are aware of its existence. For those who have insight into this demarcation, to cross Kimball heading east on Dickens; they aren’t just crossing another street in the officially designated Logan Square community area within the city of Chicago, they are entering the AIG hood of SP/A st, "DarkkSide", which carries with it its own set of rules and implications.
Nation members often view their own symbols as powerful icons representing their collective history and sacrifices; a symbol that encapsulates the “blood, sweat, and tears” that they and their “brothers and sisters” have shed for their Nation, and by extension-for themselves. They often hold their own Nation symbols in reverence, even resembling in some ways a form of spiritual and religious devotion. While these “gangbangers” are often portrayed simplistically as one dimensional characters wholly consumed, (both rabid and mechanical) with their “gang” affiliations; they often demonstrate that they simultaneously participate in multiple roles or identities that on the surface might appear to be contradictory. These different roles and ethos’ might not be easily reconciled, and within the “gangbanger boogeyman” there may be significant cognitive dissonance at work. In this process of sorting through their own socialization and the requirements of their environments, they may incorporate aspects of these different roles and discard others, resulting in a wholly unique “hood identity” that is in constant transition. As much as these Nations have helped to shape their local communities, the Nations themselves have been simultaneously shaped and influenced by local religious heritage and practices: they have not developed in an urban “crime vacuum”. As a result, these Nations have appropriated many symbols and language from the
greater community dialogue, redefining and modifying them to suite their vision. Through the graffiti the Nations then manifest these symbols on the walls, once again returning them to the community to become part of the greater discussion, now with altered meanings.

Significance has been inscribed into these symbols that could be referred to as “sacred” in a sense that is not unlike how religious iconography is utilized. Further demonstration of this parallel or “merge” is the appropriation and re-definition of traditional religious symbolism, concepts, and characters: such as the Christian cross, the star of David, the star and crescent moon, and figures such as Bishops, Angels, Devils, and Saints. Many of these Nations have incorporated symbols and slogans that infuse the religious affiliations and nationalism that is valued in the larger community, so by extension these socialized values become the tools and framework from within these youths have built this other layer of Nation identity. As this Nation identity is passed down through generations, in many instances the original context and meaning behind why these symbols were adopted is lost; and the symbols themselves are effectively transformed by their use as part of this hood “drama” that has eclipsed their origins.

Nation participants reconcile their own religious/spiritual commitments to their Nation identities; resulting in a hybrid “street spirituality”; wherein they can see themselves simultaneously as both a “banger” and “religious/spiritual”, as “Christian” and “Latin King” for example. While there are varying and complex
degrees of religious or spiritual identification within Nations; local religious practices often influence the Nation iconography and language used both in Nation literature and in the graffiti, regardless of individual “beliefs” or feelings on the validity of religion. In this sense the Nation identity can allow religious identity (or lack thereof) to be held simultaneously to one’s own Nation affiliation, but one is still expected to “perform” one’s Nation role when needed.

As another example of this, the Black P. Stones are known to utilize the star and crescent moon, most commonly known as symbols of Islam. While they originally chose the name “The Black Stone Rangers” as a reference to their origin street of Black Stone in the Woodlawn neighborhood, over time as those with status within the group adopted an Islamic orientation, they supposedly re-presented the name Black Stone as a symbolic connection with the “original” Black Stone of the Kaaba in Mecca. Despite this, many of their members in Chicago identify as Christian as far as their religious identities according to one of my sources. Perhaps this indicates that their Nation identities serve what they view as the requirements of the “here and now” street reality, and their religious identities accommodates their transition to “the hereafter”, or that they see both identities as representing something more all-encompassing, the details of symbols and physical practices in contradiction being less important. This matter requires less speculation and more in-depth research and analysis.
“Hood memorials” are often constructed for fallen Nation members. While the cause of death is often homicide, a memorial is usually built regardless of the cause. Hood memorials are generally created in the vicinity of where a Nation member was killed, or failing that; in a concealed location that can be protected. If a member dies far from his/her hood, the memorial might be put up on their set corner. A hood memorial generally consists of a “tribute altar”, featuring send off gifts of flowers, candles, childhood toys/stuffed animals, favorite drinks, cigarettes and blunts, and even a shirt or cap with some significance to the Nation set, such as appropriate colors or symbols. Graffiti and smaller tags are often left, even on a posterboard, that allows mourners to leave thoughts and tributes. These memorials simultaneously serve multiple purposes. In addition to mourning a fallen brother and sister, there is a celebratory aspect of one’s life and exploits, often accompanied by drinking and drugs. These locations also become a way to bring together Nation members from other sets in order to pay tribute, catch up, and potentially plan revenge. These gatherings become dramatic occasions, further amplified by intoxication. They can become especially volatile and result in further violence if rivals killed the person who they are mourning. These memorials are considered “sacred” and more concern is given to their maintenance and protection.

Regardless of the circumstances around a Nation members death, they are automatically “angels” in “God’s care”, “resting in peace/paradise”. There seems to be a generally held view that all members of one’s Nation are destined for heaven, to be “liberated” from this “hood life”; a commonly occurring theme in memorial
graffiti. Furthermore; as fellow Nation members are killed as part of their “service”, there seems to be a general projection of this notion of “transcendence”, “ascension” as a “heavenly angel” within the language what goes up on the walls and in the hood memorials that are created. There is an assumption of automatic absolution; it doesn’t matter how they lived, but because of their Nation affiliation they are “cleansed and forgiven”. Often this notion of being “real” is connected to this idea of spiritual ascension; heaven being granted to those who lived according to the street code set forth by the Nation, not any “legitimate” religious doctrine. And of course, in terms of the streets and how one presents their own group to others, God always favors one’s own Nation; simultaneously condemning one’s enemies to hellfire.

While one’s one Nation symbols are cherished and held in reverence; the symbols of rivals are disdained and modified in an obligatory fashion to show this rejection of the “other” when they are written out. These designations are used as a way to essentialize one’s own group and the rival “others” in ways that further parallel religious dichotomies of “saved” vs. “damned” in that one’s own Nation (and especially one’s own set/hood) is always the “correct” association, and rivals are always “incorrect”. While one’s own Nation members “Rest in Paradise”, those of rivals always “Rot in Piss”, and BIH/RIH (Burn in Hell/Rot in Hell). While some sets are specifically called out in the graffiti, there are generally no exceptions when disrespect is shown to a rival: it is “all or none”, and universally includes everyone within those designations. The enemy in this way becomes projected as uniform and
“faceless”, it becomes conceived of as single entities, not allowing for contradictory exceptionalism; at least in terms of how the Nation presents its rivals to others.

That isn't to say that there is not a complex “grey scale” of attitudes and feelings towards rivals by the individual participants; and as part of the Nation role, one often finds one bracketing one’s own experiences and feelings when it comes to the presentation of the group identity and disposition. As an example, an Insane Ashland Viking who was close friends with an Almighty Harrison Gent when they were “shorties in grade school” prior to their gravitating towards different rival Nations, might hold each other in higher regard on a personal level, and even spare each other’s lives on a one on one basis, would suppress this when they are with their own sets. It is not as if the Ashland Viking would tag “Harrison Gent killa (except for Weazil)” because this would convey what would be viewed as weak compassion, and put one out of favor with one’s own group. So while one might publically say that a rival “burns in hell” in a celebratory way, one might feel differently on a personal level.

Nation symbols possess localized symbolic power that transcends their origins; as over time the behaviors and experiences associated with those images become inseparable from them. Violent interactions have been a re-occurring facet of Nation culture, resulting in many of its participants (and many non-participants, as well) becoming imprisoned, disabled, or killed. The graffiti can thus act as a method to further re-inscribe and condition how one views the “others” based on
these arbitrary distinctions, as they become embodied over and over again as these “proxy” stand in symbols and master figures, where symbolic violence is acted out upon them. While this type of violence is merely an act, as it occurs over and over through its written articulation, it contributes to the contextualized consciousness of conflict that may allow for an easier transition from “saying to doing”. That is not to say that Nation graffiti in the strictest sense “causes” the Nation violence, but it becomes a way that the violent absolutism fostered by the Nation continuously manifests itself as a form of community indoctrination.

These experiences and the awareness of these common outcomes have become part of the greater neighborhood perception of these Nations. By extension; Nation symbols become closely associated with violence in a general sense, and therefore writing them as graffiti has a stronger impact on those who view and understand them. For many locals in these neighborhoods; the symbols are not merely “teen vandalism” but a representation and signature of violent entities (based on precedent). For many residents; these symbols can inspire fear and/or anger; as they know that Nation members who are “active” in their neighborhood might be capable of reproducing the violence that is part of their reputation, which often spills over to non-affiliates who suffer as “collateral damage”. Although Nations originally may have adopted symbols of locally cherished religious identities; over time for many of the residents these symbols re-created as graffiti come to represent entities that “profane” what they believe the symbols are “supposed” to represent.
XI. Conclusion

This project has demonstrated that Chicago working class youths have constructed a complex culture of their own in the form of Nations, and their continued use of graffiti as a practice similarly demonstrates this complexity. While graffiti is often presented merely as crass vandalism, “gibberish”, or simply “markers of gang territory”, this project has shown that the graffiti serves multiple functions as a form of creative expression: a method of communication, a practice of identity creation and representation, a field to engage in status competition, a way to symbolically claim social space, and a platform to contest symbolic boundaries.

This project has also shown how the internet can provide an avenue to circumvent locally relevant symbolic codes in order to gain insight into the logic and practices of cultures that resist outsider involvement. Furthermore, the “Chicago
Cold War” Flickr page has served as one platform where youths who would otherwise be limited in their ability (and probably interest) in sharing information about their identity with outsiders have been able to act as cultural critics and experts in a way that is not detrimental to them.

In a surprising way, the “Chicago Cold War” Flickr site has taken the logic and codes of the Nation experience, and built its own form of community, codes, and forms of status which to a limited, degree subverts the local Nation codes in this specific context. Youths who typically would not interact with each other in the same way “on the street” based on existing Nation identity demarcations can if they choose bracket that identity and its obligations, and have interactions with those who they would either never come in contact with, or if so, would be considered “opposition”. While it is true that many of the Nation conflicts have been transferred to the Flickr scene, resulting in the expected style of dialogue, there have been many instances of very measured, respectful discussions that serve to build a new framework, where status is based less on disparaging other Nations, but one’s knowledge of one’s own. Those who seek to only “netbang” are often criticized and shunned, while the ones who describe “how things are” from their experience are welcomed and engaged across normally very divisive Nation lines.

This project hopes to have continued in the ethnographic tradition of Susan Phillips and Dwight Conquergood through illuminating facets of “gang” culture beyond simplistic criminology categorization. In addition, Clifford Geertz’s “thick
description” defines how this project was engaged, in that a sufficient level of immersion was successfully gained in order to be accepted and gain further access to on-going cultural transitions and insights.

As Nations are always changing in response to greater social and cultural changes, by extension the graffiti will continue to change, as well as the meanings attached to the symbols and words that are created. This means that more work must continue in order to identify these changes and analyze their significance. The “Chicago Cold War” Flickr project will continue to exist in this capacity, capturing and documenting the attitudes, logic, and practices of a sampling of Nation participants at a certain point of time. In addition, as time passes and the Nation culture changes, it will serve as a way for younger participants to describe those changes in relation to the changes in the various neighborhoods. This will be a valuable resource for academics as we strive to gain insight into the Chicago Nation culture in relation to larger social and cultural processes at work.
XII. Works Cited


