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**LITERACY ARTIFACTS AND THE SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPE OF A SPANISH  
SECONDARY SCHOOL**

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### Abstract

In this article I examine literacy artifacts placed by students in different locations of a state-run secondary school of the city of Madrid, Spain. The data were gathered as part of a two-year long multi-level ethnography focused on the social and academic trajectories of immigrant students in Spanish compulsory secondary education. The analysis draws from concepts developed in semiotics, linguistic anthropology, literacy studies and social geography. Two broad types of literacy artifacts configured the school's semiotic landscape: political texts and graffiti. In turn, these artifacts were tied to two youth expressive styles present in the school: left-wing *anarkas* and Latino *reggaetoneros*. Students associated with these expressive styles tended to have different ethnic backgrounds and followed different socio-academic trajectories: *anarkas* tended to be of Spanish origin and often moved on to pre-university education while *reggaetoneros* were predominantly Latin American and were geared towards vocational/remedial forms of secondary education. Drawing from concepts in social geography, the analysis suggests that *anarka* texts occupied official spaces in the school and were construed as 'in place' while *reggaetonero* artifacts occupied unofficial spaces and were construed as 'out of place'. I argue that this distribution, alongside other institutional practices and discourses, contributed to the construction of Latin American origin immigrant students' less favorable academic trajectories.

**Keywords:** Semiotic landscape – Literacy artifact – Expressive style – Secondary education

## **LITERACY ARTIFACTS AND THE SEMIOTIC LANDSCAPE OF A SPANISH SECONDARY SCHOOL**

Consider the following events which took place close to the beginning and end of fieldwork of an ethnographic study on immigrant students' socio-academic trajectories in Spanish secondary education:

(1) Monday, 12 November 2007

It is one of the first days the team of ethnographers visits the school to begin regular periods of participant observation. The researchers are first taken to Consuelo's (pseudonym – in this article all names are pseudonyms) office, the academic director of the school. Consuelo briefly describes the school as having about 650 students, 50% of which are of immigrant origin. The school also has several compensatory education groups where about 70-80% of the students are of immigrant origin. It also turns out to be a special day at ICA marked by the tragic events of the previous weekend in which Carlos, a 16 year old 'anti-fascist', was stabbed to death in the subway on the way to an anti-fascist rally in down-town Madrid. The event has been at the center of media attention for the past 24 hours and this morning a group of students from the school have gathered in the school auditorium. Two students take the stage and read the manifesto that the 'Madrid Anti-Fascist Consortium' *Coordinadora Antifascista de Madrid* has prepared (available at: <http://www.kaosenlared.net/noticia/carlos-hermano-nosotrxs-no-olvidamos>; retrieved: 13 February 2011). One of the students says he is from Bolivia and was a friend of Carlos. The student who reads the text is 'characteristically dressed' in 'SHARP (Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice) style': Adidas shoes, a t-shirt with an AK-47 logo and athletic clothes. One part of the texts reads [original in Spanish and translation into English]:

(...)

*Los medios de comunicación insisten e insistirán en intentar hacer ver que sólo ha sido una reyerta entre bandas opuestas. La realidad es bien distinta para l@s que nos atrevemos a mirarla de frente. Estas agresiones vienen a sumarse a la lista de víctimas que el fascismo y el racismo ha ocasionado en toda la Historia. La herida entre las dos españas está hoy muy viva para much@s, a pesar de que la intenten disimular con alguna ley tibia e incompleta.*

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*No ha sido un muerto por pandillismo, Carlos ha sido asesinado por defender a la clase trabajadora, sin pararse a mirar el color de su piel o su país de procedencia.*

(...)

(...)

*The media insists and will insist that this has only been a fight between opposing gangs.*

*Reality is quite different for those of us who dare looking at it eye to eye. These aggressions are an addition to the list of victims that fascism and racism have caused throughout History (sic). The wounds between the two spains (sic) are very much open for many, despite attempts to cover it with half-hearted and incomplete laws.*

*He is not a gang-related death, Carlos died because he defended the working-class, without stopping to look at its skin color or country of origin.*

(...)

(2) Wednesday, 3 June 2009

Many students are gathered in the school auditorium for an end of the school-year festival. The preparations for this event have been going on for several weeks. The program consists of a couple of music pieces organized by the music teacher with her students and thirteen musical performances (dancing and singing) organized and led by students. Latin American students are present in eight of these performances and several of them are involved in more than one musical number. Reggaeton, hip-hop style music seems to be the preferred choice for several of the acts and 'guitar-based rock bands' are noticeably absent from the program

The data collected between these two episodes strongly suggest that their protagonists were different 'types' of students who engaged in different social practices, seemed to have different academic trajectories, participated in different peer and friendship networks and were defined and approached differently by institutional agents at the school. The students who took the stage in these events were also not prototypical in any normative-demographic sense. Rather, they seem to be a sub-group of adolescents intensely engaged in particular *expressive styles*, which originated outside the school walls and were brought into the school and made visible in, among other ways, formally organized school rituals. One conspicuous aspect of these styles was that they involved the consumption of particular *semiotic artifacts*

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inside the school (e.g. a written manifesto circulated through the web, music lyrics or choreography), which can be seen as relatively durable elements that inform about the social identities of their producers. Further, as durable materials, these artifacts can be read, recovered and re-appropriated by different actors in the school and become part of a set of resources which inhabitants of the institution can use to categorize students and define the local social system.

The above episodes are just two examples, produced in specific public events in the same school auditorium, of students' expressive productions in the school. Many other artifacts had a much more permanent character and occupied different spaces of the school, such as school walls, bulletin boards, bathroom doors or court-yard walls. Some of these locations (e.g. bulletin boards, main halls) were formally sanctioned by teachers and others were relatively hidden from staff and the school administration (e.g. bathrooms, stairways, court-yard corners). Some texts, such as murals for class projects, were produced in collaboration with teachers and others, such as the above examples, were self-generated by students. Finally, the content and materiality of these objects was varied. However, all these artifacts formed part of the student-produced *semiotic landscape* of the school: the visible inscriptions located in space made through deliberate human intervention and that contributed to meaning making (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010).

In this article I examine two of the most conspicuous student-produced inscriptions in the landscape of this urban secondary school: graffiti and 'political texts'<sup>1</sup>. I will attempt to trace the social groups and types of students these artifacts were attached to and the socio-academic interpretation that can be extracted from this association. In the institution under study different groups of students followed divergent social and academic paths, paths which often lead Latin American origin students to less favorable academic trajectories. From the viewpoint of the research project this article stems from, these outcomes were the product of a

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complex web of institutional policies and practices, family dynamics and peer-relations - examined elsewhere (e.g. Poveda, 2011; Poveda, Jociles, Franzé, Moscoso and Calvo, 2012; Poveda, Jociles and Franzé, 2009; Moscoso, 2009; Calvo, 2010) which configured socio-educational inequalities between Spanish origin and immigrant origin (primarily from Latin America) students. Obviously, the constitution of the school's semiotic landscape was not the cause of these social and academic outcomes, which were played-out in tracking practices, academic expectations, teacher's ideologies, educational decisions, etc. However, examining the school's semiotic landscape does provide a complementary look into these processes and helps understand how social relations (and their academic consequences) were structured in the school.

Only a handful of studies have focused on the linguistic and symbolic landscape of schools and have underscored their political and academic implications. Serra (2004, 2007) in a study of a secondary school in Catalonia (Spain), showed how Catalan and Spanish flags or football team preferences and logos, among other things, indexed the structure of social relations among students, ideologies towards the nation-state and, eventually, exclusionary discourses towards foreign immigrants. Mor-Sommerfeld (2010) showed how the design of the linguistic landscape is an integral element of the tense and complex constitution of an Arab-Hebrew bilingual school in Israel. Yet, moving outside schools, focusing on some the texts that will be discussed in this article, there are numerous studies examining the explicitly political and aesthetic nature of urban graffiti across contexts (e.g. Iddings, McCafferty and da Silva, 2011; Figueroa-Saavedra, 2007; Pennycook, 2010).

Despite the diversity of settings and contexts covered in these studies, they all have in common a focus in a scenario in which semiotic/literacy artifacts and inscriptions are explicitly pointed out, fore-grounded and signified by social actors as a part of ongoing social processes/conflicts (e.g. political tensions, urban inequalities, educational inequalities, identity

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politics, etc.). In contrast, in the site under study in this article, the semiotic landscape of the school seemed to be largely back-grounded by social actors in the school and, despite the fact that students and teachers were, in different ways, the producers of this landscape they did not seem to attribute any particular meaning to how it is structured, were not keen to examine it explicitly and tended to consider that ‘relevant’ socio-educational processes unfold in other arenas of school life. Thus, expanding the logic of analysis of previous studies, the goal of this article is to examine and discuss the role played by the school’s semiotic landscape, as defined above, in the structuration, alongside other factors, of social relations and socio-educational outcomes in the school under study.

To achieve this goal I propose a set of analytical tools that facilitate this task, especially in a social scenario where semiotic artifacts do not seem to be reflexively scrutinized by its consumers (or producers) in relation to broader social processes. I make use of a conglomerate of concepts developed in literacy studies, semiotics, geography and anthropology, all of which draw on a conception of *place* as socio-culturally constructed and institutionally meaningful space (e.g. Creswell, 2004; Ingold, 2000; Lefebvre, 1991). In what follows I review the concepts I use to guide the analysis that is presented in subsequent sections of the article.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Literacy Objects and Semiotic Artifacts**

Over the last three decades an approach to the study of literacy as a social and cultural practice has been established (e.g., Street, 1993; Barton, 2007). Literacy, as an individual or a social accomplishment, has been stripped of pre-supposedly necessary cognitive, political and economic consequences (Collins and Blot, 2003; Besnier, 1995). Instead, many scholars have come to understand literacy as something heterogeneous, with diverse effects and multiple forms of organization that unfold in particular literacy events (Heath, 1983) and through



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ideologically mediated social practices (Street, 2000). By now this approach has become a dominant research paradigm in parts of anthropology, education and linguistics and has even penetrated some areas of psychology (Barton, 2007; Cassany, 2006; Collins and Blot, 2003; Gee, 1989, 2004). Yet, in recent years, a combination of theoretical insights, social changes and new literacy forms have highlighted several underdeveloped themes in social and cultural approaches to literacy which are especially relevant to the empirical materials of this article.

Brandt and Clinton (2002) and Kell (2009) have argued that, while focusing on literacy events and practices has helped dismantle abstract attributions to literacy, the impetus of the critique has neglected to pay attention to the “material dimensions of literacy, its durability, its capacity to connect, mediate, represent, and hold together multiple interests” (Brandt and Clinton, 2002, p. 355). Literacy involves literacy practices, literacy events and also *literacy objects*, which become the medium through which certain expectations and meanings produced in one context can be re-appropriated in other contexts. This does not mean understanding the process as one of decontextualization and abstraction, rather the concept of literacy object draws on contemporary cultural theorization about objects and artifacts, which breaks with the ‘people-things dichotomy’, and sees objects as simultaneously: (1) deeply social artifacts which are an integral part of human action and meaning-making but that (2) ‘have effects’ which are relatively independent of and non-reducible to its original producers (Latour, 1996; Costall, 1995).

One reason why the materiality of literacy has become especially relevant is because it has become increasingly diversified. Alongside traditional forms of print, new literacy objects are produced through a variety of electronic technologies and multimodal texts which combine image, sound and embodied practices (Kress, 2003; Lankshear and Knobel, 2003; Mahiri, 2008). Such diversification obviously requires an expanded definition of what literacy is and what artifacts it includes. Also, given new forms or representation, circulation and

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transmission, the spatial dimensions of literacy need to be reconsidered (e.g. Leander and Sheeny, 2004). This includes paying attention to the circulation and social trajectories of literacy products or texts, in other words, examining the natural history of texts and discourses (Silverstein and Urban, 1996). Texts and discourses can be *entextualized*: generated in certain contexts, detached from these contexts, circulated and reincorporated into new social settings (Bauman and Briggs, 1990). However, as Hanks (2000) points out, this is not simply a re-formulation of the process of decontextualization because a text/literacy artifact to be interpretable and meaningful in a new context has to be *centered*: “grounded in a locally defined social context, which functions as the source of information an author and reader draw on to flesh out the interpretation of the textual artifact (itself incomplete)” (p. 175). This constitutive interrelationship between text and context opens the door to another set of ideas that elaborate on the spatialization of literacy practices and objects.

### **Semiotic Landscapes and Emplacement**

Understanding literacy objects in space raises the issue of how they contribute to make the environment meaningful to its inhabitants through aspects such as the ‘declarative’ information, the materiality or the location of literacy objects. These are the aspects of meaning captured under the notion of semiotic landscape (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010) but there are number of components in this definition that need to be spelled out.

Focusing on deliberately produced inscriptions (i.e. literacy objects) underscores the fact that behind those semiotic artifacts are sets of communicative intentions and meanings that have to be recovered to interpret them (cf. Keane, 2003). However, often, contact with the producers is not direct and the original generation of the objects may have not necessarily been documented either by researchers or ‘object-readers’. Thus, this recovery process is always a situated and partial re-construction structured by the *indexical order*, the specification of what larger social meanings (macro/meso-forces) must be brought to bear in

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the interpretation of particular communicative instances (Silverstein, 2003), in which the semiotic artifact/inscription/literacy object participates (Collins and Slembrouck, 2007).

Understanding communication as indexical also stresses the fact that space and communicative modes must be understood as historically and socially constructed phenomena (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Blommaert, 2010), layered with multiple meanings and ideological tensions. These unfold at different levels of social organization that range from macro-historical forces, to institutional and meso-level configurations to micro-interactional and personal-biographic meanings (Silverstein, 2003; Nespore, 2004).

In this theorization of socio-cultural space (i.e. *place*) the particularities of location stand out as an especially relevant feature. Within linguistic anthropology, Scollon and Scollon (2003) capture this in the notion of *emplacement*, the physical location of a sign within a geosemiotic system, stressing how the meaning of a sign depends, among other things, on where and how it is located in a space. Further, these artifacts can be examined in terms of their capacity to occupy multiple spaces, which involves considering what aspects of the artifact are transformed in the process and what new meanings emerge in each particular emplacement. Discussing emplacement requires examining the ideological and social processes that are activated through the placing of semiotic objects in particular locations and it is here where work in social geography is especially useful. Cresswell (1996, 2004) has examined the location of social practices and artifacts in place as ideological processes - involving degrees of deviance, transgression or resistance- that construe them as *in place* or *out of place*. This analysis necessarily involves interpreting action and artifacts within value hierarchies that position certain emplacements as legitimate or illegitimate - a premise that, implicitly, acknowledges that these hierarchies can be simultaneously defined in a variety of ways from multiple social and institutional perspectives.

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In short, building on these concepts, in this article I focus on the meaning of particular literacy objects in the school under study. The analysis draws on different sources of data gathered during an ethnographic study of immigrant students' educational trajectories in a state-run secondary school of the city of Madrid, Spain. In particular, it examines a varied set of visual materials compiled during the ethnography (cf. Pink, 2007; Suchar, 1997) such as photographs and videos produced by students inside and outside school, photographs and videos collected by the research team inside and outside school, and media materials posted on the web by students such as videos or personal profile pages. After contextualizing the research site and presenting the general methodology of the project, I discuss the findings, describing and discussing the two adolescent expressive styles that articulate these literacy productions and then presenting an analysis of the semiotic landscape of the school. In the final comments, I discuss the role this semiotic order might play in configuring students' educational experiences.

### **Method**

The results I present in this article draw from a research project focused on the educational trajectories of immigrant students in compulsory secondary education in Spain. During two academic years (2007-08 and 2008-09) a team of researchers conducted an intensive multi-level ethnographic study of a public (state-run) secondary school located in a southern district of the city of Madrid, Spain. The research design included a variety of traditional ethnographic data collection procedures as well as a number of visual data collection procedures.

In this section, I first describe the institutional setting in which the study took place. Because this article uses the general ethnographic data to provide context and meaning to the findings gleaned from the visual data, I then describe these aspects of the study. Finally, I discuss the study's logic of inquiry.

### **Instituto de Educación Secundaria Central-Aluche**

*Instituto de Educación Secundaria Central-Aluche* (pseudonym, shortened as *ICA* or *IES Central-Aluche*) is a state-run secondary school located in Latina district, a large southern district of the city of Madrid, Spain. The school opened in the 1980s, alongside other secondary schools in the area, as a response to the strong pressures to provide schooling for the growing secondary education population of the district (born in the Spanish ‘baby-boom’ of the 1970s). *ICA* is located in the intersection of two neighborhoods of this city district: (1) Aluche, which has a large middle-class population and is largely occupied by residential apartment buildings built in the 1960s-1970s and (2) Carabanchel Bajo, a historical working-class neighborhood that grew out of the migratory movements from ‘the country to the city’ that took place in the 1950s-1960s. Over the last decade, the district has also received large numbers of economic immigrants, primarily from Latin America (Ecuador and Bolivia especially), and at the moment approximately 19% of the district population is of immigrant origin (Municipal Census Data, year 2009). A majority of immigrant residents occupy homes within Carabanchel Bajo and its surrounding neighborhoods. Even though the school is located in the intersection of these two socio-economically diverse neighborhoods, *ICA* primarily draws its students from Carabanchel Bajo and serves a student body who is, on one hands, increasingly of immigrant origin and, on the other hand, regardless of national background, lives and identifies itself primarily with Carabanchel and a working class background (see opening extract) than with the middle class homes that surround the school. In other words, *IES Central-Aluche* is described by its teachers and ‘felt’ by its students as a primarily working-class and increasingly ethnically heterogeneous school. The demographics confirm this pattern: approximately 30% of students were of immigrant origin in the 2005-06 school-year and this figure rose to close to 50% during the 2008-09 school-year. At the time the study was conducted over 90% of immigrant students at *ICA* were of Latin American

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origin. Most of these Latin American students are first-generation immigrants who arrived in Spain at some point of their primary school education, often in a process of re-unification with their parents who had earlier immigrated to Spain. Nonetheless, there are few Latin American students at ICA who have recently arrived in Spain (through the same process of family re-unification) and practically have begun their schooling in Spain at IES Central Aluche (Moscoso, 2011).

IES Central-Aluche opened and was established as an ‘academically oriented institution’ committed to preparing students, many of which given the districts’ social history, had a working-class background, for pre-university secondary education. As a result, throughout its two decades of existence it has concentrated on university-oriented forms of secondary education while other schools in the district extended their educational provisions to technical and vocational forms of secondary education. Currently the two strands of secondary education that the school offers are Compulsory Secondary Education (*ESO*), for students between 12-16 years of age, and pre-university Baccalaureate (*Bachillerato*), for students between 16-18 years of age. Students who want to consider technical-vocational forms of post-compulsory education must transfer to other schools after completing *ESO*. Currently there are about 600 students enrolled in the school of which close to 500 hundred are enrolled in compulsory secondary education and 100 in the pre-university program. Simultaneously ICA has implemented a number of programs designed to meet the increasingly complex educational needs of its student body. In general terms, educational programs in secondary education in the Spanish educational system are designed with two alternative ‘rationalities’ in mind: (a) to provide academic-educational support for students who experience difficulties during their studies but are seen as potentially capable of meeting *ESO* requirements; (b) to offer an alternative educational path for students at significant risk of ‘dropping out’ and who are not seen as capable of completing conventional *ESO* education.

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Over the years ICA has been involved in implementing a variety of measures that are more in accordance with the first type of programs and has a multi-professional counseling department that is very active in designing these measures and/or orienting students into programs of the latter type offered in other schools of the district.

The demographics of these programs and academic tracks is not color-blind and a disproportionate number of immigrant and Latin American students are placed in remedial programs or counseled to transfer to vocational programs outside ICA. For example, in some cases 100% of the students who were transferred to different programs outside the school had a Latin American background and, inside ICA, over 75% of the students enrolled in ‘compensatory’ education programs were Latin American. Also, while somewhere between 35-50% of students in ESO have an immigrant background at ICA these figures drop below 20% in pre-university Baccalaureate - see Poveda, Jociles and Franzé (2009) and Poveda, Jociles, Franzé, Moscoso and Calvo (2012) for a more detailed discussion of these figures and programs.

In short, ICA has focused on the apparently laudable task of stressing an academically-oriented and university-bound curriculum while working primarily with a working class and ethnically diverse student body. Even the school webpage makes an explicit contrast with other nearby secondary schools located in Aluche/Latina that share a similar academic orientation but serve a much more ethnically homogeneous and middle-class student body. However, this is achieved through implicit institutional practices and programs that stratify students along ethnic and academic lines, as shown in the sections below and in the larger ethnographic study (Poveda, Jociles and Franzé, 2009; Poveda, Jociles, Franzé, Moscoso and Calvo (2012).

### **General Ethnographic Study**

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The study was conceived as a team ethnography (e.g. Woods, Boyle, Jeffrey and Troman, 2000; Creese, Bhatt, Bhojani and Martin, 2008) in which each team member focused on particular strands and/or co-documented different contexts inside and outside the school. Fieldwork was distributed among the research team to usually involve two full days per week of participant observations in the school during most of the two academic years of the study. The project attempted to document the different intersecting social fields (institutional, family and peers) that configure students' academic trajectories. To this end, we focused on:

**The work of counselors, teachers and other professionals.** This aspect of the study included participant observation of educators' work in spaces such as teacher meetings, classrooms (some of which were audio-recorded), interactions with students inside and outside the classroom and informal spaces such as conversations with colleagues during coffee breaks. We also followed in detail the activities of the various professionals who formed the counseling department of the secondary school – which included psychologists, social workers, compensatory education teachers and, during the second year, an intercultural mediator. Documenting the work of the counseling department included observing their relations with other professionals and services outside the educational institution such as child social services, intercultural mediators, counselors from other schools in the area as well as visits to other schools in the district organized by the counseling department for students who are considering 'transferring' to other programs. In the study we also formally interviewed several teachers and educational professionals who worked in/with the school and with students in compulsory secondary education (around 16 interviews/teachers). Additionally, in the course of fieldwork, we held numerous informal conversations about their work with particular students.

**Peer relations inside and outside schools.** Several students and their peer networks were followed in classrooms, the court-yard during recess and in their informal socialization



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and leisure spaces outside school (Calvo, 2010). A number of students in the school, especially students of Latin-American origin (although not exclusively), were involved in creating and consuming reggaeton / hip-hop music and graffiti. These activities were given particular attention and we documented some of their formal and informal performances as well as their composing strategies through field-notes and video-recordings outside school settings. Numerous students from the school were formally interviewed in depth (around 40 students/interviews) and members of the research team held many informal conversations with these and others students inside and outside school settings (Calvo, 2010; Moscoso, 2011). The students who were formally interviewed had a variety of backgrounds and academic trajectories. In relation to background 29 students (15 males and 14 females) were from Latin America (mostly Ecuador but also Paraguay and Peru) and 11 students (6 males and 5 females) were born in Spain. We obtained the basic academic details of 25 of the interviewed students and the distribution was again heterogeneous: 13 students (9 Latin American origin and 5 Spanish origin) had experienced 'academic difficulties' (i.e. had been retained at least one year and/or were placed in an educational support program) while 12 students (5 Latin American origin and 7 Spanish origin) followed an 'ordinary' academic path (for the general demographics and academic tracks of the school, see below).

**The experience of immigrant families.** The study also documented the perspectives of immigrant parents on the education of their children. In the first stage, the team observed some of the 'formal activities' that the institution supported in relation to parents, such as the school parent association, parenting classes and workshops or group meetings between educators and parents. However, these observations underscored the fact that immigrant parents participated minimally in 'formalized' spaces and direct contact with immigrant parents in school activities was minimal. Therefore, eventually, a member of the research team contacted a set of immigrant parents and conducted semi-structured interviews (with 13

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parents) on their migratory experiences, educational expectations and practices. All the parents selected for this part of the study were Ecuadorian -the largest Latin-American origin population in the school and area- and had children enrolled in the school during the time of the study (see Moscoso, 2009, 2011).

**Other educational spaces.** Members of the research team also documented, though in less detail, other educational spaces and activities inside and outside the school, such as after-school educational support programs or vocational and technical training programs offered at other institutions in the area. These spaces were particularly relevant as less successful students in the school participated in them (i.e. after-school support) or were geared towards these programs after repeatedly not meeting end-of-year academic expectations.

### **Collection of Visual Data**

The study also involved collecting a variety of audio-visual materials generated both by the research team and students in the school. Three types of visual materials were gathered.

**Video-recordings of students' activities.** Members of the research team made video-recordings of peer interactions outside school and also video-recorded the end-of-year show of the school presented at the beginning of the article. However, the main source of student recordings came from three video-documentary workshops that were organized by the research team for students in the school. The goal of these workshops was to create a space where students could generate their own video-recordings and, eventually, edit 'mini video-documentaries' on any aspect of their lives they chose to focus on. Two of these workshops were offered as an after-school activity (one during each year of field-work) and lasted about a month each (based on weekly two-hour meetings) and one was offered during class hours (in a single one-day session) in the final stages of the study. Although the initial design of these workshops included producing and editing the video-recordings, this part was not followed through by the students and the workshops resulted in several hours of 'raw' student

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recordings inside and outside school and of the discussion and analysis of the videos during the workshop meetings (which were also video-recorded).

**Photographs of school life.** As part of the project, members of the research team took photographs of school life and particularly of the semiotic landscape of the school (as defined and discussed in this article) during the two years of the study. Also an activity was set up for students from two classes in the school (year two and year four of compulsory secondary education) who were given digital cameras and asked to take sets of photographs of their school and title these photographs (cf. Rose, 2007). Finally, a number of photographs made by teachers in the school (for example, of field-trips or end-of-year portraits) and some available at the school website were collected by the research team. In total, well over 200 images were collected through these procedures.

**Media artifacts.** Several of the students who participated in the study had personal web-pages and/or created their own video-recordings/video-clips which were later uploaded to web-based repositories (such as *Youtube*). Several of these pages and audio-visual creations were tracked down and examined by researchers. Also, the research team member who focused more closely on peer relations held numerous conversations via instant messaging systems (primarily *Messenger*) with students at the school and documented, among other things, the different icons and logos that these participants introduced in their virtual exchanges (see Calvo, 2010).

### **Logic of Inquiry**

This article examines the meaning of the school's semiotic landscape and draws on two strategies of analysis. On the one hand, the concepts presented in the first part of the article (and especially those related to emplacement) were used to categorize and interpret the visual materials that configure this landscape. On the other hand, a wide set of ethnographic findings from the project focused on peer discourses and relations, institutional practices,

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educators discourses and students' educational outcomes - presented in this article and examined elsewhere (e.g. Calvo, 2010; Poveda, 2011; Poveda, Jociles and Frazé, 2009; Poveda, Jociles, Franzé, Moscoso and Calvo, 2012; Franzé, Moscoso and Calvo, 2010) - are used to provide context and a particular *centering* to the materials and meanings that are examined in this article. Connecting these two strands of data often involved establishing links between material objects present in the school (of which the project does not have direct empirical data in relation to the actual processes of creation, placement and distribution) and processes and practices taking place in other arenas of school life and contexts. Indeed, the connection is the result of my own interpretive analysis - as supported by different strands of data - so as much as is possible in the article, these threads are spelled out in the presentation of findings, allowing readers to scrutinize the proposed analysis.

The analysis of the semiotic landscape of the school and its connection to students' backgrounds and socio-academic trajectories emerged from the analysis of the data and the continuous specification of research questions that is part of ethnographic fieldwork. As can be seen from the description above, the visual component of the study was incorporated from the beginning into the research design (i.e. through the preparation of video workshops across and the collection of photographs across both years of the study) and the artifacts that are the focus of this article were documented from the start since they are a rather conspicuous element to any casual visitor of the school. However, the interpretation of the visual data developed at later stages of the analysis when a general account of how academic trajectories and social relations in the school were structured was elaborated (Poveda, Jociles and Frazé, 2009; Franzé, Moscoso and Calvo, 2010; Calvo, 2010) and the theoretical tools discussed in the first part of the article were brought into the analysis. Nonetheless, the analysis presented in this article is developed because it contributes to understand the basic question that guided our research project: understanding the complex web of processes that configured the

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construction of immigrant students' (less favorable) academic trajectories. In this article, I show how a school's semiotic landscape can be a piece of this puzzle and thus open the door to, and provide the tools for, further examination of this dimension of school life in future research.

### **Findings**

#### **Anarkas and reggaetoneros as the dominant expressive styles in IES Central Aluche**

As in other secondary schools across the world (e.g., Heller, 1999; Eckert, 2000; Levinson, 2002; Soto, 2008), students at ICA organize their social relations, identities and socio-academic trajectories through, among other things, a set of expressive youth styles which allow categorizing and labeling peers and groups in the school. Several labels circulate in the secondary school (Calvo, 2010) and these categories seem to draw on elements of popular culture, local cultural practices and, especially, from different ways of experiencing and uptaking the urban environment in which these adolescents are growing up<sup>2</sup> (cf. Moje, 2004). Students in the school make use of these labels, identify with them to different degrees and assign them multiple meanings which vary across social contexts, as the video-capture shown in Figure 1 and the interview excerpt suggest.



**Figure 1: Video capture and summary from a student video-recording**

Summary:

Juan, a 15 year old student from Ecuador, for his project in the video-documentary workshop has recorded and interviewed different people and adolescents in parks, clubs and shopping malls in this area of the city. The video-capture shows a group of Spanish female friends from ICA he found in a park. At one point he asks the girls if they have had problems “for dressing like that” - the two girls on the sides of Figure 1 are wearing military boots, t-shirts from punk-rock groups, dark lip-gloss and dark eye-liner. After this question they collectively answer: “If we let ourselves be influenced by people we would all be the same, we would be alienated, there wouldn’t be different groups, there wouldn’t be any *punkis, pokeros, pijos*<sup>3</sup>, we would be all the same and we would all have the same personalities”

**Excerpt 1: Interview with two male Spanish origin students (from Calvo, 2010, p. 151)**

Spanish original

(...)

Julian: él es rapero, el López, tío, él es rapero no reggaetonero

Interv: ¿luego hay reggaetoneros también?

Julián: que sí, que esos son los que nos joden la imagen de los raperos porque esos visten como nosotros, son los que se meten en peleas y son los que nos joden la imagen

Miguel: sí

Interv: ¿y quienes son los reggaetoneros del colegio, por ejemplo?

Miguel: los que bailaron “¡ay mi mamita!, mi pa...” el que decía “¡esta mamita latina!”, ¡no se que pollas!

(...)

English translation

(...)

Julian: He is a rapper, that López, man, he is a rapper not a reggaetonero

Interv: Then there are also reggaetoneros?

Julian: Yes, they are the ones who fuck-up rappers’ image because they dress like us, they are the ones who get into fights, and are the ones who fuck-up our image

Miguel: Yes

Interv: And who are the reggaetoneros in the school, for example?

Miguel: Those who danced "Oh, my *mamita!*, my pa..." "this Latina *mamita!*", and some other shit like that!

(...)

As shown in these interactions, students at ICA use a variety of labels to categorize themselves and their peers and begin to order social relations. In the first case, the group of girls enumerates a number of style labels, which are presented in neutral terms and morally equivalent, and implicitly identify with some: the girls on the sides are closer to the ‘punk’ style and the girl in the middle is closer to a ‘preppy’ style but, as they later explain in the conversation, this is not an obstacle to their friendship. In contrast, the two adolescent males interviewed in Excerpt 1 set a contrast and hierarchical relationship between their own rapper style and that of Latino reggaetoneros who are derogatively characterized by them.

In this context of multiple youth style labels and group identification processes two styles among ICA students stand out. A number of factors contribute to this visibility: (a) they seem to be an important identification resource for a good number of students in the school - although, I will argue, numerical weight per se is not the most important issue; (b) they (often

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implicitly) emerge as part of teachers' discourses about students in the school and their educational trajectories; (c) they are structurally organized in opposition to each other around a number of themes – and I will argue that, despite the analytic simplification this may involve, the opposition captures an important component of how these expressive styles are construed and operate at ICA; (d) they are practically the only two expressive that leave visible material traces in the school's semiotic landscape. These expressive styles are labelled by students, among other terms, as *anarka* and *Latino / reggaetonero* but before I describe them some theoretical observations around the concept of expressive style need to be made.

The concept of youth sub-culture has received a great deal of academic attention across different disciplines and has been the topic of a number of controversies (reviewed in Hodkinson, 2002 and Feixa, 1999). The attempt to categorize adolescents within relatively defined and labeled sub-cultures has been well received by the media and popular discourses but has raised several problems that recent work has attempted to circumvent. In summary, the following issues have generated analytical reformulations:

(1) A static definition of youth sub-cultures seems to assume that all adolescents (members) who identify with or are ascribed to a particular sub-cultural category (e.g. 'burn-out', 'anarka', 'goth', 'posh', etc.) will be internally homogenous in terms of the practices they engage in, their values and their aesthetic choices. Various ethnographic studies have shown that this is not the case and some authors have suggested thinking about youth styles in terms of *communities of practice* to underscore internal diversity (e.g., Eckert, 2000; Bucholtz, 2002). Under this logic, heterogeneity is understood as the expected outcome of a system where adolescents usually occupy different positions -variable across time and contexts- which can be more central or peripheral to that particular community and/or practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Also, a community of practice is a local product of



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adolescents' own creative appropriations (as *bricoleurs*) of a number of expressive elements and, thus, variations across contexts are expected.

(2) The components that may configure a particular youth culture/style and which adolescents appropriate, especially in contemporary globalized contexts, are extremely heterogeneous and draw from elements organized at multiple scales of social organization (for example, as discussed for Hip-Hop by Alim, Ibraim and Pennycook, 2009). Consequently, it is not possible to reduce the articulation of a youth style to a single and predominant social structuring force (i.e. class conflict, racial-ethnic identification, gender relations, etc.) since these intersect in complex ways and play different roles across contexts.

(3) The above points (variability and complexity) underscore that a 'youth style' will probably not be prototypically epitomized in the practices of specific adolescents and that the elements that fashion each individual identity will be varied. This contributes to displace the focus from individual actors and their practices to the discourses and artifacts that are incorporated into these practices in our understanding of youth expressive styles. In other words, it is also possible to think of youth sub-cultures and styles as *semiotic aggregates* (Scollon and Scollon, 2003) which are identifiable and materialized in both a variety of cultural products and individual practices.

With the notion of expressive style I attempt to capture these reformulations in analytically productive ways to: (a) describe two expressive styles without attempting to claim that I quantified and aggregated clearly defined groups of students or even socio-demographic consistencies (e.g. as the opening of the article shows there are anarkas with a Latin-American background and Spanish adolescents who also consume reggaeton); (b) focus on some of the artifacts that are associated with these styles and produced by its members; (c) extract the potential 'messages' that these artifacts explicitly and implicitly transmit.

Table 1 summarizes the key elements that configure and contrast anarka and reggaetonero expressive styles inside IES Central-Aluche. The discussion below elaborates on the meaning of these distinctions.

**Table 1: Some organizing contrasts between anarkas and reggaetoneros**

	<b>Anarkas</b>	<b>Reggaetoneros</b>
<b>Central identifier</b>	Anti-racist / Extreme-left political ideology	Music and dance Trans-national experience
<b>(Presumed) origin</b>	Primarily Spanish	Primarily Latin American
<b>Out-of-school expressive contexts</b>	Squatter house Public space: Public rallies	Web-based networks Public space: leisure
<b>Institutional assessment</b>	Legitimate Supported	Illegitimate Ignored / Regulated
<b>Literacy artefacts</b>	Political texts	Graffiti / Reggaeton music

Anarkas (also called *radicales izquierdistas* ‘left-wing radicals’ or *okupas* ‘squatters’) structure their expressive style around themes associated with far-left political ideology and mobilization. Demographically, they tend to be of Spanish origin –although, as advanced above, primarily of a lower-middle/working class background- and many of the students who follow an academic trajectory into pre-university post-secondary education at the school sympathize to some degree with this movement. Anarkas from ICA have as their key out-of-school space an emblematic squatter house in the district that is part of an informal network of politically and civically active squatter houses in Madrid. Finally, many teachers are receptive to these students’ initiatives and provide formal and informal support to their activities.

Latinos have as their main expressive feature engagement with a particular music, aesthetic and dance style (reggaeton hip-hop<sup>4</sup>). Demographically, a majority of reggaetoneros are Latin American. Although there are also Spanish origin students who ‘consume’ reggaeton music and dance (for example, several Spanish origin female students prepared dances with reggaeton music for the end of year show described at the opening of the article) this does not necessarily mean they identify with a broader Latino/reggaetonero style, as many of the elements of this style make explicit reference to the trans-national Latin American identities of its members (Warriner, 2007; Hornberger, 2007). These Latino students have as their main out-of-school spaces parks and music clubs as well as web-based social networks where many of them have personal profiles and post their visual and audio creations. Latino literacy products are generally ignored by teachers (or sometimes censored) and do not receive any formal or informal recognition -except for the one-time event that took place the second year of the study.

Several pieces of data underscore the contrasts between anarka inspired and reggaetonero-inspired practices. The lyrics written by Spanish or Latin American students from ICA who have formed hip-hop groups show these contrasts, even when we focus on the most explicitly political creations<sup>5</sup>:

**Excerpts 2: Fragments of lyrics by *PGH* and *ZT Records***

[Left column: Original Spanish / Right column: English translation]

PGH

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 Te sientes triste por no poder comprarte un bolso | 1 You feel sad because you can't buy a purse        |
| 2 y hay niños felices viviendo en un sucio pozo     | 2 and there are happy kids living in a dirty dump   |
| 3 y es que la verdad duela aquí te lo repito        | 3 and even if the truth hurts here I repeat it      |
| 4 opino que matar a un nazi no tiene que ser delito | 4 I think that killing a Nazi should not be a crime |
| 5 y así te lo digo                                  | 5 and I tell you                                    |

ZT Records

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 En esto de la calle estoy activo chamaquito | 1 I am active in the street little kid |
|---|--|

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2 mientras unos sueltan plata otros son mendigos	2 while some throw away money others are tramps
3 yo te digo lo que lo que suelto venga aumento	3 I say what I say and more
4 que un pelado bien parado	4 that a wealthy balding man
5 a mi patria represento	5 I represent my country
6 orgulloso compañía	6 proud company

*ZT Records* (pseudonym) is the name of a group of Latin American friends (from Ecuador and Bolivia) who have formed a reggaeton group. The lyric is extracted from a song in a ‘CD album’ they recorded and produced on a home computer. The extract, which deals with socio-economic inequalities, like the majority of songs in the album, is recited using numerous colloquialisms present in South American Spanish (e.g. *chamaquito*, *pelado*, *bien parado*) and has nationalist references; situating clearly the national and cultural origin of its members. This contrasts with the song by PGH (pseudonym), a ‘hip-hop band’ formed by a primarily Spanish group of friends, extracted from a video-recording of the group of adolescents performing their songs in a public park. The text formulates socio-economic inequalities without reference to nationhood and connected to this shared topic we find one of the main themes that identify anarkas: direct confrontation with far-right (i.e. neo-Nazi) opponents. In other words, both compositions may share a concern for socio-economic inequalities (in contrast to Miguel and Julian’s derisive commentaries above) but the PGH song underscores ideological conflicts between radical political factions in Spain while the ZT Records piece underscores national origin in a transnational context.

Public space is also used differently by anarkas and reggaetoneros, especially when they engage in the more emblematic practices of their expressive styles as the following video-captures show. The first two images (Figures 2) are extracted from the video-documentary recordings made by two Spanish anarka students who participated in one of the video workshops. The captures show the interior of the squatter house on a Friday night

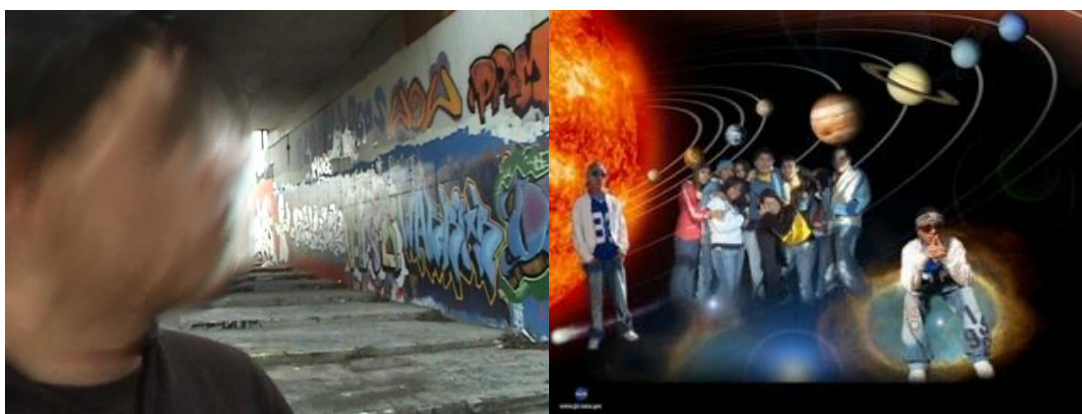
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(Figure 2a) and an anti-capitalist rally during the weekend in the neighborhood (Figure 2b).

The following images (Figures 3) are extracted from two sources. Figure 3a is another extract from Juan's video-recording where he is interviewing a friend, also from Ecuador, about his involvement in graffiti. Figure 3b is a capture of a video, constructed as a collage of still images over music, posted in Youtube by another reggaeton band formed by Latin American adolescents from ICA. These examples show how, for anarka youth, urban public space is construed, among other things, as a field for political action, where –as it is presented by the adolescent in Figure 3b- public space is primarily used for aesthetic purposes and these expressive goals are also extended to the 'public virtual world' by Latino adolescents.



**Figures 2: Anarka squatter house and public rally**



**Figures 3: Latino graffiti and website posts**

Finally, focusing on the dynamics inside ICA, these expressive styles are received differently by adults in the school. The following section of the article will discuss and illustrate in more detail the institutional place that the artifacts of each expressive style occupy in the school, here it is important to point out how these opposing youth styles are assessed at a personal level by some teachers in the school. The majority of the teachers in the school are Spanish natives - although there is a teacher who is originally from Argentina and, during the second year of the study, a Bolivian intercultural mediator was assigned to the school. Based on observations gathered during informal conversations and explicit statements made during the two years of fieldwork, politically, a good number of teachers sympathize with progressive left-wing ideologies and social initiatives. For example, a number of teachers in the school collaborate with NGOs, are affiliated to left-wing labor unions and are openly critical of the governing forces in the Madrid region (which for years has been in the hands of a conservative party). Also, as educators working in the public sector, they are often very critical of the neo-liberal social policies and programs that have dominated the political scenario in Madrid for close to two decades, as the following conversation during a teacher staff meeting illustrates:

**Excerpt 3: Staff meeting of ESO year four tutors (from field-notes)**

26 May 2008

Aurora, the school counselor raises once again the issue of what to tell students about the reforms that will be introduced in next year's Baccalaureate program. This has been an on-going conversation during the past weekly staff meetings and the year four tutors are increasingly concerned about the regional government's tardiness in passing the reform since at this point of the school year they still don't know what to tell their students about the changes in the program of study they will have the following academic year. Aurora talks about some of the "rumors" that are circulating about what is going to change, one rumor is that tutoring hours will be elective for students and another rumor is that they will have to continue to have to offer Religion as subject during Baccalaureate. This leads to a debate about the hours that are dedicated to scheduling Religion classes which "almost no one in public secondary

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schools takes”. Mercedes, one of the tutors, proposes that Religion should be placed as the last class hour slot or even as an after-school activity and Beatriz, another tutor, goes on to say that “she is a practicing Catholic” (in fact, that same morning she brought to the meeting the photo album of her daughter`s communion to show to her colleagues) but that “Religion should be taken out of public schools and taught in Parishes and that she will defend this idea wherever it is necessary”.

In short, many of the broader ideas and goals expressed by far-left anarka students in the school resonate with teachers’ own left-wing oriented concerns and are sometimes even personally supported. For example, bearing in mind how such statements should be interpreted, among the principles included in the mission statement of the school (available in the schools’ webpage, accessed February 9, 2011) the following is said:

**Excerpt 4: Extract from ICA’s mission statement<sup>6</sup>**

We are committed with our social reality. ICA shares the sensitivities of members of the educational community as citizens, and manifests its collective commitment to peace, the preservation of the environment, the improvement of citizens’ lives, the rights of minorities, gender equality and the eradication of daily violence.

In comparison, the aesthetic preferences displayed by Latino reggaetonero students are not found particularly appealing or purposeful to the majority of teachers. At worst, this style is met with apprehension by the staff as it can be easily associated with behaviors that are considered openly problematic, such as ‘involvement in gangs’<sup>7</sup> (e.g. Feixa, 2005) or, especially, precocious sexuality. In the school there were a number of pregnant students and teenage mothers which led to an on-going concern with early sexual relations. In some cases, these were stereotypically and prejudicially attributed to Latina students by some teachers. For example, the following interview excerpt shows how a male class tutor who had recently started working in the school makes a strong characterization of how Latin American female students experience gender relations:

**Excerpt 5: Interview with a physical education teacher and year two tutor**

Spanish original

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(...) yo lo que veo que hay una concepción de la mujer y del hombre muy diferente a la que tenemos aquí, muy diferente (...) tienen muy clara la idea de mi pareja, “mi chico, mi chica, mi chico, mi chica” y ahí se queda, o sea muy precoz, las chicas creo que a esta edad están más avanzadas, más desarrolladas (...) a nivel (...) de edad evolutiva están más desarrolladas que los chicos y más que las chicas quizás de aquí (...) ¿cuál es el problema? que muchas lo enfocan solamente, la conclusión que saco yo de este mes aquí, que lo enfocan un poco por un apartado que creo que no deberían solamente enfocarlo que es “mi chico, mi chica, soy su chica, es mi chico” incluso lo dicen ellos “es mi macho” (...)

English translation:

(...) I think there is a concept of women and men that is very different from the one we have here (...) they are very clear about the notion of a couple “my guy, my girl, my guy, my girl” and that’s all, so very precocious, girls this age are more developed, more advanced (...) developmentally they are ahead of boys and even I would say than girls from here (...) what’s the problem? That they only focus, my conclusion after this first month in here, they only focus on a part that should not be the only focus which is “my guy, my girl, I’m your girl, he is my guy” or they even say “he is my *man*” (...)

In sum, this section showed how some adolescents at ICA self-identify (although not only) along different expressive youth styles that have different configurations in the school. In the following section I focus on the role that the literacy objects of these expressive styles play in the school.

## **Political Texts and Graffiti in ICA’s Semiotic Landscape**

**The Structuration of Space at ICE and Expressive Styles within the Official Curriculum.** The institutional regulation of space at IES Central-Aluche can be differentiated along a series of oppositions between ‘formal/official’ and ‘informal/unofficial’ places and uses (cf. Lefebvre, 1991; Baynham, 2006; Maybin, 2006; Cresswell, 1996; Wilson, 2004; Gottdiener, 1995; Bucholtz, 2006). These distinctions work at various physical scales in what could be considered a fractal structuration (i.e. the same relations appear at different levels of analysis/spatial scale) of the informal/formal opposition. Within this recursive system the broadest distinction is made between ‘inside’ the main school building (the formal teaching-



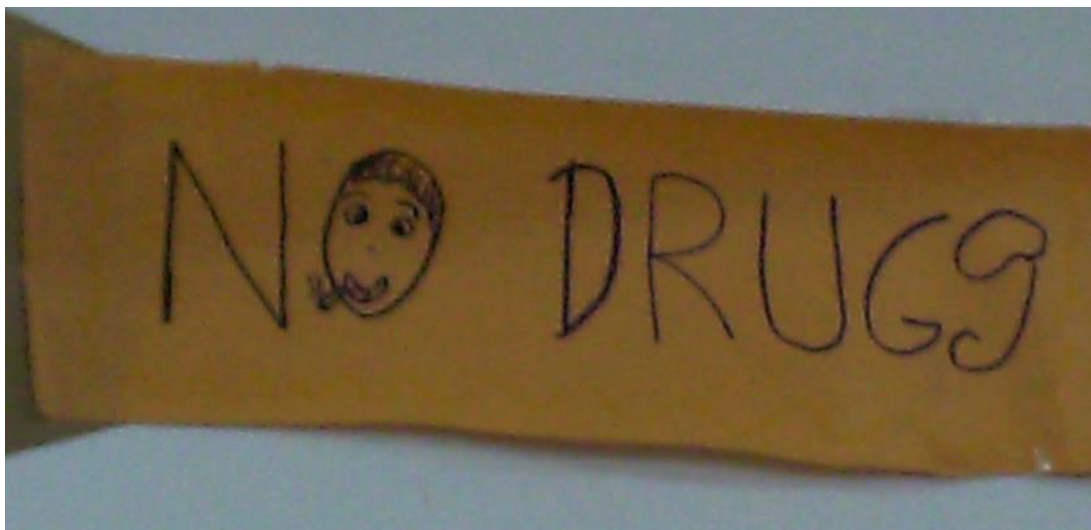
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learning scenario) and the ‘outside’ playground/garden (the informal leisure and recess space). At a following level, the walls that limit the school grounds (which enclose the playground and school parking lot) have an interior face that is regulated and maintained by the school and an exterior face adjacent to sidewalks and parks in the neighborhood that is part of public space and maintained by local public authorities. Walls, sections and structures within the main building are also divided into formal and informal territories. There are formal bulletin boards in the main lobby, the main hallway and each classroom. The main entrance lobby and the main hallway that connects with the counseling department, the administration offices and the teacher staff room are visible/privileged formal spaces. In contrast, student restrooms, secondary halls, spaces under stairways or secluded corners behind buildings constitute unofficial informal spaces in the school. Finally, these oppositions are organized at an even smaller scale. The interior side of bathroom stall doors is opposed to the exterior-communal facilities and the exterior side of bathroom doors. Classroom desks have an upper visible surface that is officially regulated and smaller lateral surfaces that are not regularly cleaned by janitorial staff.

In this section I will discuss how these spaces are occupied by different types of student-produced literacy artifacts and made meaningful through the overlap of these literacy products, the social identities they are associated with and the institutional oppositions that structure school space. The intersection of these three elements organizes the school’s *semiotic ideology* (Keane, 2003), which is relevant to how graffiti and political texts are read in the school and to how students’ vernacular expressive styles penetrate other classroom/official curricular literacy products (cf. Creswell, 1996, 2004). This last issue is relevant to how expressive styles are interpreted inside the school and will be discussed briefly as part of the context that gives meaning to graffiti and political texts at ICA.

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As part of formal classroom projects students produce literacy artifacts which are placed in spaces such as the library walls, the main school corridor or entrance hall. These multimodal texts, composed of images, writing and other graphic representations, are designed to meet academic goals but in their aesthetics they also reflect students' own expressive styles and may even include 'subversive' sub-messages.



**Figures 4: Curricular literacy artifacts**

The images in Figures 4 show parts of a banner hung in the school library and created by students during an English language class. The banner is composed of a list of well intentioned societal (i.e. *justice, tolerance*) and personal (*friendship, love*) principles that the

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school officially endorses. The design of the texts was chosen by students and generally draws on ‘bubble style’ graffiti lettering – for example, the composition of the word LOVE in Figure 4a. This banner also has an instance in which images are inserted within letters to create parallel messages within a textual artifact that actually contradict each other (cf. Reh, 2004; Poveda, Pulido, Morgade, Messina and Hédlová, 2008). The detail in Figure 4b shows how the O of NO DRUGS has conspicuously been turned into a smiling face smoking what appears to be a cannabis cigarette.

More generally, the design of a variety of class projects in different subjects that culminate in mural pieces which are displayed in the main halls (i.e. official spaces) of the school draw on the themes and graphic styles that are popular among students in the school. Figure 5 captures a mural built for a science class focused on ‘acoustic pollution’ in which the main title of the mural is again designed with graffiti style bubble lettering and is accompanied by an electric guitar/bass amplifier. Figure 6 captures a mural in which variations of the ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ *Caperucita Roja* story created by the students are presented. The successive versions of the story occupy different columns and are titled (from left to right): *Caperuza Verde Oscura* ‘Dark green Riding Hood’, *Caperuza Fashion* ‘Fashion Riding Hood’, *Caperuza Pija* ‘Preppy Riding Hood’ and *Caperucita Rosa* ‘Pink Riding Hood’. Interestingly, the alternative use of *caperuza* and *caperucita* in the titles of the story suggest that both Latin American and Spanish origin students were involved in this project, since the first variation (*caperuza*) is more common in Ecuador, at least, for the title of the story vs. the latter diminutive (*caperucita*) which is more common in the Iberian Peninsula title of the story.

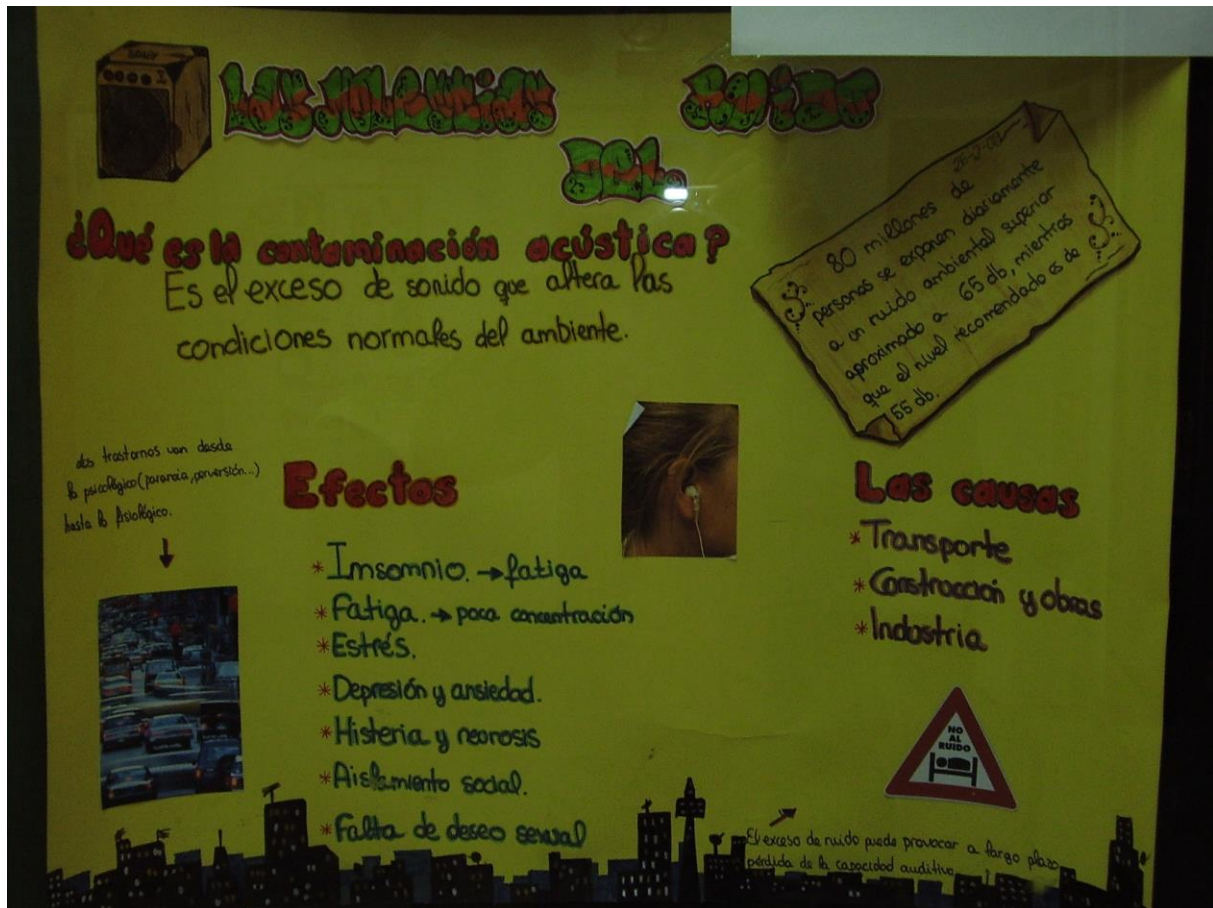


Figure 5: Science class mural



**Figure 6: Spanish language and literature class mural**

In short, students are able to legitimately introduce their aesthetics (including those that draw from graffiti conventions) into the curricular texts that are displayed in the school. Thus, when artifacts are informally produced and placed by students at ICA we could hypothesize that the variety of texts created by students would be heterogeneously displayed across school spaces. This is not the case. Political texts primarily occupy formal and official spaces while graffiti tends to occupy informal and unofficial spaces in the school. As we will see, part of the school staff explicitly sympathized with anarka/left-wing political activism and texts while graffiti was explicitly considered vandalism inside the school and was proscribed. Further, this distribution and institutional treatment experienced transformations during the two years of the study. Political texts and anarka artifacts had continuous official

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visibility across both academic years. In contrast, graffiti was relatively contained during the first year of the study and then became increasingly visible the second year of the study - a transformation that, chronologically, paralleled the significant increase in the number of Latin American origin students and changes in the school administration.

**Political Texts and Graffiti at IES Central Aluche.** During the two years of the study, politically oriented texts occupied most of the space available in student bulletin boards and had, in practice, an almost exclusive use of a stand that was placed in the entrance hall next to the library. The following figures show two student bulletin boards in different parts of the school. Figure 7 shows the bulletin board in a Baccalaureate classroom. The whole board is occupied by texts that reflect the concerns of anarka students at ICA: activities at the local squatter house, a rally organized by the ‘Madrid Anti-fascist consortium’ and different statements against the implementation of the reform processes that Spanish universities were undergoing in the framework of European Union policies (the ‘Bologna agreement’). The implication in the protests against reforms in higher education is especially relevant in this context. On one hand, the critique is aligned with certain arguments - i.e. those against the introduction of neo-liberal policies in higher education. On the other hand, more importantly for the analysis of this article, it reflects anarka students’ orientation towards University-type higher education as their expected/desired outcome - an educational itinerary that is obviously the expected outcome for Baccalaureate students but not necessarily for all Spanish ESO students.

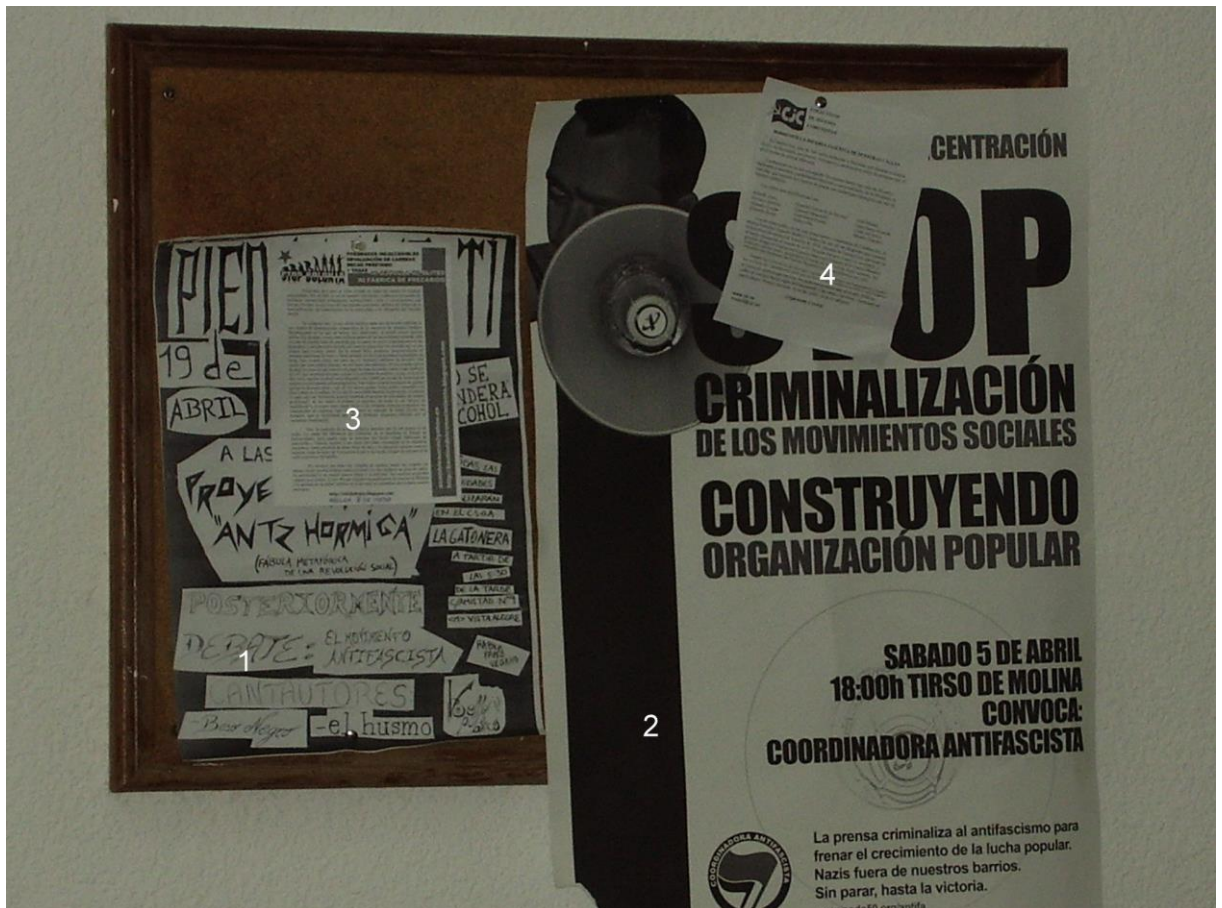


Figure 7: Bulletin board in Baccalaureate classroom (March 2008)

(1): Festival announcement from the local squatter house, (2) Rally in favor of social movements organized by the 'Antifascist consortium', (3-4) Manifestos against the 'Bologna' reform in higher education.



**Figure 8: Bulletin board in the main entrance to the court-yard (May 2009)**

(1-2-3-4): Events in favor of the II and III Spanish Republic, (5-6-7) Manifestos against the ‘Bologna’ reform in higher education, (8) Collage in favor of environmentally-conscious industrial policies, (9) Rap concert at the local squatter house, (10) School student assembly announcement.

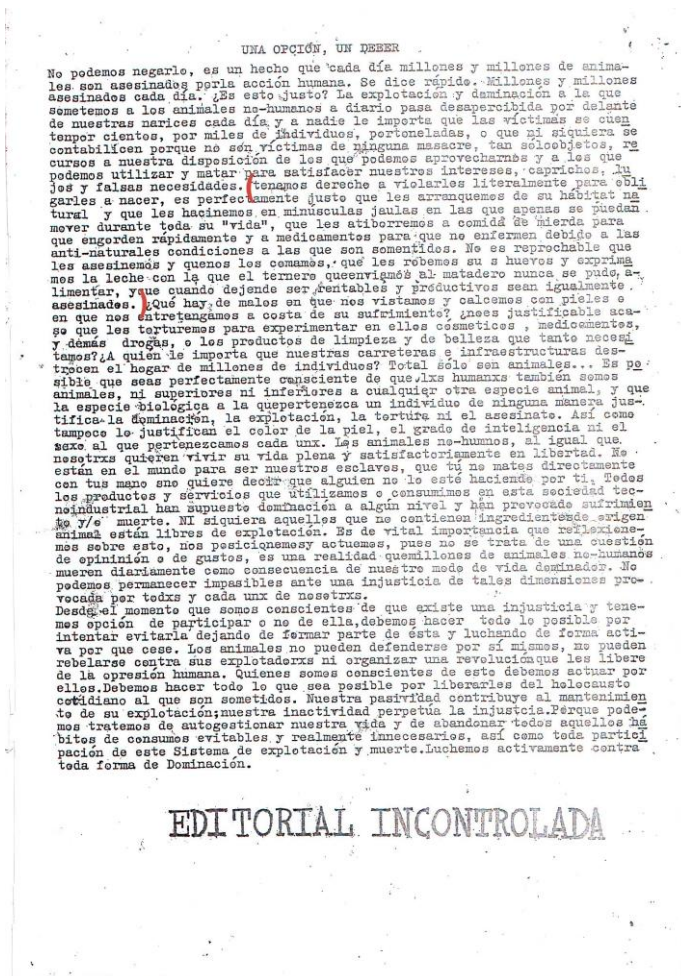
These concerns continue to be present in the bulletin board placed in the main hall entrance to the court-yard (Figure 8). This bulletin board is for all the students in the school but it is again colonized by anarka artifacts in which some themes are repeated - the



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programming at the squatter house and anti-Bologna manifestos - and other new themes are developed such as activities in favor of re-instating a Spanish Republic<sup>8</sup> or a manifesto in defense of animal rights. The bulletin board also has an announcement for a general student assembly organized by the 'ICA Student Association'. This assembly is open to all students but, in practice, it basically captures the interests of politically-mobilized students (i.e. left-wing students) and, for example, the order of the day for the assembly has as its first point discussing actions around 'Bologna'.

This presence in formal spaces continues in other sites. As said above, next to the library entrance there was a small wooden stand where different pamphlets and notices could be placed. Frequently this stand held copies of a text titled 'Uncontrolled editorial' *Editorial Incontrolada* produced in an A7 photocopied paper sheet primarily composed of courier font text (i.e. as if written in an old-fashioned typing machine). Figure 9 shows an image of one editorial focused on animal rights:



Translated extract (marked in red brackets above)

(...)

we literally have the right to rape them so they can give birth, it is perfectly fair that we pull them out of their natural habitat and jam them in tiny cages where they can hardly move during their lives, that we stuff them with shitty food so they fatten quickly and with medications so they don't get sick from living in these unnatural conditions we have forced them into. We can't question that we murder them, eat them, that we steal their eggs and take their milk that will never feed the calf we sent to the slaughterhouse and that when they are not any longer profitable and productive we also murder them.

(...)

**Figure 9: Uncontrolled editorial on the library stand**

Finally, other school-wide student-led initiatives also seem to make especially visible the contribution of left-wing students. Before the 2008-09 Christmas break some students

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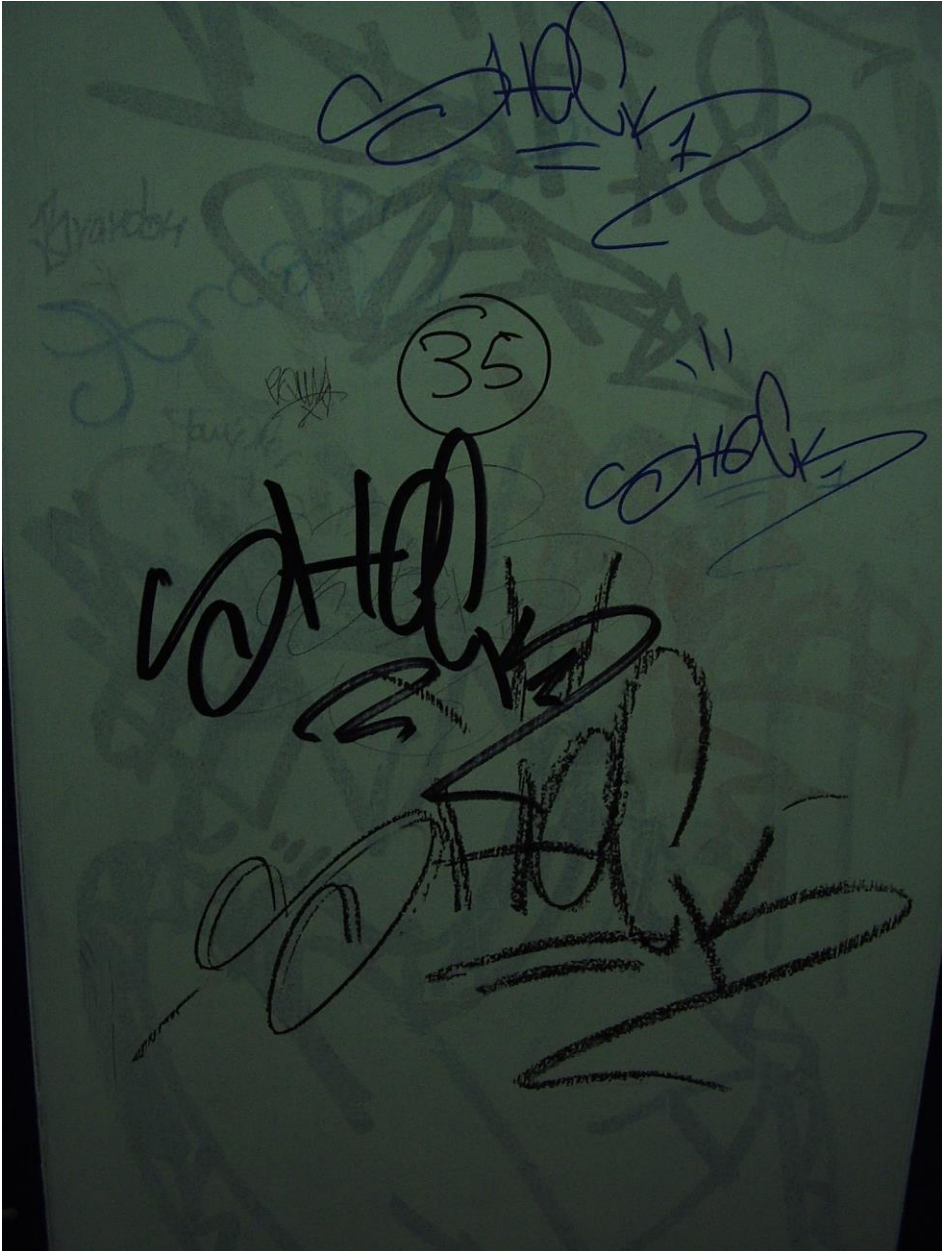
organized, with the authorization and support of the school head-team, a ‘Charity Flea Market’ *Rastrillo Solidario* in the school entrance hall and the banners they set up were broadly aligned with ‘anarka aesthetics’ such as a black-dark red contrast in the use of color or cloth material to build the banner (see Figure 10; image can be viewed in color online).



**Figure 10: Charity flea-market banner (December 2008)**

In contrast, graffiti concentrated in informal / non-official spaces of the school. During the 2007-08 period graffiti texts were mostly limited to simple signatures placed in spaces such as the back doors of bathroom stalls, back parts of stairways or secluded corners in the playground. These signatures were created with permanent markers or even less durable materials such as chalk as the following images show:

-----  
INSERT FIGURE 11A, FIGURE 11B, FIGURE 11C, FIGURE 12D HERE  
-----







Figures 11: Graffiti signatures (2007-08 school-year)

The three images in Figures 11 show different graffiti signatures placed in informal school areas: Figure 11a shows a set of overlapping signatures on the inner-side of a student bathroom door - as the image suggests this door has been repeatedly cleaned but traces of older signatures persist; Figure 11b and Figure 11c show permanent marker signatures placed on the side of a stairway and the glass protection of the emergency fire-hose in the court-yard. During the first year of the study, graffiti was formally proscribed in the school, considered vandalism and a disciplinary issue, as the following episode shows:

**Excerpt 6: Staff meeting of year four tutors**

Monday 21 April 2008

Juana, a member of the school head-team, reminds teachers that students who are in ESO are not allowed to leave the school during recess, explaining once again that the school rule is organized around school years and

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not age, so it does not matter if ESO students are 16 years old or above: they have to stay inside the school during recess. Last week she found the whole ‘diversification’ class outside school bounds, so they are punished without recess for all of this week. Also, she informs teachers that bathrooms are again being vandalized and if this persists they will have to close the bathrooms, although she thinks that it’s not the year four students who are doing this.

More generally, as Juan (the Ecuadorian student discussed in Figure 1 and Figure 3a) stated the only safe place to leave a “signature” in class that may last have some durability was on the side of a desk - and consequently student traces in class desks, in general, were very subdued (Calvo, 2010). Given this insecure status it seems understandable that graffiti productions were relatively simple and produced with less durable materials (chalk, ink markers, etc.). Consequently, within ICA, the only place where more elaborate graffiti was visible during this first year was in the exterior sides of the school walls, as Figure 12 shows:



Figure 12: Exterior-side of school wall (2007-08 school year)

The following school year, in which the demographics of the school population changed and there was a new head team running the school, graffiti became increasingly visible. Graffiti artwork and texts were still limited to informal spaces such as the school court-yard but increased in quantity and ‘quality’. Walls or infrastructures that were previously ‘clean’, in the 2008-09 school-year were marked with numerous signatures, produced with chalk and permanent markers. Also, several larger spray-painted pieces appeared during this second year, as the images in Figures 13 show:







**Figures 13: Graffiti pieces during the 2008-09 school-year**

All these photographs were taken in the school courtyard. They show chalk and permanent marker signatures in a corner of a basketball court (Figure 13a) and on an emergency stairway behind the annex building where the school gym and auditorium are located (Figure 13b). The other images show more elaborate spray painted pieces, placed along the inner side of the school walls (Figure 13c) and the front wall of the annex building (Figure 13b). Most probably, these larger spray painted pieces were not made during usual school breaks. Rather, according to students and school staff, they were produced during ‘night incursions’ into the school court-yard. The school court-yard can be accessed and exited by jumping over the school outer walls, often from a particular corner where a tree facilitates this process (Calvo, 2010). Thus, such actions do not require entering the school building which is locked and empty during the night. Indeed, this is the most likely explanation and if so it is worth mentioning that these ‘incursions’ did not seem to be voiced or raise concern during staff meetings of the 2008-09 school-year. In contrast, the previous school-year the school was broken into during the night, and all of the teachers’ PDAs were stolen from a locked closet inside the teacher staff room. This constituted a major episode that resulted in a police report and an investigation into the possible involvement of students in the robbery.

Finally, interestingly, the outer-walls of the school premises were ‘cleaned’ and all the graffiti that decorated them the previous year disappeared - as shown in Figure 14 which was taken approximately a year later in the same area as Figure 12. It is worth mentioning that the presence of an external clean wall in the spring of 2009 occurs precisely at the time when the application and enrollment process for the following academic year is opened in Spanish schools. In the current socio-political and financial scenario this process pushes schools to engage in substantial public promotional work and increased communication with potential students and families. In this context, it appears that ICA would rather not have the presence

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of graffiti as a conspicuous feature of the school. For example, in the current version of the schools webpage (accessed February 9, 2011) there are several photographs of the courtyard and sports courts, which are proudly presented as emblematic features of the school, where all traces of graffiti are completely absent. More so, the presence and place of graffiti at ICA contrasts with how graffiti is arranged in other schools of the district where vocational training programs are offered - see Poveda, Jociles and Franzé (2009) and Poveda, Jociles, Franzé, Moscoso and Calvo (2012) for a discussion of a visit to these schools by ICA students.



**Figure 14: Exterior side of school wall (May 2009)**

To summarize, infrastructures at ICA serve as a platform for the placing and display of different student generated (although not necessarily created) literacy products. These artifacts are distributed in the school premises along a series of oppositions between formal/official

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and informal/unofficial space. The youth expressive styles that have these literacy products as part of their repertory seem to be tied to different types of students (cf. Anderson, 2009) in the school: primarily Spanish and more academically oriented (anarkas) vs. primarily Latin American origin and less academically oriented (reggaetonero). This set of conditions configure ICA's semiotic ideology, the "basic assumptions about what signs are and how they function in the world" (Keane, 2003, p. 419), thus returning to the concepts that opened this article it should be possible to synthesize how these artifacts are read and how this reading positions the students who are tied to the artifacts.

**Ideologies of Emplacement of Students' Artifacts at ICA.** In Cresswell's terms (1996, 2004) graffiti is located - i.e. emplaced in terms of Scollon and Scollon (2003) – out of place. It is situated in an institutionally marginal position and throughout the two years of the study was managed ambivalently by successive head teams in the school. In contrast, political texts are in place. They make use of formal and institutionally sanctioned display areas and have continued support by the school's head team and teacher staff. Drawing on Foucault (1986), ICA contains a series of *heteropias*, "singular spaces to be found in some given social spaces whose functions are different or even the opposite of others" (Foucault, 1984, p. 252), indexed by the presence of particular semiotic artifacts, which place students in different positions of the socio-academic order of the school. Spanish origin students seem to occupy a core position in the institutional order of the school and many follow the complete educational path that is offered in the school (ESO and pre-university Baccalaureate). Latin American students, despite their increasingly numerical visibility, seem to occupy a marginal position in the academic-institutional structure of the school and, as the figures in the school suggest (Poveda, Jociles and Franzé, 200; Poveda, 2011), are directed towards peripheral educational programs or resources outside ICA that lead to early entry in the labor market.

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This socio-spatial order is visible in the way adults in the school interpret students' literacy products, as can be seen in the contrasts between two conversations I held with different members of the counseling department:

**Excerpt 7: Conversation with Maria (from field-notes, April 2008)**

I am walking with Maria, the school social worker during the 2007-08 school-year, around the school. We are placing announcements of the video workshop the research team is organizing at different spots in the school that Maria considers strategic because lots of students walk by them. We eventually go to the bulletin board next to the court-yard and she looks at a poster of an anti-racist rally that has already taken place. She mentions that she gave that poster to the students and that they have not taken it down, so "they must like it". She moves around some other posters to put up the video workshop announcement but, generally, she leaves the posters and pamphlets that students have placed there.

**Excerpt 8: Conversation with Enrique (from field-notes, May 2009)**

I am talking to Enrique, a Latin American intercultural mediator who has started working in the school this academic year, about my preliminary analysis of the texts in the school and the activity I want to prepare with students to continue exploring the topic. He says that he has noticed that throughout the school there are quite a few "political" posters and that now that he thinks about it, "his students" (the Latin American students he counsels more closely) never talk about these texts, as if they were not their business, even though they talk about many things. I ask him if they talk about music and he says "100% of the time, they are all into reggaeton, it's the music they listen too, they don't even follow Spanish pop music". Later he tells me that his students have asked him to ask the school library to also include reggaeton music in their catalogue; which he thinks is a good idea since "45% of the student body is of immigrant origin and the library should reflect their tastes".

Here, two adults in the school who given their professional role tend to have a relationship with students that is not restricted to content matter teaching, talk about students' expressive styles and their own relationship with these. Maria, a Spanish social worker, describes how she sympathizes with anarka students' initiatives and how she provided materials for them (i.e. a poster announcing an anti-fascist rally). Enrique, an intercultural mediator, talks about the very different interests that the Latin American students he works with have outside the school walls and how the political texts that populate the school have no

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relevance to them. In short, the comments of these adults capture the semiotic order that is produced through the emplacement of different literacy artifacts.

Several examples from students' interactions with teachers and their own graffiti activity suggest that these distinctions are also relevant to students. For example, on the way to a visit to a technical training secondary school organized by members of the counseling department for year four ESO students, José Francisco (a Spanish student self-identified as a 'radical leftist'), took a permanent marker from his pocket and drew the communist hammer and sickle on the back of a bus-stop sign as we were arriving at the school. Maria, the social worker, was walking behind José Francisco, witnessed these actions but did not make any commentaries. Yet, a few weeks earlier Cristina and Rocio, two Spanish origin students in the same class and peer network as José Francisco, took the photograph captured in Figure 11c. The theme of their photographs was to make visible the different parts of the school that were deteriorated and soiled – thus seemed to interpret graffiti inside the school in similar terms as those presented by the school head-staff in Excerpt 6 (interestingly, Cristina and Rocio are part of the 'diversification class' that was punished without recess for leaving the school premises during school hours). In contrast, on another occasion Aurora (the school counselor and teacher of a year two ESO class) entered her classroom and found two students, Ricardo (Ecuadorian) and Paco (Spanish), practicing graffiti signatures with chalk on the blackboard. When she saw this, she jokingly commented, as she erased the signatures, that "now she can see if she recognizes similar signatures in other parts of the school". These students took the photograph captured in Figure 11b - which other classmates later suggested depicted Ricardo's signature.

In short, various strands of data converge and give meaning to the observable differences in location and nature of the texts and artifacts that students at ICA produce, consume and place within the confines of ICA. The findings suggest a relatively stable

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distribution of literacy products in space that is structured along ideological divides, tied to students with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and associated with divergent educational trajectories. However, other findings, such as Enrique's report of how Latin American students would like to have reggaeton incorporated into the library catalogue (which includes movies and other popular musical artists) or the visibility of reggaeton in the musical festival described at the opening of the article, also suggests that certain transformations were taking place at ICA. During the second year of the study Latino expressive practices, even though they appear to be primarily leisure-related, seemed to be much more visible in informal spaces and were experiencing some penetration in formal institutional structures. Further, these divides are not perfect and, as I have shown in this article, there are points of contact between Spanish and Latin American students through hip-hop music and culture (if defined broadly) and a number of students who do not fit within the more common associations I have presented so far. Nonetheless, it is possible to extract some general trends and conceptual implications from the analysis of this semiotic order.

### **Discussion**

The result of all the interconnections I have spelled out is that the semiotic landscape of the school 'sends messages' about the social and academic position of Latin American and Spanish origin students in the school. Following Ballestín's (2011) general structuration of students' school experiences it seems that the penetration of anarka artifacts in ICA helped Spanish origin students identify with a path of *engagement with the academic and social life of the school*. In contrast, the position of reggaetonero artifacts in the school was congruent with a path where Latin American students were *engaged with the social life of the school but disengaged with the academic life of the school*.

The findings from other parts of the ethnography (Poveda, Jociles and Franzé, 2009; Poveda, 2011) underscore how Latin American students were in a marginal position within

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the academic-curricular structure of the school. Nonetheless, this did not preclude Latin American students from actively participating in school celebrations, appropriate informal spaces of the school and develop their peer sociability within school structures. Other sources of data support this construction of ICA as primarily a space for peer sociability. For example, in several of the audio-visual productions that Latino students posted on the web they included photographs of themselves taken within the school (in classrooms, hallways, the court-yard, etc.). During the second year of the study several of the Latin American students the research team had previously followed left ICA to go to other technical training programs not offered there. Yet, these students would still come to visit their friends during school breaks and enter the court-yard or meet their friends at the end of the school-day at the school entrance (Calvo, 2010). In other words, for these Latin American students (current and former) ICA was continuously construed as a space for sociability and peer relations but not necessarily for academic-professional advancement.

Having said this, it is important to point out that any deterministic connection between ethnic origin, expressive style and academic trajectory must be substantially hedged. Numerous observations during the study provide counterexamples to most associations. There were Spanish students who consumed reggaeton music, Spanish students who participated in graffiti and hip-hop (although arguably, a 'different kind' of hip-hop and graffiti), a few Latin American students who had successful academic careers, left-wing students with Latin American backgrounds, anarka students who failed in school, etc. Nonetheless, this does not undermine the notion that anarka and reggaetonero semiotic artifacts (political texts, hip-hop/reggaeton lyrics, graffiti, etc.) favored an *interpellation* (Althusser, 1971; Moje and Luke, 2009) within the school that associated artifacts with particular ethnic and cultural backgrounds – and here it is important to remember how Althusser (1971, pp. 173-174) stated that interpellations work by transforming 'individuals' into 'subjects': by treating individuals



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within ideologically and institutionally constructed social categories. Equally, the emplacement of artifacts in the school socially positioned their producers in particular ways. In short, the connections should be seen as a set of discursive constructions that contributed to regulate social practices in the school rather than a series of statistical correlations. Obviously the semiotic landscape of the school was not the main 'causal force' in the organization of students' academic careers -which were created in actual classroom and assessment practices, decisions taken by students, families, teachers, the counseling department, etc. However, the semiotic landscape of the school was not independent of these processes and was intertwined with the social and educational ideologies that regulated school life.

Returning to the opening concepts of this article, with my analysis I have tried to show how these associations were the result of specific re-constructions within the school of expressive styles and discourses that were generated in other social settings and wider urban youth cultures. In other words, the semiotic landscape of IES Central Aluche reflected a particular centering (Hanks, 2000) of anarka and graffiti texts. This re-contextualization/entextualization becomes clearer if we examine some of the potential contradictions that emerged between the broader tenets of anarka ideology, reggaeton or graffiti and their realization within ICA. For example, anarka ideology and its social outcomes such as squatter housing (e.g. Squatting Europe Collective, 2010), direct social protest and alternative forms of social mobilization/economic organization seems to be very much 'out of place' and in direct opposition to dominant/mainstream social ideologies and policies. Nevertheless, inside ICA, anarka initiatives were clearly expressed within institutionally-appropriate confines: the vast majority of political texts and left-wing symbols were placed in the appropriate bulletin boards, rather than inscribed as graffiti in walls or other structures of the building (in contrast to what may be the case outside ICA as I showed earlier), political/social events made use of the resources of the school (auditorium, main hall banners,

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etc.) and anarka initiatives moved through appropriate channels of communication. For example, the public reading of an anti-fascist manifesto in the opening extract, the charity event captured in Figure 10 or the conversation captured in Excerpt 7 show how anarka initiatives required endorsement from the school administration to take place and/or were supported by individual teachers. Moreso, even though anarka/left-wing students have as one of their strongest ideological identity traits an anti-racist ideology they do not seem to be particularly disturbed by the fact that they participate in largely mono-cultural peer networks or that classrooms are visibly structured along ethnic (and gender) lines (Poveda, Jociles and Frazé, 2009; Poveda, 2011; Calvo, 2010). In a related matter, we have seen how Spanish origin students engaged in hip-hop almost stubbornly refuse to recognize any political value to the lyrics and music produced by their Latino reggaetonero peers (Excerpt 1).

In a way, this institutional assimilation of left-wing/anarka discourses is congruent with the schools' historical origin and mission. It is a state-run educational institution in a traditionally working class district serving primarily working class students and families (historically Spanish migrants from other parts of the country and now alongside foreign immigrant families) and it reflects the social ideologies and educational expectations that have been socially dominant in this city district for the past decades. From this perspective, the recent incorporation of immigrant students in the district and the school involves a substantial reorganization of this social order. At the time of the study, this reorganization had resulted in an educational scenario where Latin American students were strongly geared towards non-academic educational tracks and the educational work with immigrant students was often transferred from 'ordinary classroom teachers' to specialized professionals such as intercultural mediators, the counseling department, after-school tutors or, eventually, alternative educational programs outside ICA. My claim is that Latin American students' appropriation of the schools' semiotic landscape was somewhat congruent with this social

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order: graffiti/reggaeton, as articulated within the school as 'Latino artifacts', downplay their potential political significance and are rather construed as elements of peer sociability and cohesion. Graffiti in the school did not seem to highlight socio-political concerns similar to those discussed in other analysis of graffiti in urban contexts (cf. Iddings, McCafferty and da Silva, 2011; Figueroa-Saavedra, 2007). Over time, graffiti inside ICA made itself present in informal spaces of the school such as the court-yard, the place for peer sociability and relations and where even ex-students from the school met with their old classmates. The reggaeton compositions by ICA students I have examined have a discernible political component but the themes they develop, as well as other symbols and logos present in their virtual communication (Calvo, 2010), seem to highlight national/cultural pride or social inequalities in a more generalized sense more than address the immediate social-educational realities that the students who create them experience. Indeed, the schools' institutional policy towards graffiti and other Latino expressive products facilitates this positioning; yet I have also shown how when Latino students want to make their interests visible to the school head team (such as when they suggest having more reggaeton music in the library) these requests are channeled indirectly through the intercultural mediator - a strategy that, regardless of the socio-educational value we might attribute to this professional role, also indexes how Latin American students' relationship *vis a vis* the school authorities is not the same as that of other Spanish origin students (see Rivera, 2010 for a similar argument in another Spanish context about the role of intercultural/linguistic mediators as an external and specialized agent).

Given the complex web of interrelationships that I have argued are taking place at ICA it is important to consider how these findings might be generalizable to other settings or wider socio-educational patterns taking place in Spain. Latin American students' less favorable academic trajectories at ICA is very much in line with the findings of several other studies conducted in Spain (e.g. Patiño, 2007; Pedoné, 2005; Gibson and Carrasco, 2009). The role

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that adolescent youth styles play in the organization of peer groups is also something repeatedly reported across ethnographic studies in different parts of the world (Heller, 1999; Eckert, 2000; Levinson, 2002; Soto, 2008) and the particular labels and styles that circulate in this school also resonate with wider discourses in Spanish society and Spanish secondary schools – yet these have received very little scholarly attention, except for some a policy-oriented study on Latino adolescents (Feixa, 2005) or a much older survey of adolescents political choices (Jiménez and García, 1990). What is particular to this school is the specific shape these discourses have taken in relation to the institutional context and immediate social reality they unfold in. The dynamics I have discussed in relation to Spanish anarka and reggaetonero Latin American students were, in part, the result of the demographic particularities of the school (i.e. a primarily working class student-body with an growing number of immigrant students from one particular region of the world). Therefore, they will probably vary across locations as the demographics of each school and neighborhood change. Further, as something particular to this school and which I will not claim can be generalized in any empirical sense, the meaning and the specific realization of each expressive style within the school (as a particular community of practice) is the product of the institutional, social and ideological processes that unfolded at ICA and that I have discussed in this article, so it is doubtful that they will matched in similar terms in other school sites. More importantly, the findings presented in this article should not be read as a general report about graffiti, political texts, Latin American students in Spanish education or even Spanish left-wing youth. This article is an analysis of the role a school's semiotic landscape can play in the structuration of social and educational inequalities, and it has put forward a number of conceptual tools and arguments. In the final conclusions of this article I will attempt to spell out what type of contribution these tools make to literacy research.

### **Final Comments**

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My analysis has established a dialogue between concepts drawn from social geography, semiotics, literacy studies and linguistic anthropology that I believe are especially productive to examine the semiotic landscape and literacy artifacts of contemporary educational institutions. This line of analysis is especially feasible within ethnographically oriented studies where multiple strands of data can be brought to bear to the analysis. Further, I have argued that the construction of the semiotic landscape and the role of literacy artifacts can be connected to the construction of socio-educational inequalities (and not only literacy learning in a purely instrumental sense). To my knowledge, the analysis I have proposed is not very common either in the Spanish research context or the international literature, so there a number of areas for future research that are addressed in this article.

The concepts I introduce draw on the recent attention to spatiality in literacy research (e.g. Leander and Sheeny, 2004; Handsfield, Crumpler and Dean, 2010) but, in my view, they advance the effort of making space and place tangible research objects for literacy studies. Work drawing from semiotics and linguistic anthropology focused on emplacement and indexicality (Scollon and Scollon, 2003; Silverstein, 2003; Nesper, 2004; Collins and Slembrouck, 2007; Blommaert, 2010) provide tools to unpack the social, historical and institutional significance of location of literacy and semiotic objects in space within specific research settings. Equally, alongside spatiality, drawing from a social semiotic perspective (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006), my analysis illustrates the importance of paying attention to the materiality and physical reality of literacy objects (Brandt and Clinton, 2002; Kell, 2009).

This general attention to spatiality illustrates the current visibility that social geography has in social theory in general (e.g. Harvey, 1990) and also recent educational research (e.g. Taylor, 2009), an interest that in this article is specified in relation to literacy practices and semiotic artifacts in educational settings. In particular, this article focuses on the

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potential dialogue between literacy and geographical research to examine relatively unexplored dimensions of the construction of socio-educational inequalities. This intersection illustrates the relevance of work focused on the geographies of transgression, deviance, resistance and transgression (Cresswell, 1996, 2004) for literacy research and opens a new dialogue for a broad range of literacy researchers who are concerned with social inequalities.

### **Author statement**

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## Notes

1. The variety of texts I will discuss under this label do not seem to have a referent that is as easily recognizable as graffiti so, for lack of a better term, in this article I will describe them as ‘political texts’. I will use ‘text’, which has its own set of conceptual implications and connotations, in favor of other terms such as ‘propaganda’, ‘logos’, or ‘banners’ given the ideological and semiotic pre-conceptions that these terms also carry.

2. This contrasts with the dichotomies that are often reported about high schools in the United States (Foley, 1990; Eckert, 2000; Ortner, 2002), where the ‘high school’ itself seems to be the central producer of identity categories.

3. Very schematically and disregarding significant cross-national differences these labels would roughly refer to different expressive styles: ‘punk’ *punki*, ‘clubber’ *pokero* and ‘preppy’ *pijo*.

4. As pointed out by one of the reviewers, readers may not be familiar with reggaeton. To quote her/him: “it is a Spanish-language hip-hop style whose epicenter is Puerto Rico, but which has diffused internationally, especially in Spanish-speaking countries (...) Reggaeton can be clearly political, as in the case of *Calle 13*, but is often depicted in the media as highly sexualized in its lyrics and choreographies”.

5. An examination of the complexities, differences, forms of engagement and production of hip-hop and related musical styles by students at ICA would deserve an analysis of its own that departs from the goals of this article. In this article I present examples from hip-hop to

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illustrate particular points or as instances of literacy products in the secondary school but I will not delve into their significance in relation to hip-hop as a cultural movement in itself.

6. To protect the anonymity of the research site the original Spanish version of the statement cannot be provided. Also, the English translation has been slightly modified so an automatic translation and search by web-based engines cannot be easily performed.

7. Throughout the study the staff at the school never expressed a concern about their students being involved in ‘Latino gangs’ (*bandas latinas*) -which have increasingly drawn media attention in Spain- nor did they consider this an important issue in the life of the school. However, for particular students with more problematic academic careers, the members of the counseling department did pay attention to how these students adopted more ‘gang-inspired’ aesthetics and demeanor (e.g. bandanas, baggy pants, jewelry, body and hand poses, etc.).

8. Spain is currently politically organized as a Parliamentary Monarchy. The II Spanish Republic was derogated with Franco’s victory during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939).



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