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SCRIBBLESCHOLAR WAS HERE: Confessional Notes of a Vandal Academic

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SCRIBBLESCHOLAR WAS HERE:
CONFESSIONAL NOTES OF A VANDAL ACADEMIC

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By

Clay Cleveland Shields

Lexington, Kentucky

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Lexington, Kentucky

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

SCRIBBLESCHOLAR WAS HERE: CONFESSIONAL NOTES OF A VANDAL ACADEMIC

As a (former) vandal-punk in the academy, I often fear succumbing to Ivory Tower Stockholm syndrome. The identities I perform, vandal-punk and scholar, ideologically clash to the point that they often feel irreconcilable. By codemeshing the high-low discourses associated with these adopted cultures, I attempt to disrupt any hierarchal privileging of either, instead searching for a way to live with and harness both.

KEYWORDS: Deviance, Graffiti, Punk, Identity Performance, Academia

Clay Shields

8 August, 2015

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“You become so numb to all the images that you’re assaulted with, that it takes, potentially, something absurd to make you question the rest of what you’re being confronted with.” (Shepard Fairey, Interview from *Bomb It*, 2007.)

“I was, after the fashion of humanity, in love with my name, and, as young educated people commonly do, I wrote it everywhere.” (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, cited in *Bomb It*, originally found in *From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, 1811.)

1. Throwing Up Citations

Similar to the way academics are able to infer the approximate historical and social roots of a text, or even its stylistic influences (to say that something is Orwellian, or DFW-esque, for example), graffiti writers carry a mental catalogue of lettering styles. Thanks to the internet, scores of documentaries, and hundreds of coffee-table books, any bored kid in Kentucky can see flicks of graffiti in nearly every metropolis across the world. While some people think of cities’ architectural styles or sports mascots, *graficionados* think Philly tall-hands, Baltimore one-liner complicators, Brazilian *pixação*.¹ In many instances, graffiti writers are even able to point to specific ways of drawing individual letters that are indelibly linked to particular vandals.² As in any form of creative expression, those with trained eyes can easily perceive the difference between biting and what amounts to citing, between stylistic plagiarism and proof you’ve done your homework, the derivative and the innovative. Ultimately, this discussion is about

¹ Tags are the signatures of vandals. Tall-hands are tags that stretch from the ground to as high up as the vandal can reach. One-liners are a type of tag executed in a single, unbroken line; complicators take this form and add many beats and superfluous elements to each letter, making the tag illegible to non-writers. *Pixação* is a cryptic style of graffiti lettering unique to Brazilian cities.

²One example each. A lot of taggers give the tail of their lower-case “e’s” a sharp “v” shape, but EARSNOT (IRAK crew founder) tweaked this common graffiti lettering trope by snapping the tail into a form somewhere between the right angle serif-spur of upper-case serified “L’s,” and the small loop before the finial in cursive “L’s”. The (bubble letter) throwie “S” SKUF (YKK) uses is somehow cartoony even when he does not incorporate eyes and a mouth—the top reminds me of the Arby’s hat. Both have touted their unique first letters and referenced toys biting them in graffiti documentaries, EARSNOT in *Infamy*, SKUF in *Bomb It*.

what we, as (graffiti) writers, *do* with our influences, how we incorporate them into our own style by doing the hard work of copying others until we are copying ourselves.

In this essay, for the most part, I have tweaked academic citation conventions not only to disrupt the decorum of scholarly prose and its complicit role in re-edifying the distinction between “high” and “low” discourse, but also because, as a highly privileged individual (white, middle class, educated, First World, straight, mono-amorous, able-bodied, young, adult, male-identified, male), I fear that standard citation methods would all but force me to (mis)appropriate the identity performance scholars who have most influenced my essay, theorists who carry a much greater burden than I. Avoiding the invocation of particular academics may not completely prevent me from biting, but it does force me to articulate my feelings in my own words, rather than relying on someone else’s highly specific and personal concepts of identity when engaging race, ethnic identity, sexuality, gender, ability, etc. Obviously, these omissions could also be perceived as my failure to give credit where credit is due—a heinous oversight, an experiential pillaging on my part, the worst form of scholarly biting. But wielding the words of others to describe my very different experiences seems a much more treacherous path.

I could, for example, contextualize the hell out of DuBois’s concepts of double-consciousness to describe my own deviant-academic two-ness, but this approach, while giving DuBois a nod, would allow me to avoid the harder task of describing *my* personal experiences of identity performance(s). Not to mention the fact that my white-boy usage, in its well-meaning effort to broaden DuBois’s concepts, could also result in nothing

more than a watering down, a despicable bleaching. Hopefully my alternative strategy prevents me from casually copying-and-pasting their experiences within my own.

One way graffiti writers own their influences is by throwing them up: tagging their mentors' names alongside, or within, their own pieces. Sometimes, these individuals have never met in person, but vandals everywhere still feel compelled to show respect, to pay tribute to the all-city Queens and Kings.³ Here, I shout out those who helped me find my words within their own: Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and the rest of the radical women of color of *This Bridge Called My Back*, José Esteban Muñoz, W.E.B. DuBois, Vershawn Ashanti Young, Rusty Barrett, Erik Reece, Janet Eldred, Randall Roorda, Nikky Finney. You will always be Queens and Kings, especially to me.

2. Orientation

Every time I had been to the Patterson Office Tower on the University of Kentucky⁴ campus, my teenage friends and I got chased away by security guards for skateboarding on the brick base of the namesake's bronze. Even during summer break, we could only hope for five minutes, enough to do some carves and slappy wallies⁵ off the pyramid foundation as the college's first president James K. Patterson presided, book and staff in hand, dignified as a dollar bill. I had no practical reason to know the name of the man draped in metal or the tower above him until one morning in August of 2011 when, following directions emailed by administrators, I climbed a short but steep hill and

³ All-city is when a vandal puts up graffiti in all areas of a city—e.g., in all five boroughs of NYC. This idea has now expanded to all-country, or even, to the international level. The title of Queen or King is given to prolific vandals who have earned the respect of their peers over time.

⁴ Hereafter, POT and UK respectively.

⁵ Slappies are an old school group of skateboard tricks which arguably predate the Ollie; basically, you grind or wall ride by shifting your weight and carving directly onto the obstacle instead of using an ollie. Wallies are slappy wall rides where you also ramp off the object.

realized that the tower I had skated beneath years before was also to be the location of my first teaching orientation.

The blueprint floor plan for most of POT resembles the shape of a squared-off figure eight, with classrooms, offices, and conference rooms along the inner and outer perimeters and elevator shafts and stairwells in place of the hollow cores. Eighteen stories, stacked like a column of cinderblocks. I didn't notice this rough likeness until much later, but even if I had, I could not have shared the observation with anyone because I boarded the elevator alone.

The linoleum and silence of the lobby were replaced by carpet, dark wood, and a drift of voices. Turning left, I faced a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, a large room constituting the whole south-east side of the top floor, the highest point on the university's grounds, taller even than the twenty-three-floor Kirwan-Blanding complex due to POT's base elevation. The word panopticon came to mind, but I allowed only a quick smirk, because I had come fully into the room, and nearby several people were introducing themselves at the head of a long fold-out table covered with coffee carafes, plastic mugs, waxy-looking danishes, and several stacks of paper handouts.

If visually fitting in was my goal, I had chosen my attire well: chinos bought specifically for this occasion and a red Lacoste given to me by a friend, the only shirt I own that fits into the annoying little realm of men's fashion where all business-casual shirts require obnoxiously cute patches of whales or other marine-life embroideries on the left breast. Introductions in a professional setting converge the worst possible conditions under which to meet me. If it's a group, I clam up after shaking hands and immediately forget everyone's names, as I did upon approaching the small group of early arrivers. If

it's an individual, I botch the whole thing by trying to rush past the script of trading almas and hometowns, often jamming in inane observations and bad jokes in a flailing attempt to bring our actual personalities to the fore. As more Teaching Assistants,⁶ faculty, and administrators arrived, several conversation huddles formed, but each seemed captained by doctoral students comparing their former teaching experiences. I became acutely aware I was not only the youngest, as expected, but also the most inexperienced, as feared. So, when someone who appeared close to my age walked past, I latched on, assuming she must also be an incoming Master's student, fresh out of college. After we exchanged names, she said she had come to Kentucky from Oman to attend the program. "O-man! Long way!" I blurted like a giddy yokel. I may as well have elbowed her ribs while waving an American flag and crossing my eyes. Thankfully, my new colleague either did not hear me, or simply ignored the lazy pun (which was a very decent thing of her to do) and we lobbed our talk back and forth until a woman stepped into the center of the small crowd, now approximately seventy people, and announced that we would be moving to a conference room in about fifteen minutes, but first, the department had provided an icebreaker scavenger hunt.

Like a BINGO sheet, the scavenger hunt was completed by finding individuals in the room that satisfied each square's criteria: "Who travelled the farthest?" "Someone who prefers pencils to pens." I had endured many iterations of this activity in K-12 and even college, but thought them behind me as an incoming graduate student and part-time composition teacher.⁷ It was not that I felt infantilized so much as micro-managed. At

⁶ Hereafter TAs.

⁷When referring to teaching in this essay, I mean my time as a Teaching Assistant—when I met with an advisor, but was the primary instructor for three course sections over the span of two semesters from Fall

least, until I glanced over the 5x5 grid. Not to put too fine a point on it, but I simply didn't care which authors my new colleagues had literary crushes on, nor was I curious whether they'd rather be in-laws with Huck Finn or Holden Caulfield. Lest I come off a churlish killjoy though, I rallied. Briefly. While those around me stoked the ice breaker questions until chit chat blossomed,⁸ I seemed to extinguish banter. The slightest pause would occur, I would fill it, and a longer pause would follow.

I abandoned all pretense of casual conversation, simply asking each of my colleagues to literally point, first to a filled-in scavenger hunt item, then to a corresponding individual. Perhaps, I have mis-colored the memory. But even with good reason to believe my colleagues liked me just fine—given that I later befriended many of them—I still cringe thinking back. Several awkward first impressions later, I inquired whether a doctoral student's cat preferred Byron or Shakespeare,⁹ wrote “WS” in the last open square, and crossed back through the elevator hallway to the conference room where I sat among dozens of rowed, stackable chairs, and glugged another thermos lid of coffee while gazing northwest across campus, toward downtown, out more floor-to-ceiling windows.

As other TAs filed in, chatter briefly permeated the air until a woman in a woven blazer took the podium at the room's front, and a hush settled without so much as a word from her smiling lips. She welcomed us, thanked us for joining them in this beautiful space with this beautiful view. She did not mention that on the day after Kent State, over two hundred protesting UK students crowded the hallways outside the conference room

2012 to Spring 2013 and a Writing Center Consultant to undergraduate, graduate, and faculty clients from Fall 2011 to Spring 2012.

⁸ No doubt the admirable intent of the icebreaker's author(s).

⁹ Full disclosure: I've had to reconstruct the spirit of these scavenger hunt items. Except for the pet cat's literary preference thing. I'll never forget that.

where we sat. She did not recount how, while trying to escape the crowd, a seventy-one year old Albert B. “Happy” Chandler—former Kentucky governor and senator, and then UK board of trustees member—punched a long-haired graduate student, Mike Greenwell, “right smack in the nose, in the schnozzola.”¹⁰ If anyone behind the podium was aware, they did not tell us that J. Edgar Hoover later sent Chandler a personal note of commendation for taking swift action in response to the campus disruptions. These are not “fun facts” fit for college brochures. This is the type of story institutions tell only when asked. No one was shot on UK’s campus during the May 5th protests, but, like Kent State, teargas was used to disperse peacefully demonstrating students, a still-unknown perpetrator set fire to a portion of the (former) AFROTC building, and the National Guard was ordered onto campus. Just outside the conference room where we TAs were gathered, an administrator punched a graduate student in the nose, and I doubt more than ten of my peers knew, including, at the time, myself.

No one punched anyone, but as part of her introductory remarks, the woman in the woven blazer did provide a history lesson, one of schism and reunion: the department we would all be teaching¹¹ for was going “live” for the first time in the Fall 2011 semester, and its mission aligned with a (inter)national trend.¹² At the risk of simplifying a pedagogical paradigm shift here, it sounded to me like there was a widespread push toward academic *specialization* around the early twentieth century that was now (re)contracting, toward more *interdisciplinary* models. Academics pick their interests.

¹⁰Happy’s words here. See “FBI Chief Hails Punch at Protestor.”

¹¹ And funded by, regardless of whether we were graduate students pursuing degrees in English Literature, Composition and Communication, Linguistics, History, Philosophy.

¹² One toward a hybrid curriculum which would (re)integrate aspects of English (Literature), Rhetoric, and Communications pedagogy, in order to instruct students on composition and analysis across multiple medias.

Capturing the complexity of this century-long debate is not one of mine. Possibly one reason for my indifference is, while the Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Media (WRD)¹³ faculty and administrators touted the unique, innovative spirit¹⁴ of UK's newest program, I was having a hard time distinguishing it from the Writing, Rhetoric, and Communications (WRC) department I had minored in during undergrad, less than two miles away at Transylvania University.

But what really made the conference room confusing and uncomfortable is that after the director (the woman in the woven blazer), most of the other segments of the orientation were presented in a tag-team fashion by an English instructor and a Composition and Communication¹⁵ instructor, which would not have been so bad, if the individual presenters had actually conveyed the collaborative spirit their shared department was meant to represent.¹⁶ Instead, when one of my fellow TAs asked about the difference between the WRD courses cross-listed as C&C and those cross-listed as English, one C&C professor¹⁷ replied that that came down to our graduate program affiliations. But she then went on to distinguish the two disciplines by saying something about how English Lit. pursued “little-t” truth, while C&C sought “Big-T” Truth. She even turned to her fellow (English department) presenter for confirmation, which was reluctantly given, in a spectacularly passive-aggressive little-t sort of way: “More or less.”

¹³ Now known as Writing, Rhetoric, and Digital Studies.

¹⁴ “We are best known for the innovative Composition and Communication curriculum ...taught as WRD...the first cross-college program of its kind in the nation.” See Rice.

¹⁵ Hereafter simply C&C.

¹⁶ To the department's credit, they did abandon the tag-team format in subsequent orientations I attended.

¹⁷ Given the transitional moment, many of these professors taught both WRD courses and upper-levels for the departments they were originally hired for, whether English or C&C.

From what I could guess through fleeting eye contact with my fellow TAs—regardless of whether they were here at UK to study linguistics or film, literature or ethnography—the rhetorical choices of some of the presenters seemed to perplex us far more than the departmental pseudo-merger itself. My undergraduate experience, with its many cross-referenced, team-taught electives, had instilled the sense that interdisciplinary scholarship (and camaraderie) is always the best method of approaching any intellectual endeavor. I believe that, philosophically, the members of the WRD department also felt this way, and still do. Maybe the patronizing implication of the upper-case/lower-case “T” device did not even occur to the C&C instructor. Even the most brilliant academics must sometimes rely on imperfect metaphors, both for demonstrative purposes and convenience. Even doctorates in rhetoric occasionally fail to consider connotation before they speak extemporaneously. It was foolish to expect otherwise.

Sometimes, while considering the potential sources of the mood I perceived in the conference room that day, I wonder whether the issue even arose from some inter-/intra-departmental dynamic. The hand wringing could have also held great solidarity, a collective dread. Perhaps this national shift seemed like yet another harbinger of dwindling teaching positions and larger class sizes. Equipped with only a mite of cynicism, one could posit that this solid pedagogical proposal could easily be mutated into a good bottom line for UK at the expense of teacher-student ratios—viewed not as a supplemental department over time, but a two-birds one. Or, say we dial down these declinist fears some, perhaps *The University v. The Faculty* narrative still rings true, but boring-er: as part of a new department, WRD members were, at the very least, under pressure to demonstrate the efficacy of a new curriculum in order to justify their funding

and comparatively small class sizes.¹⁸ My point here is that there's always some form of jockeying in any large organization or institution. I do not intend to put WRD on trial but instead to make a point about academia in general; just like any other group, scholars have their share of tension. It's amazing no one has yet made a scintillating Netflix Original series called *Tenure*.

Before we adjourned, they gave us a homework assignment: bring an image which embodies your desired teaching *persona* for show and tell. On day two, in a small conference room, I uploaded a wide shot of 5Pointz,¹⁹ and explained to six Master's students and one administrator that the walls of the Academy—pedagogy, research and analysis methodologies, and epistemology more generally—are, like graffiti, all about palimpsests. Contemporary scholars go over each other, composing a collective fresco of perpetually wet paint. Works by respected kings and queens ride for decades, everyone jockeying style and paying homage for generations. On occasion, a huge mural of a treatise is snuffed out with a tag, dissed and dismissed with a one-page book review. The only common goal for all practitioners, academics and graffiti writers, is to encase our structures in paint more representative of us by working over, and around, our peers and predecessors. I said something like this while presenting my persona image, but checked the vandal idealism a bit, assuming that a room full of rhetoricians could easily grasp my point: graffiti as palimpsest, Rhet/Comp as palimpsest, discuss. But I also avoided any gutter proselytizing because I feared coming off as little more than a loose-lipped (ex)criminal sprinkling scholarly buzzwords amidst a spew of guerilla art dross. I

¹⁸ 25:1 student-teacher ratio from 2011-2013. Comparatively small in relation to huge lecture style courses of four hundred students, like you find in many introductory hard science/mathematics courses at UK.

¹⁹ This was in the fall of 2011, before 5Pointz got buffed overnight in 2013, then demolished in 2014. Rest In Paint.

legitimated my vandal image by exclusively speaking a language of authority honed in both classrooms and my family's lawyer-headed home, omitting basic graffiti vocabulary, like *beef*, *jocking*, *go over*, *tag*, and *(still) riding*, despite my preference for their colloquial nuance.²⁰ More than a loss in translation, these compromises, like gunked up spray paint valves, alter the very pattern and coverage. Instead of a uniform mist suddenly opaque, terms like imagistic ideological warfare²¹ sputter out in globs here, pigment-free propellant there.

Only one friend in my cohort, roughly my age, had also grown up skateboarding and knew a bit about graffiti, though you'd never suspect going off his self-portrait persona image, which had announced "I polish up nice. You know I'm the teacher. Just look at this tie!"²² As the semester went on, I wrote an article for a (now defunct) free newspaper, *North of Center*, about Lexington's first street art festival, PRHBTN.²³ After reading it, my friend shared an insider laugh, saying something like "That's crazy you had to define overspray."²⁴ Indeed. It's kind of like explaining feedback to people who have never heard of electric guitars, let alone Jimi Hendrix, or Sonic Youth.

But I allude to my grad school friend, our similar backgrounds, our very different approaches to imaging our teaching personas, not to congratulate myself for staying punk, or being more authentic, or any of the other self-affirmations deviants tell themselves that you should (probably) never believe. The pissing contest aspect of all this

²⁰ Hopefully the rough meaning of these terms can be inferred here. Clue: if someone has been jocking spots and/or style, writers and crews go over each other, even if their enemy's piece had been riding for a grip—a simple tag over a complex, time-consuming piece the ultimate diss.

²¹ Rough approximation of a term from WJT Mitchell.

²² With a few exceptions (including a palimpsest!), most of my fellow TAs submitted (boring) self-portraits begging inclusion in college brochures.

²³ Not an acronym, just prohibition (as in prohibited arts) without the vowels. Celebrated fourth annual in 2014.

²⁴ Spray paint that (unintentionally) sprays over or around the frame of a stencil.

bores me, at least at the moment. The point is I had never met any other skate rats that really gave a shit about school.²⁵ I assumed if and when I found such a person, they would share in what seemed the inevitable inner turmoil of a (former) punk in the academy, convincing themselves that these institutional hall passes, these talismans of cultural capital add up to more than a mess of pottage. They would also grope for solace, clumsily struggling with internal accusations of sell-out, hoping to do more damage *inside the system* and thus retain their deviant identity, which is always so tenuously tied to some notion of subversive authenticity. My friend seemed to have opted out of what I'm increasingly convinced will be an ongoing negotiation and attempted reconciliation between my intermingled and often contrarian selves, vandal and academic. At that time, far from condemning, I envied him. It seemed he could simply tighten up his tie and become—EGADS!—Mr. D-----.

3. Vandal Flashback

I bought my first non-used skateboard from No Division, partially because I had heard the guy that owned the other skate shop²⁶ in town couldn't even do a kickflip. To be fair, I could barely ollie up a curb at the time, but I was also thirteen. I had only been skateboarding for a few months, riding a Frankenstein of hand-me-downs,²⁷ but had stuck to it long enough that my parents didn't stop me from splurging all my birthday money

²⁵ For a slightly hyperbolic, but illuminating example, conf. NECKFACE: "The end of school sucks, when you start figuring out like 'Oh, fuck school. I like skateboarding. I'm not gonna go to school no more.'"

²⁶ I think the other one was called "Superior" skateshop—something with an "S". Both shops are now defunct.

²⁷ An Element "Featherlight" deck so thoroughly chipped it was less popsicle-stick-shaped, more square shovelhead; a mismatched pair of trucks, one Independent, one generic from either Hibbett Sports or Wal-Mart; and a buckshot of stripped bolts and slightly different sized nuts, salvaged from a family toolbox.

on an all new complete.²⁸ Many of my fellow middle schoolers were so eager to impress the older guys that hung around and worked at the shop that they intentionally scraped up their trucks and board graphics, or even sliced holes in their shoes with X-ACTO knives, instead of acquiring these badges through actual skateboarding. I just kept hanging around the shop and its ilk until it stopped feeling like tagging along. A couple months later, a friend told me about a big party at No Division, a punk show, my first punk show.

The shop's owner, Andrew, was running the door, X-ing out the backs of people's hands with a Sharpie to show they had paid and could re-enter. He drew an anarchy "A" on my left hand and a dick on my right, and said, "That'll getcha backstage." Below the vinyl banners advertising Black Label and Anti-Hero sat a drum kit flanked by PAs, facing out from the back wall, toward the storefront. The tube television, battered couches, and legless chairs, where we usually watched skate videos on rainy days provided a makeshift barricade for the musicians' equipment. I remember feeling cool for being one of the youngest people there, but that delusion has become harder to maintain in retrospect. I wore a triple-row pyramid-studded belt and wristband, both from Hot Topic, as well as a Nixon "Rocker" watch: the trifecta of poser accessories. But, again, I was only thirteen. It seemed like every person with a tattoo or facial piercing in the tri-state area was in attendance, including grown men with receding hairlines and unhealthy Pete Wentz obsessions.

Scrawny but not stupid, I took cover behind some display cases along with the shop employees when the second band went on and the mosh pit attained critical mass. There, I beheld the configuration I would see repeated at every punk show I would ever

²⁸As in "complete" skateboard: a black Zoo York deck (which I chose mostly for its wildstyle graffiti graphic, not for its shape or "pop") with Jessup griptape, orange Tensor Los, Spitfire Wheels, REDS bearings.

attend, the almost-atomic shape and movement of mosh pits. A dense semi-circle of pogo-ers and immovable, Bouncer-type guys form an arc around the nucleus, the stage, while the more adventurous jostle within the crowd, ricocheting in spirograph patterns.²⁹ Every so often, the integrity of the perimeter will breach, and a grimy Rudie will whip free like a solar flare, only to immediately return to the molten center. At one point, a lanky tall blonde, probably early twenties, careened from the pit, dizzy, but catching himself a few steps from the skate deck display wall, less than ten feet from where I stood. He was a dead ringer for a young Johnny Rotten, but turned crust³⁰ punker, complete with stick and poke tattoos³¹ and random haggard dreads. When not facing the stage that night, I had been gawking at him, as I did every other time we happened to be in the same place. No one looked like that in Ashland. Before him, I had never seen anyone in person that so thoroughly embodied everything I was beginning to understand as *real* punk.³² Once, from a safe distance so he wouldn't notice, I followed him around the food court at the Huntington mall, just for a moment. Through a saucer-sized hole in the center of his shirt, I could see a black X on his back: "STAB HERE." What had appeared to be dimples were pock-ish craters, scars from DIY cheek piercings, I later realized. At the time, I was ill-equipped to understand, let alone explain, many of his most striking features or characteristics. For example, one of his stick and pokes was the Black Flag logo, but at thirteen, I just thought to myself, "That's gotta be the dumbest tattoo I've ever seen. Four solid bars?"

²⁹Spirographs are those little, plastic drawing toys that allow the user to trace out complex patterns of geometric curves (hypotrochoid and epitrochoid). Invented by English engineer Denys Fisher.

³⁰ A punk scene highly associated with griminess and anti-capitalism: lots of black, dirt, studs, dreads, Freegans. See "CRUSTPUNK."

³¹ Exactly what it sounds like. Just a needle and ink.

³² To be clear, even at that age I understood that punk was not about fashion. That said, certain "fashions" often align with corresponding sub-genre-based ideologies/philosophies (e.g. crust punkers often love doom/sludge metal, anarcho-punk, nihilism, and the color black).

After regaining some composure following his ejection from the pit, Crusty Johnny³³ glanced at the wall, where rows of nails used to hand skateboard decks protruded at eye level. Without the slightest hesitation or wince, he yanked one free, and pierced his septum. There was no blood. No trace of regret or pain in his face. It was as if he was straightening his glasses, or replacing a jostled hat. “Ah! That’s where I put that thing!” he could have been thinking. I looked to my friends, but they just nodded to the bass line. A guy had stumbled from the mosh pit and punctured his nose with a nail, without so much as a quick flame sterilization using a lighter, and no one else even seemed to notice. It was the coolest thing I have ever seen. I felt something akin to what Nicholas Rombes describes in *A Cultural Dictionary of Punk, 1974-1982*, at the beginning of his entry for L.A.-based hardcore punk innovators, the Germs: “Listening to the Germs for the first time was like being let in on a dark secret. You wanted to turn away, and yet...It was that ‘and yet’ that separated you from many of your friends” (105).

Recently, while reminiscing about our earliest exposures to punk with a tattooed, ex-roadie friend of mine, I laughed zestfully during the story about Crusty Johnny and his skewered schnoz, assuming the guy that just queued up Electric Wizard’s *Dopethrown*³⁴ would be able to relate. Instead, he jokingly asked if I had PTSD from seeing that at such a young age. I told him the reason I loved punk rock from the very beginning was because it was over before you even knew what the hell just happened. Like the show at No Division, for example. Crusty Johnny got thrown from the pit again, shattering the

³³ I use this nickname out of convenience, but also because I never learned the guy’s name.

³⁴ Arguably the greatest doom/sludge/stoner metal album yet made.

large storefront window.³⁵ The cops came. The shop kids got a cup and started taking donations to replace it. Andrew, the shop owner, had already promised all the money from the door to the touring bands. He never held a punk show there again. We had no 80's-movie-style community center. Aside from the Paramount Arts Center (where you paid upwards of thirty dollars to see plays and ballet performed in the space where Billy Ray Cyrus based his music video for "Achy Breaky Heart"), there were no music venues to speak of in Ashland. Due to Kentucky's nonsensical alcohol laws,³⁶ which stipulate(d) that any business serving alcohol in the city had to accrue at least seventy percent of their revenue from food sales, there were no bars or clubs. I often wonder whether Andrew might have kept booking shows at No Division if the first time hadn't been such a disaster. But then, I also toggle to and fro concerning this what if; maybe the barren roots of Ashland spurred my friends and me to create something our own. My older siblings didn't listen to much hip hop or punk. Prior to skateboarding, the only "counterculture" I had managed to discover came spoon-fed from MTV, during the heyday of hyper-commercialized '90s pop punk. I didn't want to just listen to punk music or look at graffiti. I wanted to be a vandal in the scene, faithful to the whole roster of DIY, anti-establishment, anti-capitalist, countercultural³⁷ ideologies. This mental commitment

³⁵ Tangential detail: Andrew's father had painted a picture of Andrew skateboarding on the window. I like to think of Crusty Johnny flying through the painting in the same pose, a la the Looney Tunes, or the Kool-Aid Man.

³⁶ The commonwealth's counties can be classified as "dry" (all sales prohibited), "wet" (on- and off-site consumption sale in certain locations), or "moist"/"limited." I'm almost certain that Ashland's county, Boyd, is/was moist, but there are not many places to buy liquor or wine except for within the Ashland city limits, so perhaps "limited" would be more appropriate, with Ashland being the exception in an otherwise (mostly) dry county.

³⁷ I'm checking my anti-scholastic skepticism about these pedantic semantics, because as scholar, I acknowledge their importance. I use "counter" not "sub" to (sort of) avoid hierarchical language, but also, to highlight the difference between cultures which are more defined by their *rejection of* or contrary pose in relation to "dominant" culture and/or their *persecution survival tactics* within said culture. (My uses of "anti-" and "scene" also harness this distinction.) *Inter-/Intra-cultural* orientations require but also deserve case-by-case distinction. Particularity is key. Duh.

proved easier than anticipated, but balancing this persona with the other roles I played, not so much.

My high school extracurriculars included academic team, National Honor Society, Latin Honor Society, Creative Writing Club, vandalism, and occasional petty theft. Invariably best friends with the worst troublemakers (the vandals, the kids throwing the keggers) I was nevertheless a model student, the high-brow stoner, the bookworm among the delinquents. In A.P. Calculus, I would trace the curve of graffiti bubble letters and fidget in my seat, waiting to congregate around lockers and show off my new “pieces.” At the skatepark, I’d scoop my feet on high-grit grip-tape and yammer on about the physics behind pressure-flips. At school, in my advanced classes, I gravitated toward the sore thumbs: Robby, dreamer of long haul truck driving during Chemistry class; Hunter, fellow self-deprecator, guffawing at the strategic padding of our college applications; Casey, opinionated speed reader, always shooting from the hip about a chapter not yet assigned. Most of my best friends though, I met in electives, gym class, or off-campus.

We climbed fire-escapes, cat-walked behind AC units when cruisers passed, and tagged roof-spots visible from the street; we skated every set of stairs, pole jam, and many pad in town, waxing ledges and Bondo-ing sidewalk cracks along the way; we hopped fences, bolt-cut pad-locks, and stole Quikrete from construction sites to build our own ramps in abandoned factories; we clung to boxcars, rode a quarter-mile as the trains gained speed, and leapt to the grass; we drank our dads’ beer, hated cops, and revered scars. All while blaring GG Allin.³⁸ At the peak of our criminal activity, a few of us all but mastered guerrilla ramp building, besting ourselves one day with a hip transfer add-on at the public skate park. A driver dropped the supplies (four eighty pound bags of

³⁸ Look him up at your own risk. Coprophage shock rock. ‘Nuff said.

Quikrete, buckets, water, trowels, a power drill with paddle attachment) and swooped us up less than ten minutes later—everything set to dry and still better crafted than the lumpy half pipe put up by the city. The following afternoon, we marveled at the wet spot, the only trace amidst the push-broomed concrete.

Despite my prowess as an all-around vandal however, I was an inept graffiti artist, both in execution and discretion.³⁹ Shortly after I received my driver's license, some friends and I got tired of playing SKATE⁴⁰ one evening and decided to go bombing.⁴¹ All too often, I am forced to respond to some iteration of the statement, "Yeah, murals are cool, but it's that tagging shit I don't like. If you're gonna deface something, you might as well leave something with artistic value." People I respect, loved ones I consider to be capable of astounding empathy, art historians and rhetoric professors and my own students have paraphrased this criticism to me while discussing graffiti. I usually just say something about people making graffiti for a vast array of reasons, but what I really want to say in these instances is that none of those reasons have anything to do with giving a shit about your opinion. I personally do not intend to be abrasive with that phrasing, only to be as blunt and direct as possible concerning the response you would receive from any bomber. Your complaint doesn't even register. Graffiti is cathartic and deeply personal. Many vandals might even intend to piss people off, or at least, that is an unacceptable level of collateral damage, when self-validation, creative expression, and adrenaline are the reward. Anyway, we decided to go bombing. We had become increasingly brazen

³⁹Exhibit A: this essay.

⁴⁰ The game HORSE, but with skateboards.

⁴¹ Vandalizing many surfaces in a given area, usually with tags or throw ups, for the sake of speed. Throw ups, or throwies, are simple, often bubble-lettered, pieces of graffiti, usually two-toned (fill, outline). Also, it's worth noting here that war terminology suffuses graffiti vocabulary (bomb, crush, burn, slam, massacre, kill) which in my opinion helps to highlight both the (calculated) battle over public visual space and a simultaneously self-aggrandizing and nihilistic impulse toward the creative/destructive act that is vandalism.

with each criminal success, so we stupidly agreed the flood wall (which we'd bombed before) would be safe, even though it was only dusk. Four friends and I threw our skateboards in the sticker-covered trunk of my Honda Civic, consolidated our loose change, and swung by the Dollar General. The teenage cashier couldn't give two snots what we were doing and never IDed us for paint.⁴²

After exiting the parking lot, nearly all the way across downtown to our destination, we rode alongside the trains. As a child, I did not mind that the view of much of the Ohio River was eclipsed by steel mills and oil refineries, because industrial wastelands mean trains, and trains mean freight graffiti. The loud and fast tumult of whatever punk band we were punishing our eardrums with that week, probably the Dead Boys, rattled from my car speakers, but I don't remember talking much as we approached the boat docks parking lot. Maybe someone, or all of us, had second thoughts, but no one spoke up, so we each assumed an exterior appropriate for the mission, equal parts nonchalance and hardened-criminal experience (that we didn't have). After I parked at the end of the boat docks lot, near the 12th and 13th Street bridges that connect Ashland to Ohio and West Virginia, we walked a few hundred yards in between the river-side of the flood wall and the train tracks, past the mobile Fire Department training simulator, and arrived at a relatively secluded portion of the floodwall, almost equidistant between the boat docks and the Cinemark/Town Center Mall. We were reckless, sloppy. Instead of getting up and scrambling, we loitered for ten minutes—a really long time if you know

⁴² It was cheap and they would sell it to us—my only defenses for Dollar General spray paint.

what you're doing with spray paint—until some kid whose dad owned the farm supply store on the city-side of the floodwall spotted us.⁴³

When I came home, fingernails still speckled but hands scoured (like that helped) there was a cruiser in the driveway. Maybe I should have looped the cul de sac, parked my car on a random street, and gone to the park, or one of the small patches of hilly woods in the neighborhood, but it would have been utterly pointless. Waiting out the cop so I could talk to my parents privately first might have exacerbated things anyway. I parked my car across the street and walked in to our house hoping to seem just the right amount of curious: “Hey did you all know there’s a cop car here?” Sometimes, when I was skating downtown, a cop might have threatened a ticket and called my parents, only to get an earful for calling at work because their son was pushing a piece of wood around a parking lot. As long as my grades didn’t fall—and they never did—my parents were lenient with me. While friends got grounded for merely dyeing their hair or talking back, I had interpreted my parents’ unspoken restrictions as “Don’t do anything (too) stupid.” I knew this vandalism business was different, but still assumed I’d only get a light scolding. Instead, after the cop read me my first Miranda Rights while sitting at our living-room coffee table, in front of my parents, mom steamed up slow as a pressure cooker when he mentioned the location of my crime: the floodwall, where the city had recently commissioned murals near the boat docks as part of a riverfront beautification project for Ashland’s sesquicentennial, one of few events in our conservative little town that I remember genuinely exciting my mom, art lover and doodler-extraordinaire.

⁴³ It is actually extremely difficult to successfully charge someone with vandalism unless they are caught in the act.

I expected my dad would get doubly pissed as parent and lawyer, but after the cop left, he turned the game back on in the other room and left me alone with my mom's stare. I threw a plea bargain together on the fly, admitting my vandalism, but appealing for clemency based on our shared love of public art. I emphasized that the graffiti was at least a half mile away from the boat docks murals, far down on the city-length floodwall, a spot picked because we didn't think anyone would even notice. (When my friend fessed up, his older brother just laughed at him: "That's like spray-painting a rock and burying it.") I thought about telling my mom we used Dollar General paint, further evincing the fact that we didn't take this graffiti or its location particularly seriously, but I finally managed to shut the hell up. That was the only time I was ever grounded—something I felt my mom didn't know how to administer, punishing her youngest. She resolved herself to her most powerful weapon, silent disappointment, refusing to answer three days later when I got the guts to ask, "What exactly from? How long?"

Roughly a decade later, almost twenty six years old now, I'm convinced her silence was about more than simply making me sweat. Well before the floodwall incident, she must have expected I would eventually spray paint something other than my t-shirts, shoes, notebooks, skateboard. When I first heard about Banksy, after photos from his 2005 Israeli West Bank barrier trip went viral, I nattered on to anyone that would listen, especially my mom. When I began making stencils, I would give her a few bucks for packages of photo paper and replacement X-ACTO blades when she went to the store. I freehand cut a crude cupcake stencil for my dad's birthday card. Countless times, walking back and forth between my room and the screened-in porch, testing out fresh cuts of Charlie Brown wearing an anarchy shirt, my mom would ask to see, maybe

mention how much she missed painting. Had she not seen my stencils popping up on street signs? Did she not care? Why not call me on it, punish me before the cops nabbed me? Did she tolerate or ignore my (“destructive”) vandalism, by focusing instead on my (“creative”) art? Was my graffiti more crime or art to her? We still talk about Banksy⁴⁴ when he’s in the news, but, for whatever reason, my mom has remained consistently silent about *my* graffiti and its criminal and financial repercussions. The most recent possibility I’ve considered is that she may have reached an impasse, not necessarily a limit, but an impasse deeply embedded in graffiti art⁴⁵ itself: to approve of graffiti is to condone *crime*, but to allow that stigma to wholly eclipse graffiti’s potential or authenticity as an (anti-)art is to restrict creative expression. Indiscriminate stigmatization of all graffiti condemns some forms of art; indiscriminately condoning graffiti allows for some types of crime. When faced with this conundrum, I believe my mom chose not to vote when faced with two crap choices. I chose to explore the third party options.

A connection I made recently: every fourth period during my freshman year of high school, in Dr. Lockhart’s English class, I would glance up to see the time and, intentionally or not, re-read a poster directly below the clock, which read “SUBVERT THE DOMINANT PARADIGM.” Whether it was the bold type, the repetition, the

⁴⁴ A veritable household name in graffiti/street art. How’s this for turning Broken Window theory on its head: Banksy’s guerrilla art actually raises property values (if it’s not angle grinded off and sold at private auctions for six figures). His documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop* earned an Oscar nomination. *Better Out Than In*, his American “residency,” had NYC on a month-long art scavenger hunt.

⁴⁵ By now, reader, I’m presuming, you’ve detected hints of difference between *street art* and *graffiti* along lines of (perceived) artistic “merit,” legality, content, intention, and so on. The “difference” between the two is subjective, and in no way clear cut, e.g., *graffiti*, in my opinion, is always *illegal*, but that does not mean all *street art* is *legal* or *commissioned*. The two do not have mutually exclusive characteristics. The task of defining these distinct but interconnected terms is for another time. Just know I purposefully use “graffiti” here.

propaganda-ish potency—made even more immediate by the clock face juxtaposition—the message lodged in my teenage thoughts. Maybe it gave fifteen-year-old-me a kick in the pants, encouraging a reevaluation of my flippant dismissal of just about everything I didn't come up with. Maybe the imperative alloyed my romanticized anarchy obsession, pushing me from “It's a great idea, if people weren't such idiots” to the more existential “I won't be an idiot, at least.” Maybe I simply recognized the phrase's dissonant harmony with every punk song ever written.⁴⁶ (If you doubt my capacity for disillusionment at fifteen, before I read any Marxists or existentialists, I'll remind you that punk rock is the gateway drug for countless political agnostics.)

Among the periodic tables and Hang In There Cats, I specifically remember two additional images from my high school classroom walls which now seem to emblemize, like the red and white aphorism in DocLock's class, my relationships with the people who most influenced my own teaching persona. Mr. Wittich, a history teacher, had a *London Calling* poster. We traded CDs sometimes. He wore “fun” ties. Mrs. Lewis, our Latin teacher, often wore a sweater embroidered with a cat and the phrase “Veni Vidi Nappi.”⁴⁷ During senior year, two friends and I gave her a Sears portrait collage of us wearing togas. Far from muting their interests and personality in the classroom, these teachers let you in on something, feeling nothing but pity if you don't *get it*. They excelled in academics, but still played air guitar to the Clash. They read *The Great*

⁴⁶ “Rise above, we're gonna rise above!” “I wanna be stereotyped/I wanna be classified/I wanna be a clone/I want a suburban home.” “Cause I wanna be Anarchy/It's the only way to be.” “Are you taking over/or are you taking orders?/Are you going backwards/Or are you going forwards?” “Don't need no ivory liquid. Don't want no afro sheen./Don't need the latest fashions. Don't want my hair to smell clean.” Black Flag's “Rise Above,” the Descendents' “Suburban Home,” The Sex Pistols' “Anarchy in the UK,” The Clash's “White Riot,” and Bad Brains' “Don't Need It,” respectively.

⁴⁷ I came. I saw. I napped.

Gatsby for the one hundred and thirty sixth time with new eyes. Even within their roles as teachers, they seemed to communicate with their entire being, as Montaigne did.

More than any of my other teachers though, Mrs. Lewis had cultivated my overall favorite teaching persona, based entirely upon her acerbic, but charming, expertise. She loved intimidating students with her extensive knowledge and dark humor. While the kids in Spanish learned to flamenco, she drilled us with equal parts conjugation and one-upping of the Most Depraved and Debaucherous of the Roman Empire (Messalina and Calligula always won). We sidetracked half a class period translating “It puts the lotion on its skin or else it gets the hose again.” Once, when Mrs. Lewis caught me shaking the Wu-Tang hands as a friend waved a doodle which read “RequiēscēbatIn Pace ODB,”⁴⁸ she simply sighed and corrected his confusion of the indicative imperfect and subjunctive present tense.

Studying Latin yielded exactly what I had hoped for, an augmented vocabulary. But the dusty language of lawyers, scientists, and clergy stayed put within my school work for only so long. At roughly the same time, around sixteen years old, I won second place at state Latin convention for “Mottoes and Abbreviations” and began spray painting the flood wall, parking garages, street signs, electrical boxes, and occasional freight trains with stencils, freehand tags, or throwies of my new name, [*SIC*]. Meaning roughly, “it was thus,” *sic* alerts a reader that a source has been precisely transcribed to preserve the original document’s integrity. In contemporary English usage, however, it is often intended as a tool of comic ridicule, drawing attention to the cited source’s typographical, grammatical, or logical mistakes. How I smirked. Three letters, tucked away in italics, yet capable of re-contextualizing the very tone in which a reference is evoked and read.

⁴⁸Ol’ Dirty Bastard, founding member of the Wu-Tang Clan. Requiescat in pace.

Deployed artfully, with pithy intent, *sic* jabs—a snarky, backhanded whisper, “Get a load of this guy.” At sixteen, I welcomed it as a deviation from the stuffy politeness of academic writing. Also, as a graffiti *nom de guerre*, I felt it suited me somehow. In ways that I did not yet fully appreciate, *sic* gave me license to be smart and still be a little shit. It is only in composing this essay that I see my first tag name as a glimmering indication, an early (unconscious) attempt to acknowledge both of my selves, vandal and academic.

4. College

Due to my legal status as a minor, the floodwall incident resulted in a diversion agreement which was automatically expunged from my record before I turned eighteen and left Ashland to attend college. While it is beyond cliché to note many teenagers champ the bit to leave their hometown because they find it stifling or depressing, my fellow TrAshlanders and I have been vindicated in this claim time and again through statistical evidence—most notably, through the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index, which has ranked the Ashland (and Huntington, West Virginia) metro at the very bottom nationally in overall well-being four separate times since 2008.⁴⁹ I assumed that by leaving Ashland, I would also leave behind some of the nation’s most miserable graffiti, the Yokels with Spray Paint scrawl of *Jeb Peed Here, Class of '07 Rules, Juggalos Unite*.

Additionally, since Lexington was (and continues to be) over ten times the size of my hometown, I had hoped there would be ten times as much graffiti. This turned out to be true in disappointing ways. As a small city with a large college population, “The Horse Capital of the World” has occasional swells and long dry seasons for quality

⁴⁹ “At 59.5, Huntington-Ashland, W.Va.-Ky.-Ohio, is the only community with a Well-Being Index score below 60. Huntington-Ashland also trailed all other metros in 2008, 2010, and 2011; its score of 58.1 in 2010 remains the lowest on record across five reporting periods spanning six years of data collection.” See Gallup-Healthways.

graffiti, coinciding with a high proportion of young, temporary residents. In an almost total lack of contrast to Ashland, most Lexington graffiti could be lumped together within a similar classification, “Drunk(Toy)s with Spray Paint.” For example, depending on your proximity to the University of Kentucky campus, people actually write “I Bleed Blue, I Pee Blue” above urinals here. While I was attending Transylvania, some chump who had apparently not bothered to practice on paper beforehand, spray painted “CANT STOP 2 BAD” all around downtown overnight, writing the number “2” instead of “T-O-O”. Throughout college, as I walked and bicycled around the city, cataloging the crannies, I did find many stickers, tags, and mirror scribes I loved—GRIP, ONIONE, ERNER, WAZO, TONER—but in most cases, these seemed to be remnants of people who had since quit graffiti or moved away.⁵⁰ I remembered my favorites, as I might with sidewalks cracked by tree roots, and checked they were still there each time I passed.

For the first three years I lived in Lexington, from the Fall of 2007 through 2010, no one seemed to be actively (read: consistently, prolifically) making street art, at least no one I was impressed by. Then, in early 2011, I started noticing two new wheat pastes all around town, both of which bore a logo familiar to me only in faded form, “Dronex, Inc.”⁵¹: one, a throwback to a vintage sausage advertisement, a pig happily slicing itself into patties; the other, Lady Gaga in her meat dress, but with her arms lopped off, the Venus de Gaga. Before even speaking, I felt a deviant camaraderie with the minds behind Dronex because I identified with their work, which often lampoons consumer culture, capitalism, advertising, private property, and notions of high art. Take the drone, the

⁵⁰ The few local writers I managed to befriend during college generally agreed with me here.

⁵¹ Their website: Dronexinc.com. In a *STORY* magazine article I wrote about Dronex, I mocked the Lexington *Herald Leader* for refusing to print “Dronex, Inc.” because the collective is not factually a corporation.

collective's signature product.⁵² Since the 2004 founding of Dronex, waves of these ambiguous, bar-coded minions have intermittently flooded the central Kentucky area. As foot soldiers, they gear up for their particular missions: depicted as devil drones superimposed onto a church-sponsored, anti-homosexuality, anti-abortion billboard;⁵³ bootlegger drones masked in bandanas, sticking up cartoony freights; cowboy and Native American drones in a Manifest Destiny standoff, guns drawn, arrows nocked.

Then, in late February 2011, my senior year of college, I was tasked with designing one of three (legal) murals for a course called "Community Engagement Through the Arts," which I had enrolled in almost exclusively as a form of decaf vandalism. Because our assignment involved wheat paste and gathering stories from community members, I jumped at the excuse to meet my favorite local vandals under the guise of a research interview. Like most people in the art underbelly, I contacted the folks at Dronex⁵⁴ through a mutual friend who shall remain nameless. Yet, even with someone vouching for me, I lapsed into fan boy territory and sent off what I now consider one of my most embarrassing emails to date—"So-and-so sent me" as my subject line, "Drones (if that is your real name)" as my greeting. I may as well have been writing from narc@informant.gov. Thankfully though, I managed to come off as harmless enough and, after a brief exchange of texts, I had an address and time.

When I pulled in past the razor-wired fence, someone was leaning just outside the glow of a mason jar porch light, their coat splotched in dried wheat-paste, hands fuzzed in paint. The studio, a no-frills cinderblock garage on the outside, was a vandal's wet-

⁵² So-named well before military drone strikes became daily American news.

⁵³ See Kocher and Hancock.

⁵⁴ Dronex prefers to be spoken of collectively. Thus my consistent use of plural and ambiguously-gendered singular referents. They are no one in particular. There is no Tyler Durden. Only Project Mayhem.

dream within: hundreds of aerosol cans shelved by color, stacks of stickers so freshly inked they have to be peeled apart one at a time, industrial rolls of paper, stencils tiling the floor, a TIG welder, hand-made saw-horses, and a refrigerator full of beer, wheat-paste,⁵⁵ and not much else. All around, I found evidence of their experimentation, not only with the images created, but with the techniques employed as well. One thing I had never seen before or since: they had spray-painted a stencil onto Styrofoam, where the caustic propellants melted a shallow impression of the image into the material,⁵⁶ which they then filled with paint, and used to create woodblock-like prints on paper. To me, then and now, this exploration attests to their complete absorption with craft; they must constantly experiment, dedicated to their first love, refusing to let the relationship fall flat after years of marriage.

After ricocheting around the small compound, pointing to copies of wheat pastes I had seen on this corner or that electrical box, I flipped open my notebook, someone offered me a beer, and we all took a seat on whichever sticker-encrusted stool was at hand. First, perhaps because I hoped to break any tension by demonstrating my trustworthiness, but also because I could not pass up the opportunity to talk shop with a bunch of deviants, we began discussing graffiti as only the fluent can: what I imagine someone feels when returning home after being long-abroad, ready to open the floodgates and gush words at full power and speed. Discussion Point 1: Banksy's documentary. We agreed the entire film demands a degree of skepticism based on Banksy's characteristic

⁵⁵ An adhesive made by simmering roughly equal parts water and wheat flour (or other plant starch) until thick. Batches can go bad in less than a week, but at roughly a dollar a gallon, street artists can apply pre-prepared images of almost any size, so long as they have permeable paper and a broom (or other brush) to prime the wall (or other surface), slick on the paper, and seal the artwork with more wheat paste.

⁵⁶ Caution. All sorts of noxious fumes result. Only do this in an extremely well-ventilated area. Or, just don't do it.

tongue-in-cheekiness, concluding the true power of *Exit Through the Gift Shop* spawns from its ability to provoke intuitive viewers to ask how and why street art is altered and even (Dronex's words) "castrated" when it is repackaged in a gallery space for the art world. The documentary then, we concurred, is less about Banksy, and more about the state of graffiti/street art more generally, centering on themes of commodification, assimilation, neutralization, authenticity, integrity. Discussion Point 2: local graffiti. "Did you see some toy painted over FIRE's roof spot on Vine Street?" "Yeah, that kid sucks. New bucks...no respect." "What's with this sticker of the guy in the banana suit?" "Oh I know that guy, he used to write..." Discussion Point 3: motivations behind graffiti. One of the Drones cracked a second beer, as if clearing their throat, then pounced on the misconception that street artists create their work only to gain attention: "Like any true artist—musicians, painters, writers, whatever—I do it for me, because it's in me. What was that Banksy quote about this? Oh yeah: 'You don't go to a restaurant and order a meal because you want to have a shit.' You do it because you're hungry."⁵⁷ Discussion Point 4: anonymity and vandalism. I was momentarily stunned into silence, pen hovering above paper, when one Drone casually observed, "That's the cool thing about street art. You don't have to be associated with it as a body, as a personality you're selling. Street art is the performance art nobody sees."

Eventually, the conversation shifted to my new friends' pasts as "legitimate" artists, when they went by their real names, had gallery shows, and sold artworks to private parties. "But," they smirked, "that got boring pretty quickly. Now, we manufacture Drones." This decision seemed natural to me, possibly due to my ever-growing fascination with the ways in which attitudes and modes of expression fit into

⁵⁷Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, 237, "Advice on painting with stencils."

their zeitgeist—how you can feel pieces of culture being made together. Dronex was taking the anti-commercial bent of the broader graffiti community and making it their defining niche. In creating their own ominous corporation, they were satirizing not only the commodification of graffiti, but also the futility of deviant resistance. Or, to clarify, instead of taking the Jon Stewart approach, they were donning the mask of their adversary through caricature, like Stephen Colbert.⁵⁸ Or perhaps more accurately, like Andy Warhol, they embraced the very mechanisms of mass production which, time and again, herald a grand shift in Art (or Graffiti) as we know it. Rather than bemoaning change, they adapt, based not on steadfast principles, but on improvised survival decisions. Their work responds to their moment instead of pining for some golden age of graffiti/art which, if it ever existed, was already long-gone before Warhola dropped the “a” and Dronex became incorporated. This tactic of critiquing the business of art by utilizing and depicting mass-production may seem one of fire-with-fire, but it is more the-world-with-living; there is anger, retaliation, but there’s also fear, humor, awe—a response—in what is normally a one-way barrage of mass media, advertising, and highly-controlled visual space. Warhol’s Factory and Dronex, Inc. did not utilize particular aesthetic styles just to hold up a mirror, they were also observing the changing expression of the beholder, and changing themselves in turn. I did not share or even fully form the Warhol comparison in the Dronex garage that night, and even now, I make it as a sort of art history hobbyist, yet I hold firm; if Warhol had made graffiti alongside Basquiat, it would have been very similar to that of Dronex, Inc.

The common ground I shared with Dronex was not unlike that felt in academic circles—a collective pride and dedication to the culture so poignantly touched on by

⁵⁸ Colbert on Banksy: “He’s anonymous, and his art is public, so the jerk doesn’t even profit off of it.”

graffiti artist SKEME in the 1982 documentary *Style Wars*: “I don’t care about nobody else seein’ it or the fact if they can read it or not, it’s for me and other graffiti writers, that we can read it. All these other people who don’t write [graffiti], they’re excluded. I don’t care about them, you know, they don’t matter to me. It’s for us” [sic]. But there are two other, related assertions I also wish to suggest by including my meeting with the Dronex folks. First, not all graffiti artists are mindless, compulsory, or devoid of valuable social critique. As one Drone put it, “our graffiti is more like feeding a dog medicine in a cheese ball.” Second, the graffiti artist’s work insists upon the connection between private expression and public response, albeit a connection fostered by anonymously-created and -disseminated street art. Where galleries only invite people in, often at high admission prices, public street art *confronts*, but in a sense, also *belongs* more fully to the general population.⁵⁹ This second point felt like a revelation to me, until I reread the Mission Statement at DronexInc.com, which highlights both of these arguments: “[H]ere at Dronex, our products are the fruit of a collective effort aimed to connect with people and spawn dialogues that translate across many demographics. Our goods attempt to regurgitate the amazement and absurdity of our reality in a way that provides a dichotomous critique of the way we have come to live, and the things we have come to love.”

Hours had gone by before I left the garage, and the only idea the Drones had given me for a mural—a UK student smashing through a wall with a forty in each hand—simply wouldn’t do for a LexARTS-sponsored community mural project. I stood, closed my notebook, and thanked them anyway. As far as the assignment went, I had wasted my time. But I finally had some friends to speak fork tongue with.

⁵⁹ “They are the curators.” See JR.

With the exception of one underage drinking charge, my illegal activities went largely unnoticed during my time at Transylvania University, until my senior year when I began applying to graduate programs and narrowly avoided a Class D felony charge of Criminal Mischief in the First Degree for damage costs to private property exceeding a thousand dollars.⁶⁰ This figure greatly exaggerates my culpability. And I am not just making excuses here. After drinking some beers and night-swimming at a buddy's apartment complex, some vandal friends and I caught some tags on the way out. Allegedly, we wreaked five thousand dollars' worth of vandalism, and we split the bill more or less evenly, despite, if one were to tally the itemized report, the unequal share of blame. The apartment complex owners agreed not to file charges if we paid for repairs, and they took full advantage by upgrading their facilities while teaching us a lesson. Admittedly, we expected this, but their itemized bill rounded all the way up on everything. Just one example: they completely replaced⁶¹ a two-ton, eleven hundred dollar electrical unit instead of buffing off or painting over our water-based marker tags that, it must be noted, marred the weather-proof plastic hood, not the machine itself.

All else I will share about this embarrassing episode is 1) I was in-between aliases, so when one of my accomplices climbed onto a low roof and tagged up all our names, he drunkenly wrote "CLAY" ten inches tall and 2) our friend who lived in the complex was unaware of the graffiti until being blindsided by a phone call the next day,

⁶⁰ Curiously, there is no statute of limitations on felonies in Kentucky, but the financial transaction explained below would surely complicate any attempt by the property owner to file charges more than four and a half years later. Besides, a half-asleep, half-drunk lawyer could knock this felony down to a misdemeanor. Having said that, I hope to maintain a certain vandal code-of-ethics by not incriminating myself or others.

⁶¹ At least, this is what they told us.

when, in a state of confusion and fear no doubt, he told the police his friend Clay might know something. Although we were not caught in the act, and most likely could have denied everything successfully, my imminent transition into adulthood became immediately less abstract as four years threatened to be eclipsed by only one pseudonym, an asterisk next to College Graduate, *Felon*. Charges were never filed. I picked up extra shifts at work, stopped buying my own pot and beer for a few months, and paid off my share in a summer. The next year, I graduated college, and a few months later, began a Teaching Assistantship at the University of Kentucky. As a school employee, I submitted to a national background check and read documents stating that my failure to self-disclose any felony convictions or charges may result in disqualification from employment at the university.⁶² I signed my name.

5. Deviance on the Graduate Level

About a year ago, early in the drafting process for this essay, I joined a conversation off in the corner of a house party. The subject: the resurgence and history of professional wrestling. The expert: a charismatic and probably at least college-educated guy with a beer gut that knew way too much about his subject. Imagine the Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons* realized as an understated-hipster frat bro. Despite my complete disinterest in the topic, I was riveted to Professional Wrestling Guy because he also held an encyclopedic knowledge of something (which) most people only peripherally consider, thereby offering an analog through which to see myself as others might. Like his wrestler heroes, he dominated the ring, using the ropes as a slingshot, pinballing between tangents and examples, explaining larger phenomena within the culture through a rapid combo of interconnected quips. But what really struck me—and this may be a

⁶² See “Pre-Employment Screenings.”

misplaced projection of my own preoccupations—I sensed these moments in the conversation when Professional Wrestling Guy was gauging our interest, or more accurately, whether or not we were bored, thus betraying a mixture of nerd pride and embarrassment. I wanted more. But when my new friend asserted that André the Giant wasn't really as *big* as everyone thinks, I inadvertently derailed the conversation by speculating to the contrary, alluding to Shepard Fairey's original "André the Giant Has a Posse" sticker, which lists André Roussimoff's billed height and weight.⁶³ To my surprise, not only did Professional Wrestling Guy and the third wheel of our conversation, Local Band Guy, know well my reference, both held firm convictions about the (street) artistic integrity of OBEY.⁶⁴ In a call-and-response fashion, they decried Shepard Fairey as both the Benedict Arnold of Graffiti and public enemy number one for intellectual property defenders. "When I heard he uses an anti-graffiti coating on his studio space, that was all I needed to know," crowed PWG. "Yeah, he's a thief anyway, all his designs are stolen," cawed LBG. Fearing I analyze graffiti too much for my own good when it comes to casual, impromptu conversations, I checked my impulse to qualify and complicate, and listened, but nothing else was said. For all they knew, everyone agreed. So, PWG scoffed again at the very idea of Shepard Fairey, as if to say, "Worst street artist ever," then stepped out to smoke a cigarette with LBG.

I could have countered that 1) due to a number of factors, including his fame, financial success, unmasked identity, and publicly listed brick-and-mortar address, Fairey is one of the most hated and easily targeted graffiti artists alive—even toys with day-old opinions want to go over him—so it's somewhat understandable he wishes to keep his

⁶³ Not to gloat, but Fairey and I seem to be correct. André the Giant's billed height, 7'4," weight, 520 lbs.

⁶⁴ As the man behind OBEY, I refer to both as interchangeable metonyms, which is not uncommon in graffiti culture.

many enemies at bay, at least on the façade of his studio space, and 2) to suggest that all OBEY products simply copy the images of other artists is to grossly oversimplify not only the legal subtlety of fair use copyright cases, but also *all* nebulous debates concerning appropriation, artistic influence, and originality. But we were leaning on the arms of threadbare couches with a tangle of amp cords and distortion pedals at our feet, sipping cheap beer and cheaper bourbon. What a buzz kill that would have been. I had no interest in regaling innocent bystanders with a methodical catalog of my vacillating perspectives concerning a controversial artist, especially when they seemed content to proclaim a stance, cheers, and be done with it.

In retrospect, I believe at least two related factors contributed to my reticence. Fearful of coming off as an insufferable know-it-all, I suppressed some of my more academic impulses in the party setting just as I had mitigated my vandal persona during teaching orientation. But I also held my scholar tongue because PWG and LBG echoed my own inklings concerning not just OBEY, but what he represents within the world picture of graffiti (artists): he has shirked his anonymity and made a career defying the boundaries of graffiti and fine art, vandalism and branding, counterculture and assimilation. Even more maddening for the discerning deviant, scores of street art documentaries and pop culture appearances⁶⁵ have leant Fairey an arsenal of megaphones to broadcast what some art critics might stigmatize as a manifesto, vandals as an Artist Statement fit for the Gallery.⁶⁶ In the documentary *Bomb It*, for example, Fairey introduces himself as a nexus of identities: “I am a graphic designer, a street artist...I

⁶⁵ As of April 27th 2015, Shepard Fairey had forty credits on IMDb for portraying himself. Let alone the dozens and dozens of media and lecture appearances.

⁶⁶ OBEYGIANT.com includes a “Manifesto” page, but I am discussing how others might label Fairey and his words.

have a clothing line. I have a magazine. I run a gallery. All those worlds colliding, that's what I try to do." What am I to make of these seemingly contradictory border crossings? As a former vandal with anti-capitalist leanings, or, at least, counter-capitalist leanings in regard to graffiti/street art, I often catch myself deferring to some abstract notion of authenticity, as if held strictly accountable. Why am I so frequently compelled toward anti-capitalist ideals when I also know that realistically, I can only enact disruption through *alter*-capitalist ways of existence?⁶⁷ Dissatisfied with the polar choices of pure condemnation or praise, I abstain in the case of OBEY. As an academic, though, I embrace conflicted ambivalence and exploratory vacillation from the outset, always ready to brandish the teacher shtick of answering questions with more questions. Q: How do you reconcile Fairey's dual ethos, which mocks/criticizes/questions capitalism, consumer culture, and the Gallery Industrial Complex, while also participating in, and profiting from, said systems? More simply: do you like OBEY? Yes or no? The Scribble Scholar responds: How much time do you have? Where should we start?

In the graffiti world, Fairey is persistently hated on more for what his art *represents*, what he as an artist represents, than for the actual art objects he creates. He is condemned for what he is not, portrayed as having committed some grand treason against authenticity itself, against what a graffiti artist should be and how one should perform. He entered a culture embroiled in sell-out phobia and boldly flouted the insular value systems and performance scripts which have all but dominated graffiti up until recently. No wonder he has been criticized in ad hominem that simplify the situation to the point of forced agreement à la McCarthy head hunting.

⁶⁷ As suggested by my prefix usage here, I'm starting to prefer "counter-" and "alter-" to "anti-" within my considerations of these issues.

Say what you may about graffiti not having any rules—or even that in saying so you’ve just created a rule, whatever—graffiti, for a lot of writers, is defined by its criminal nature. Their vandalism does not make them money or create opportunities for them to travel around the world. And I don’t think it’s a matter of people hating on Fairey for “making it,” as some might say with rappers or punk rockers. I think it’s more akin to mistrust. The average graffiti writer lives in secrecy because they have to, because they are criminals and cannot afford to suffer financial burdens from legal charges, but also, I submit to you, because they want to. Many vandals want graffiti to remain an insular world of art criminals. And while it would be foolish to say that Fairey somehow threatens that entire dynamic, it is undeniable that OBEY as a brand has literally “sold” (out) more than any other graffiti campaign in history. No other artist so completely confounds my private reflections on authenticity and deviance. Any credibility he has accrued as a seasoned vandal is always tempered by my awareness of his commercial/gallery work and the related fear of external forces somehow compromising or disempowering the subversive counterculture I’ve adopted. My perspective continuously shifts, suggesting I may gather evidence ad infinitum. And with increasing frequency, these cross-examinations terminate in the realization that I’m judging myself through Fairey.

Am I not guilty of similar petty transgressions, loose-lipped collusions with the Institution? I harbor some idealized version of a vandal-punk within me, one that rebels against all capitalist institutions, including most art galleries and systems of higher education—am I not also indicting myself? Am I gleaning any personal insights by examining how Fairey negotiates his interconnected selves? And what would I stand to

lose in rejecting Fairey? Perhaps my reservations and fears only confirm the power and influence of OBEY, indicating that certain elements of the campaign may be worth retaining. Fairey perplexes in fruitful ways. He forces me to confront my preconceived notions. And besides, he seems so tied up in nostalgia I may risk some portion of myself in the amputation. At one point, before I learned much of anything about graffiti, I simply liked OBEY in the way I simply liked the Sex Pistols. Sure, things got more complicated when I found out the Pistols were basically the brainchild of entrepreneur Malcolm McLaren, but I saw past that and appreciated what they gave me. Their mass-marketed rebellion and subversion, like Fairey's ubiquitous street art, exposed me to punk music in a way that provoked me to dig deeper. I came across Ian MacKaye, GG Allin, Jello Biafra, and Johnny Hobo because of Johnny Rotten. Similarly, OBEY opened the door to innumerable street artists. It doesn't matter that Rotten later used his celebrity to sell Country Life butter and Fairey allowed his logo to be stamped on a gold-plated "Vicious Chain Choker" as part of his apparel line.⁶⁸ They still created art that affected me, maybe even changed me—and isn't that worth holding on to?

As a white, middle-class, educated male with a past speckled by skateboarding, punk rock, and vandalism, I have a fair amount in common with Fairey. I also feel some urgent need to anticipate sellout accusations and fortify myself against them through the way I perform. Unlike me though, Fairey has some fairly compelling—if evasive—strategies to combat the onslaught. In my experience, he almost invariably narrates the "fluke" origins of the OBEY Giant movement thusly: while trying to teach a friend how to make stencils, he suggested a newspaper image of André the Giant, his friend thought this idea was "stupid," and "Immediately that triggered something in [Fairey] where it

⁶⁸Sid Vicious did wear a chain and padlock frequently. But, his didn't cost north of \$100.

was like a reaction to how cool all [his] skateboarder clique friends thought they were.”⁶⁹ Rarely does Fairey explicitly connect this particular epiphany to the almost simultaneous and no doubt equally informative experience of earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design. Instead, he portrays the story of OBEY as a reaction to one’s own counterculture, autonomous from any art school background. He emphasizes a sort of deviance within deviance which predates any studio training. I sorta know what he means, but he seems at peace with it all in a way I am not yet.

For now though, this one goes out to you, Shep. A punk song of course, actually recorded the same year OBEY began, “Daisys Up Your Butterfly” by The Cramps: “Well now you might believe the world is sweet and fine as sugar candy/But I myself believe in whatever comes in handy.”⁷⁰

6. Daydreaming

I love how graffiti artists adapt. Some freight bombers intentionally incorporate the call numbers of cargo units into their pieces, so the railroad companies have no practical reason to buff. In large cities, like New York, where graffiti is almost ubiquitous in public spaces, some vandals target metal roll-down gates for a similar reason; owners may be less inclined to invest time and money in removing the scrawl, given that the doors are not visible during business hours. Yarn bombing—which has introduced an unexpected, but refreshing dose of crochet to street art—continues to evolve in fascinating ways; I never thought someone would bring in traditional graffiti lettering via isometrics, but that’s exactly what Minneapolis-based yarn artist HOTTEA has done.⁷¹ Reverse graffiti (or clean tagging, or grime writing), so called because images are created

⁶⁹ Shepard Fairey interview in *Bomb It*.

⁷⁰ See The Cramps.

⁷¹ See HOTTEA.

by removing dirt from surfaces, has already produced exemplary freehand and stencil art. In a work titled *Ossário*, Brazilian artist Alexandre Orion⁷² outlined over thirty-five hundred human skulls in exhaust soot along three hundred meters of a São Paulo road tunnel, using only water and pieces of cloth; after repeated questioning during the installation process, police were unable to criminally charge him for cleaning; shortly after, municipal workers power-washed the *Ossário* section of wall, leaving the rest of the tunnel untouched, until Orion struck again, forcing the city to clean the entire tunnel, arguably as an act of censorship. Green-washing advertisers have also taken notice of this particular technique. British artist Paul “Moose” Curtis, for example, creates large-scale reverse murals using wooden stencils and pressure washers, occasionally doing commercial work for companies like Green Works cleaners and Nissan.⁷³ Other methods of green graffiti include guerrilla gardening seed bombs and living moss graffiti, which is made by painting with moss that is blended with buttermilk (or yogurt) and water. Bolt-ups, pieces of street art mounted onto metal sign posts⁷⁴ or telephone poles, also offer a minimally “damaging” form of vandalism because they are easily removed (unscrewed) as opposed to painted or glued graffiti. Many of these innovative examples of public guerrilla art do not cause what could accurately be called “damage,” which begs the question: if we are going to label even the non-damaging forms of street art “vandalism,” what other public images would follow suit? Any graffiti artist worth their salt considers these sorts of questions. When I asked the Dronex folks about their hand-painted,

⁷²See “OSSÁRIO.”

⁷³See “Reverse Graffiti.”

⁷⁴ Usually the ones used for STOP signs, parking signs, etc. U-channel posts with bolt holes along the center.

wooden, bolt-up “mini-billboards,” one of the Drones responded, “I see people’s ‘*BAD CREDIT?*’ posters all over. Where do you draw that line? A staple? A nail?”

Because I may never actually participate in graffiti again, I often daydream ideas for pseudo-legal public art projects. During the aforementioned “Community Engagements” class, I placed small images of Barack Obama in the CHANGE trays of vending machines, with the asterisk “Actual satisfaction may vary.” I’m considering revisiting this project, but this time, leaving stickers of the iconic, Shepard Fairey-designed HOPE poster from Obama’s 2008 election, but with an orange jumpsuit superimposed on to the POTUS along with the text GITMO. Back when the World Wildlife Foundation and the World Wrestling Federation were negotiating acronym ownership, I talked with WAZO, Dronex, and others about making stickers of the WWF panda wearing a luchador mask, but the controversy, and my interest, has since gone cold. Playing off a common motif in the local business names of Lexington (Thoroughbred Limousine, Inc., Thoroughbred Lending Company, Thoroughbred Printing) I still plan on making stickers for Thoroughbred Glue. A few months ago while free-writing about the potentially neutralizing effect inflicted upon graffiti made for the gallery, I had the idea to attach small informational cards beside individual pieces of street art, listing the artist(s), medium, and approximate dates. Unsure of the name for such a thing, I called a friend⁷⁵ who had worked at the Art Institute of Chicago. She answered my question, then, much to my chagrin—before I even explained the cause of my interest—she also mentioned that an architect and artist, Andrew Bayley, had created a conceptual art project composed of these informational cards written for benches and

⁷⁵ Many thanks to Sandy Guttman.

elevators within museums (including the Art Institute) in order to “demonstrate how the often mundane and utilitarian aspects of architectural design enhance the experience of museums and galleries.”⁷⁶

In creating these high culture markers for deviant art objects, I wanted to comment on the potential dangers of graffiti’s assimilation into the space of museums and galleries. I wished to mock the Gallery Industrial Complex through the literal and figurative labeling of Art, thereby elaborating on the ways in which we judge creative integrity and value in light of physical and cultural context. By placing these cards in the streets, I hoped to suggest that even illegally faithful art dissidents may not have a choice in the matter—the galleries have hailed graffiti, categorization and interpellation are eminent. Any initial pang of disappointment that the idea was merely a recontextualization of Bayley’s work dissipated quickly, as I seized on a suggestive verbal synchronicity unwittingly shared by my friend. Sometimes, a link within our interconnected world glows as if newly welded before us in the span of a double-take—how have I not seen this connection before? Words do this for me. Upon first hearing the collective nouns “parliament of owls” and “wake of vultures,” I remember feeling a distinct satisfaction, of a type I submit to be possibly the greatest pleasure within language acquisition, a sensation not unlike that of struggling to remember a word for hours, or your whole life, then suddenly, someone says it. Ah, yes, *of course that’s what they’re called*. Precise words dazzle in their own right, but the surprise of language (di-)stilling the swirl around us to illuminate a particular harmony of connotation and denotation, if only for a moment, never ceases to invigorate me. Didactic plate was the more formal answer to my question. “But,” my friend added, “in the ‘industry,’ we often

⁷⁶See “Co-Opted Art.”

call them ‘Tombstones.’” Tombstones. I wanted to make tombstones for illegal graffiti, for deviant street art.

I listen again to “The Politics of Holyshit I Just Cut My Hand on a Broken Bottle,” by Johnny Hobo and the Freight Trains: “he talks about nothing using too many words. he talks revolution for an hour without using any verbs.”⁷⁷ Many graffiti writers and street artists stigmatize any and all acts of mainstream assimilation as damning collusion. Sometimes, I fear I’m too far gone, a double-agent succumbed to Ivory Tower Stockholm syndrome, one of *them* all along. I do not yet know for certain if there is something innately vampiric about (my) scholarship examining punk and graffiti as deviant cultures. I struggle, chiefly, with the question of how to write without inadvertently or complicitly, commodifying, assimilating, exploiting, or otherwise betraying the very counterculture I still (tenuously) belong to. Here’s something a little abstract that most vandals, punks, and hip hop heads will find blatantly obvious, the typical lifecycle of countercultural art⁷⁸ movements: 1) something *new* forms, largely predicated upon its rejection and/or critique of the current Artistic milieu/zeitgeist, 2) the corresponding System⁷⁹—in the case of graffiti, the Gallery Industrial Complex, as well as advertisers and clothing/shoe manufacturers—canonizes the anti-art, regardless of that counterculture’s disposition(s) toward the dominant culture, and 3) frequently, if not inevitably, canonization at least temporarily distorts, castrates, hobbles, or disempowers the original countercultural critique, because the anti-establishment becomes absorbed in

⁷⁷ See Johnny Hobo. In keeping with Pat the Bunny’s (see below) website, I do not use any capitalization when reproducing his lyrics.

⁷⁸ Here, I intend to allude to any music, writing, film, fashion, visual art, etc. which, at least in some way, was founded as a minoritarian response to a majoritarian sphere.

⁷⁹ Here, I mean only to emphasize concepts like the high Art World, the Academy as in Academia, etc. I make similar choices above and below (e.g., the Institution).

the System. Consider Jean-Michel Basquiat, SAMO©,⁸⁰ patron saint and chief martyr within the death of the graffiti artist.⁸¹ Ill-equipped to address such a fresh, radiant⁸² mind, camps of art critics attempted to situate Basquiat's work in relation the Fine Art canon, disputing over whether to call Basquiat's gallery work childlike, primitive, naïve, or outsider art, instead of considering the intersectionally prejudiced implications of their hierarchical labels. Instead of talking about Basquiat, they talked about Basquiat's canonization.

I like to think sensitive, rigorous academics take these sorts of missteps into account when approaching new modes of expression. Good luck finding a group better prepared to dissect language, and each other, in a methodical effort to pin down words, open for all to see under the operator's lamp. Scholars hold conferences centered on their specific areas of research for many reasons, but I believe their primary motivation arises from a simple desire to speak fluently about what fascinates them. Patois threads a culture more tightly together. I believe academics have the best intentions. Along with mutual understanding and solidarity, however, one inevitable side effect of any argot is exclusion. On top of the dense jargon and highfalutin ideas, citation style writing alienates a lot of people simply because of the way it looks, just as a valet and coat check suggest a dress code. Take the pomp and circumstance of the title-colon-subtitle of most scholarly articles, irreverently invoked in my favorite *Calvin and Hobbes*:⁸³ "With a little practice, writing can be an intimidating and impenetrable fog," Calvin explains, brandishing a fresh draft of his book report, "'The Dynamics of Interbeing and

⁸⁰ Graffiti moniker shared with Al Diaz and others prior to Basquiat's ascension into the art world.

⁸¹ I say this colloquially in jest. Countless t-shirts and stickers contend Punk, Hip Hop, and Graffiti are all "dead".

⁸² A nod to Tamra Davis's documentary *Jean-Michel Basquiat: The Radiant Child*.

⁸³ See "CALVIN AND HOBBS."

Monological Imperatives in *Dick and Jane*: A Study in Psychic Transrelational Gender Modes.””

As a graduate student examining the deviant culture(s) of graffiti art, I often fear coming off as a narc reporter in conversations with vandals, which is not an unreasonable concern, given Dronex’s volunteered comment, “Talking to reporters is like talking to police. It can only hurt you.” Likewise, my incessant over-the-shoulder leers within this essay betray my distrust of the academy, my hesitation in packaging deviant art discourse(s) for the institution. When it comes to tight-roping along this spectrum though, I fear falling too far to the academic side most, because a domesticated deviant self seems the inevitable result, if recent experiences are any indication. For example, while I somewhat enjoyed writing about graffiti in rhetoric or critical studies classes, my academic and vandal bifocals were so sharply focused that discussing the difference between graffiti and commercial street art in terms of Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno, felt like little more than an act of translation. Check it out: graffiti artists and the Frankfurt school both deal extensively with notions of authenticity, auras, and commodification. I was acutely aware of my own parlor trick, as if answering ad nauseam, “So what’s your culture’s word for *this*?” Academics can theorize all they want about the rush of artistic rebellion, but the discussion—with all its parentheses, quotations marks, and qualifying statements—often sounds like a parent struggling to understand the hip, new slang of a younger generation. (I hate that I can see this happening to myself).

The freedom of indiscriminately slurring scholar jargon and street urchin, albeit isolating, has spurred my turn into private pidgin-like mumbles. I want so desperately to have friends to speak fork tongue with, but so far as I know, no one with equal claims as

academic/graffiti writer has yet emerged. I share my writing, then, as an attempt to provide something useful to the future Scribble Scholars. Know I made it to the other side with ideology challenged but supplemented. Take me as doublethink proof, an inhabitant of in-between-places, a seemingly contradictory amalgamation held together by little more than a hyphen. I will write for scholars and vandals alike because I think like both. I am not alone, just one of the first to speak.

I have to be the one to fill your nose with the train-yard, to drip paint on your shoes, to twist your ankles on the large-rock gravel filling the gaps between the tracks. I am the bolt-cutters on the padlock, the leap over the chain-link fence, the hiss and fog of paint, the clack of an empty can, the siren right behind you, the feeling of getting away with it. I am the masterpieces on freights, fresh and sharp, at dawn, heading off to who knows where, to who knows who.

7. Graduation

After I successfully defended a draft of this essay for my Master's exam in May 2015, my committee head, Erik Reece, asked me to stop by his office, one identical in dimensions to most of the professors' in POT, but notable for its sparseness: wall-mounted book shelves, desk, table, two chairs, printer, Joey Ramone figure.⁸⁴ He blindsided me, offering admission to the MFA in Creative Writing for the Fall semester, with funding.

The problem was, far and away the greatest source of my post-defense relief originated from the assumption that, at least for the time being, I was through with

⁸⁴ Due to slap-dash circumstances, Erik had not read more than two pages of my project until ten days prior to the exam. I had dropped off a full draft, and a couple days later, he sent a brief email giving the green light I needed for the defense—"Full steam ahead"—but I was still somewhat doubtful of my writing's merit.

school. Since I was five years old, for over two decades, my identity in a word (at least on paper) had been that of a student. I went straight through from high school to college to graduate school, and, job-wise, had only experienced a smattering of minimum-plus-tips gigs and my teaching assistantship. I wasn't sure I wanted to go back to academia immediately, if at all. And I was even less certain of my fortitude to undertake two more years of rhet/comp instruction for WRD—the golf of teaching, a performance I respect, but cannot personally get excited about. But even putting all that aside, the MFA would have put a halt on many personal plans (moving, gaining some mental distance from the Ivory Tower, not wearing the boogie-est, most sweat-inducing shirts in my closet⁸⁵). I was flattered, especially because Erik had confirmed an inkling of mine, namely, that he might personally understand—maybe even relate to—my project's interest in how academics, how all people, perform deviant identities alongside their more public personas.

Teachers had praised my writing before, but this was something different. Yes, Erik agreed, I was writing a book, or an essay within a book, something that would one day be published outside Academia's walls, where more than a couple dozen people would read it. He explained his pragmatic take on graduate programs for creative writing. Don't go into debt. Get paid doing it. An MFA will force you to write. Come out of it with a manuscript. Use it to write this book. He wanted to help me.

Erik gave me a few days to think it over. He was going on a short trip following my exam anyway. I tried to hold out for a face-to-face, but he was still out-of-state when the department needed an answer. I was so worried about disappointing the Director,

⁸⁵ There was no strict dress code I had to adhere to, but because I felt compelled to visually perform authority in my teaching persona, I wore what I grew up calling “church clothes”—always something with a collar, no jeans.

Julia,⁸⁶ that, following my copious thank yous and wish-I-coulds, she had to clarify, twice, if I had accepted the offer or not. Following this clumsy chat, I took notes and listed talking points before calling Erik, like a good academic.

Any intimidating aura I had felt around Erik dissipated during that conversation. I had read some of his work, and now he had read some of mine. At best, I was a freshly drafted rookie compared to his out-and-out pro stature, but still, we shared a genre, a way of expression. We talked briefly about why I declined the MFA offer (for reasons ranging from the abstract level of ideology down to interactions with individual university administrators), but otherwise, our discussion centered on revision and the *what's next* for my essay. The ending—for the draft Erik had seen—I didn't like it, at least, not as the ending. We'd felt each other out by then, so I was emboldened enough to tell him my idea.

“Now I don't want you to think I'm trying to make you into the bad guy, ‘The Man,’ or anything like that, but this whole situation—the essay poking fun at the academy, for which, I am offered more access, a fuller absorption, into the academy—what do you think of that for a conclusion?”

Erik chuckled a bit: “Depends how you do it.”

The greatest joke academia has ever told is that of the humanities Master's thesis. For many disciplines, like English Literature, students are not necessarily expected to do anything with the essay following submission to the graduate school. The thesis is a dead object, the product of an academic hazing, a stepping stone that you paint meticulously,

⁸⁶ A wonderful poet who had exposed me to the spontaneous sounds of Gertrude Stein's verse during a writing workshop two years prior.

then bury and leave behind. Of course, this is not always the case, but it is common enough to be the prevailing joke: I spent months, years, writing this thing, two or three people read it, I got an expensive piece of paper, and that was that.⁸⁷ Even if this essay fails to evolve beyond the Dissertations and Theses collections of UK though, I've left my mark. I've tagged their database with my title.

But otherwise, I don't know how much I've won, whether I've done damage within the system or not. If that was my goal from the start, which I'm not sure of anymore, I don't believe it is any longer. The motivations behind this essay have been deeply personal, an attempt at solving a paradox of identities. I assumed that reconciliation was the best case scenario, that with enough mental teeter-tottering, I would emerge fluent and fluid, no longer troubled by my double thoughts. I would write out my cognitive dissonance. But in the course of exploring this fissure, I have settled on a second option: agreeing-to-disagree, allowing both to be suspicious of the other, but bridged by mutual respect—dissonant as hell, but civil.

A convenient conclusion, you might say, one typical of liberal arts scholarship. Q: Can these two things be reconciled? A: Fifty-plus pages of "Maybe. What do you think?" Fifty-plus pages of calling others to scholarly action, of raising more and more questions, but few satisfactory answers. Conversely though, would not the reconciliation have been just as trite and tidy? Given that certain tenets of vandal-punk ideology (like continuously questioning authority and subverting the dominant paradigm) inherently prevent such a breezy harmony, would not my insistence of a personal reconciliation—the assertion alone—be cause for suspicion?

⁸⁷ Paraphrasing the dissertation experience of the first Ph.D. in literature I ever asked, my high school teacher, DocLock. His story echoes that of most graduate students I know personally. (With the exception of my hard sciences friends—damn them and their concrete skills and data-based research.)

I will just have to accept that some part of me sneers at the final tone I strike: my repulsively formulaic agree-to-disagree, little-t, everything is subjective ramblings. If you're so damn smart, the vandal-me says to scholar-me, why can't you make up your mind? But instead of shutting down, my inner scholar remains loyal to these tentative, skeptical methods, the utility and virtues of the anti-climactic but realistic conclusion. Say what I might about the pretentious, condescending aura plaguing much of academic writing, I can never deny that somewhere, in all those MLA-formatted pages, things get done, thoughts get thought. An article in a peer-reviewed journal will never inspire the brazen danger of a Molotov cocktail, but who's to say it might not influence the way some people conceive of and perform their personal and public roles and identities?

The Velvet Underground's "Heroin" means something much more complicated to me (I feel I understand the song more even though I have never actually done heroin) because I remember listening to it while effectively held against my will in the backseat of a friend's SUV, after he and another friend riding shotgun admitted to snorting some dope⁸⁸ before we hit the road from Lexington for Bonnaroo 2008. Coursing and weaving through what seemed like hours of continuous interstate construction sites, I remember pleading with them to allow me or another sober friend to drive, but they refused to pull over. The only respite came when they started blaring *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, and this knowing, *this-music-is-about-us* sneer crossed their faces. I allowed myself to experience the moment with a come-what-may attitude. It was infectious, this romantic mythos of drugs and rock and roll in that little swerving SUV. I have no doubt many would have cut these irresponsible people out of their life forever, as soon as they could

⁸⁸ Pain pills, probably percocets.

get out of the vehicle. Others would have called the police, or staged an intervention. But at the time, I simply accepted that that was what those two friends were like. We spent the weekend together in a tent, got drunk and stoned while watching Willie Nelson, B.B. King, and others play to thousands on a Tennessee farm where, five days out of the year, pushers walk the avenues between tents, quietly repeating the festy⁸⁹ speak for various drugs: headies for weed, pharmies for pharmaceuticals, yayo for coke. These friends were reckless but never stole anything from me—good friends, just junkies—until eventually, one overdosed, then the other.

By the time I got introduced to the music of Johnny Hobo and the Freight Trains, the front man, Pat the Bunny, had gone to rehab and announced via his website that he would never play another Johnny Hobo song, or even sell recordings of his pre-rehab music.⁹⁰ Some part of me empathized with Pat’s decision, but another disgusting vestige within me almost scoffed: “Pussy.” Out of shame, I hesitate to use this offensive word, but I feel it is the most honest representation of the flitting, but no less vile thoughts that plague me and so many other punks as we attempt to sort out what this whole “being punk” thing means. When I attempt to emotionally and logically backtrack through my use of this lewd pejorative, I find no easy explanations. I could go on, at length, flagellating myself with the righteously fed-up language of queer theory—perhaps I should—but my (deeply regrettable) punk usage of “pussy,” it should be noted, does not precisely align with the slur’s more commonly intended meaning, i.e. a person who does

⁸⁹ As in music festival.

⁹⁰ He has since joined new bands (Wingnut Dishwashers Union, then Ramshackle Glory) and continued to play solo music under his original punk rock nickname, Pat the Bunny (last name: Schneeweis). As with the Fairey-OBEY synecdoche above, I use Pat’s pseudonyms somewhat interchangeably—his name *is* Pat after all—even though, in many ways, there was Johnny Hobo, and then there was just Pat the Bunny, there all along, but different now.

not sufficiently perform (physically, sexually, linguistically) some monolithic version of *masculinity*. I am in no way defending my usage or saying the term is somehow less offensive in certain arenas, but merely clarifying that, so far as I can tell, when someone in the punk community calls someone a “pussy,” usually the intention is to label the other a sell-out, a poser, or just generally inauthentic—not punk.⁹¹

I have never, even for a moment, viewed Pat the Bunny as a sell-out or a poser, but a powerful undercurrent of glorified self-destruction courses through punk music so pervasively that his phoenix-like rebirth seemed an abomination. I identified with the punk persona of Johnny Hobo *because* his songs valorized and mourned the reckless, itinerant life of the punk addict. That’s the tender but dark emotion embedded within my selfish disappointment that Pat got clean: I had put enough junkie friends in the ground that eventually, addiction itself became nostalgic, and so, Pat’s pre-rehab material became hopelessly connected to the most searing friendships I had known. What’s much more sinister though—what genuinely scares me—is I’ve realized that some part of me wanted Johnny Hobo to die. For punk.

Hopefully this goes without saying: of course I would never wish a drug-related death upon an artist struggling with addiction just because it would make for a better story. But after listening to enough punk music, anyone will eventually realize that along with all that anger, there is something deeply sad and scared in the racket, something

⁹¹ I have no sociolinguistic or ethnographic research to back this up. I’ve rarely heard a punk call someone a “pussy” merely for being “insufficiently masculine” though. The punk community, like any complex social institution, has always had its isolated pockets of homophobia, sexism, racism, granted, but it also boasts a proud tradition of alter-masculine (or alter-gender) performances. The New York Dolls were cross-dressing on stage as early as the 1970s, at the very cusp of punk rock’s inception. More recently, in 2014 Against Me! released *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*, their first LP since band-leader Laura Jane Grace came out as a transgender woman. Conversely, many punks consider Henry Rollins a sell-out (pussy), despite his thick-necked hyper-masculinity. Bigots exist everywhere, but punks generally are some pretty open-minded folks when it comes to identity performance.

wounded, dangerous not for its power but because it is desperate. Punk, as a culture and worldview, revels in its own futility,⁹² exalting martyrs like Sid and GG and Kurt, those too-fast-to-live, those that seem to feel too much and consequently obliterate themselves in a barrage of drugs and violence rather than continue to live in a culture they despise.⁹³

Actually, maybe I shouldn't feel so compelled to justify my creepy-on-the-surface morbidity. This tendency to romanticize self-destructive genius is far from unique to punk. We live in a culture defined just as much by what could have been as what is, where posters commemorating the 27 Club hang in college dorm rooms. We consumers of (pop) culture fetishize those that burn out rather than fade away. Snuffed out potential turns us on aesthetically (Jim Morrison will always be an androgynous heart-throb because he will never get too old to wear leather pants in public, unlike Bob Dylan) but more importantly, it turns us on ideologically, as a specimen of artistic integrity preserved in amber (because he's long dead, Mr. Mojo Risin' will never agree to advertise Pepsi-Cola or Victoria's Secret, unlike Bob Dylan).⁹⁴

But back to the specific case of Pat the Bunny and my initial impulse to decry him for not fulfilling some prophecy of punk martyrdom and how utterly wrong-headed and repulsive a thought that was for me to indulge, especially because, aside from the fact that he no longer sings songs about doing drugs, Pat's identification as punk (anarchist) seems as strong as ever.⁹⁵ In fact, the similarities between some Johnny Hobo lyrics and

⁹² Similarly, the vandal accepts the ephemeral nature of graffiti, its imminent erasure by the buff.

⁹³ Vicious, Allin, Cobain. Of course.

⁹⁴ Granting permission to Pepsi for "Forever Young," ironically enough. See Dylan.

⁹⁵ After casually researching his post-rehab life and musical career, I've found that when internet trolls attack Pat for being *not* punk, they typically lack any ammunition of substance other than the whole rehab thing and that Pat "sold out" by attending college shortly after. Both of these arguments hinge on a monolithic logic of what it means to be "punk"—an unrealistic, claustrophobic logic I'm working to exorcise from myself (especially because I could not rightfully claim the identity either based on this idiotically narrow *do drugs, fuck school* criteria).

his later work are so striking, it seems Pat might be salvaging the valuable bits from his former self and re-contextualizing them within his experience as a recovering punk addict. As Johnny Hobo he sang, “tonight i burn my bookshelf to be free, because even a rebel tradition is slavery.” Years later, in a Ramshackle Glory song about his struggle to get sober, Pat the Bunny shared his friend William’s “message of hope”: “it went: ‘fuck you and everything that you think you know. if you don’t step outside the things that you believe they’re gonna kill you.’”⁹⁶ In both cases, whether Johnny or Pat, his lyrics express a deeply punk (deviant, vandal) sentiment: question everything, especially yourself. Or, as another troubled martyr-type figure—albeit from literature not rock and roll—DFW might have put it, dogmatic faith in any way of thinking leads to “[B]lind certainty, a close-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn’t even realize he’s locked up.”⁹⁷

As in the case of Shepard Fairey, I was judging myself through Pat the Bunny, and yet again, my complaints relied on a prescriptive logic toward identity that I wish dismantled but still perpetuate in my knee-jerk thoughts. This internal dissonance in itself, I’ve come to realize, is not the worst case scenario. I could have condemned Fairey and Pat as sell-outs and never looked back. What matters is that I do not cling to any one notion of subversive authenticity as doctrine—that is what being punk, being deviant is really about. It is about carrying the torch, doing your own thing with it, then passing it on. Teenager-me, if he was here, would practically puke here, tell me to piss off, call me

⁹⁶Respectively, “From Here Till Utopia (Song for the Desperate),” from Ramshackle Glory’s 2011 album, *Live the Dream* and “Untitled,” from a Johnny Hobo and the Freight Trains split with Mantits, *Love Songs For The Apocalypse*, released in 2005.

⁹⁷ David Foster Wallace, “This Is Water,” commencement speech given at Kenyon College in May 2005.

an old man. I'd smile, envy his rubber knees and deviant idealism, remind him that I am his future, then kick him swiftly in the pants.

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