HOME IS WHERE THE SPRAY-PAINTED HEART IS:

GRAFFITI AS RHETORICAL RESISTANCE ON SKID ROW

by

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Home is Where the Spray-Painted Heart Is: Graffiti as Rhetorical Resistance on Skid Row

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This thesis is concerned with art's role in resisting dominant stereotypes of homelessness by mediating a subaltern vernacular rhetoric. Through analyzing anonymous guerrilla artist Skid Robot's graffiti art as rhetorical resistance against dominant discourses of homelessness on Skid Row, this thesis contributes to uncovering the ways in which art, in its multifaceted ways, plays a rhetorical, aesthetic, and political role in resisting stereotypes of homelessness. Through an analysis of Skid Robot's graffiti and its mediations on Instagram, this thesis shines the spotlight on the importance of art as more than "art for art's sake" and illuminates art's very real, affective capacity to intervene, create experiences, and move people, places, and things. In addition, this analysis will extend the theory of vernacular rhetoric into the visual realm, drawing out its capacities and limits as a mediator of subaltern vernaculars. The overall trajectory of the chapters leads to how graffiti art, in this case the work of Skid Robot in Los Angeles's Skid Row, acts as rhetorical resistance through a mediation of a subaltern vernacular as an interruption of normative and social discourses of homelessness. In terms of scope, I move from analyzing the mediation of subaltern vernaculars on Skid Row, to ways that aesthetics works to intervene into hegemonic discourses of homelessness, to commenting on the politics and ethics of Skid Robot's work.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND BEHIND THE SCENES: SKID ROBOT, DIALOGIC GRAFFITI,

AND RHETORICAL RESISTANCE

In the three months spanning September to November of 1999, seven Denver men, all

who were experiencing homelessness, were brutally beaten to death, found with their skulls

crushed in. Yet, it was only after five bodies—Donald Dyer, George Worth, Melvin Washington,

Milo Harris, and Kenneth Rapp—were found that police and homeless advocates released a

warning that a killer was on the loose,[1] finally formally deciding to treat these malicious killings

as crime.[2] This lack of initial response and caution calls into question the degree to which the

lives of men and women experiencing homelessness are valued. In particular, case studies on the

discourse of homelessness illustrate how textual silences can be systematically identified as

harming homeless populations; that is, how the deliberate omission of pertinent information to

the topic at hand conceals relevant information.[3] For instance, it was not until Denver homeless

shelter workers and volunteers demanded justice for the murdered men that police released the

names of the bodies implicated. This case stands as only one amongst hundreds.

Despite an overwhelming homeless population in the United States (take for instance the

610,042 recorded people experiencing homelessness on a single night in January, 2013), some

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[1] Kirk Mitchell, "Cold Cases: Decapitated body may have been the work of serial killer." *Denver Post*. January 2, 2011.

[2] Phillip K. Tompkins, "Using Communication to Mitigate Homelessness: Emergence from Outreach Work." *Specrtra* (May 2011): 7-10.

[3] Thomas Huckin, "Textual Silence and the Discourse of Homelessness." *Discourse and Society* 13, no. 3 (2002): 347-372.

have described homelessness as a "lagging indicator."[4] The concept of the lagging indicator

suggests that it takes time for economic and housing developments to impact trends in

homelessness. Ultimately, this results in a lack of immediate attention to the issues surrounding

life on the streets and a disregard of the implicated bodies experiencing homelessness. As such,

current data on homelessness is gleaned largely from the population of people experiencing

homelessness who have entered homeless shelters or otherwise sought help from a systematized

body of governance. Research, to date, is thus not necessarily indicative of the experiences of all

individuals who have experienced homelessness at the street level before entering a homeless

shelter. Moreover, current research does not thoroughly consider the implications of activism—

what this looks like or how it comes about—for people living on the streets.

As the complexity of contemporary homelessness continues to change, the composition

of homeless populations has diversified; this calls for a new host of challenges—many of which

cannot be met by shelters. Lynn Harter and her co-authors maintain that in modern America

homelessness is one of the country's gravest forms of poverty, which contradicts the image of

the United States as a "prosperous land of opportunity."[5] The approximately 650,000 people

across the U.S. who reported facing homelessness stand as evidence for Harter et al.'s claim, as

one out of 50 children, or 1.5 million children in America, continue to live homeless each year.[6]

Research frequently positions homelessness as a deviant phenomenon, occurring when

an individual cannot abide by the rules of our mainstream society. Rarely, however, does

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[4] National Alliance to End Homelessness, "The State of Homelessness in America 2014."
(Washington, DC: Homeless Research Institute, 2014).
[5] Lynn M. Harter, Charlene Berquist, B. Scott Titsworth, David Novak, and Tod Brokaw, "The
Structuring of Invisibility Among the Hidden Homeless: The Politics of Space, Stigma, and
Identity Construction," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 33, no. 4 (2005): 305-327.
[6] U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. *The 2012 Point-in-Time Estimates of
Homelessness: 2012 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report*. (Washington, DC: GPO, 2012).

research consider the implications of communicative activism for those without homes. A good deal of academic research comes from economics and geography, providing recommendations for governmental level policy changes. Although these fields yield important insights into changing the lives of homeless populations, the communication field, and in particular, rhetoric, can contribute significantly to the current conversations in the social sciences. Owing to recent developments, rhetorical analysis allows researchers to focus on the circulation of meaning and understand the affective capabilities of experience for purposes of social change. As such, the field of rhetoric has much to offer towards research on interpreting homelessness as it relates to communication and media representations of homelessness.

Analyzing homelessness from a rhetorical perspective can help to illuminate the important social factors that feed into discourses of homelessness that perpetuate negative attitudes towards the phenomenon. Studies have shown, for instance, that social science research conducted on an individual-interview level, or "person-centered perspective," tend to overemphasize what is "wrong" with people who experience homelessness, casting shame upon those who live on the streets.[7] Although such research may be useful in determining individuals' vulnerability to homelessness, it also leads to questionable interpretations of individual traits as the causes of homelessness. Instead, drawing attention to the importance of attending to discourses and representations of homelessness is, I argue, a way of opening space. This thesis will suggest that we ought to examine the rhetorics surrounding homelessness and bodies experiencing homelessness. Understanding the relationship between rhetoric and homelessness can provide productive insights into the possible rhetorical effects of homelessness activism.

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[7] Phillip O. Buck, Paul A. Toro, and Melanie A. Ramos, "Media and Professional Interest in Homelessness over 30 Years (1975–2003)," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 4, no. 1 (2004): 152.

Looking into the bridged world of aesthetics and activism, guerrilla artist Skid Robot has

recently brought a new style of graffiti to the scene that is starting to receive international

attention.[8] Born and raised in Los Angeles, Skid Robot maneuvers the streets of Skid Row using

graffiti to paint homes, thought bubbles, and imaginary landscapes around the harsh realities of

those currently living without homes, posting some of these images onto social media outlets,

and leaving care packages for the subjects of his pieces. Skid Row, an area of downtown Los

Angeles, comprises one of the largest stable populations of people experiencing homelessness in

the United States.[9] Etymologically, "skid row" or "skid road" is derived from a logging term.

Loggers, often viewed as and understood to be of the lower class, often moved their logs to

neighboring cities by sliding them down roads made from greased skids; they would then wait at

the bottom of the skids for transportation back up the hill to the logging camp. The term began to

be used as slang for spots in the city where people with little to no money and nothing to do

gathered. Soon after, skid row became the collective expression that denoted distressed and

poverty-stricken streets in a city.[10]

In turning to Los Angeles's Skid Row, Skid Robot has stated that he believes that his

identity is irrelevant to the message of his art and as such, chooses to remain anonymous.[11]

Entering the scene in late November of 2013, Skid Robot credits his girlfriend with the idea of

using his roots in graffiti to raise awareness of the horrendous conditions on Skid Row. In an

interview with *Vice Media*, the artist discusses his initial feelings of engaging in art that uses

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[8] See http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/feb/23/skid-robot-street-artist-drawing-attention-homeless for most recent (Feb. 2016) article on Skid Robot's work.

[9] John Edwin Fuder, *Training Students for Urban Ministry: An Experiential Approach.* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock (2001).

[10] Eric Partridge and Patrick Beale(ed.) *A Concise Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (New York: Macmillam, 1989): 405.

[11] See the full statement at http://www.skid-robot.com/#!home/mainPage.

both graffiti and human bodies, commenting that he "felt like a dick doing it—because, you know, I'm somewhat using them as props. But then I realized I should be doing more while I'm out here doing this. So the next day, I went to the…store and bought snacks and toiletries and made care packages for these people. That way, when I do roll up, I have something to give them."[12] In response to accusations that he was exploiting people in Skid Row as props, Skid Robot asks the community to reflect on the bigger issue of why someone is sleeping on the streets and the larger injustices at play. Obscuring his own identity, Skid Robot wears a mirrored mask on his face while working on Skid Row to emphasize that he is not the sole hero in this tale.

Many of Skid Robot's social media accounts where he posts images of his work are relatively new. Skid Robot (@skidrobot) first took to Instagram during the first week of December 2013. Instagram is an online mobile photo-sharing, video-sharing, and social networking service that allows its users to take pictures and videos and share them on a variety of social networking platforms, such as Facebook (Fisher King), Twitter (@skid_robot), and Tumblr (skidrobot.tumblr.com). His first Instagram photo was posted 121 weeks ago in Insta-lingo; currently he has 21,600 followers. Tumblr, a microblogging platform and social networking website owned by Yahoo! enables users to post multimedia and other content to a short-form blog. Skid Root's first Tumblr post was shared on December 30, 2013. The artist also uses Twitter, an online social networking site that allows users to send and read short 140 character messages, or tweets. Skid Robot's first tweet was shared on September 6, 2014; the artist now has 478 followers. On Facebook, Skid Robot's uploaded his first photo on December 2, 2014 and currently has 1963 "Facebook friends," and he joined YouTube on October 23, 2014

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[12] See https://www.vice.com/read/skid-robot-104 for full interview.

and currently has 57 subscribers. These social media sites all overlap in terms of the content that Skid Robot posts.

For this thesis I am interested in how the illegality of graffiti art disrupts the dominant perceptions of homelessness, bringing attention to the state's disregard of human bodies. I focus on Skid Robot's Instagram page to do so. In general, laws supporting people experiencing homelessness place obligations on the state to support or house these people. However, there is a growing trend in the Unites States towards criminalizing the state of homelessness in the belief that punishment for homeless behavior will discourage people from choosing to be homeless. Not only does this line of thinking assume, similar to past research on the matter, that bodies currently living on the streets or in shelters possess certain traits that push them to the streets, but it also places blame onto these peoples' ways of life—a tactic that neither deters nor encourages any kind particular lifestyle. Kent Ono and John Sloop's idea of out-law rhetoric address the disjuncture between discourses that the state recognizes, terming them out-law and in-law rhetorics. Reflecting on historical moments of racially fuelled violence, Ono and Sloop argue that particular people do not have the chance to be considered "good" because of they are situated as "always outside, as always already positioned as immoral within a specifically prescribed notion of justice."[13] Ultimately, the authors argue that, "The role of critical rhetoricians is to produce 'materialist conceptions of judgement' using out-law judgements to disrupt dominant logics of judgement."[14]

I am interested in how the use of street art contributes to rhetorics of housed and homeless, looking at how aesthetics as activism acts as an out-law to disrupt status quo narratives

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[13] John M. Sloop and Kent A. Ono, "Out-law Discourse: The Critical Politics of Material Judgment," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 30, no. 1 (1997): 50.
[14] Ibid., 54.

of homelessness. My main focuses revolve around how intersectional subaltern vernaculars work to counter hegemonic police orders with the potential for the graffiti art to create aesthetic experiences. The study of Skid Robot and his dialogic work stands as a particularly important rhetorical endeavor for this very reason.

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle outlines the practical implications for the way we understand the nature and limits of ethics—an important feature of this conceptualization lies in ethics' responsiveness to the ways in which "agents form and maintain moral commitments."[15] Rhetoric, as a humanistic, moral venture asks the fundamental question of how to best conduct a process of reflexivity and moral commitment that translates into genuine change.[16] There is, thus, a calling to see through the "fog of social and cultural capital" in order to discover tools for the production of these types of alternative rhetorical systems. Power does not lie solely in the capitalist's pocket; it is, instead, embedded in the ways in which we speak, walk, and breathe.[17] Skid Robot's graffiti project offers a very concrete example of how a moral, rhetorical endeavor strives for such social change. Through Enck-Wanzer's idea of intersectional rhetoric, Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti critiques the status quo, the master narrative, of homelessness and challenges people both locally and globally to develop alternative modes of understanding homelessness. An intersectional rhetoric "places multiple rhetorical forms on relatively equal footing, is not leader-centered, and draws from a number of diverse political or rhetorical

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[15] Alex John London, "Amenable to Reason: Aristotle's Rhetoric and the Moral Psychology of Practical Ethics," *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 10, no. 4 (2000), 288.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st Century* (New York: Melville House Publishing, 2015).

conventions."[18] As Ono and Sloop argue, it is the very vocation of the critical rhetorician to follow the path of those "who have discussed the rhetoric of the oppressed."[19] Studying Skid Robot's graffiti furthers rhetoric's everyday importance, demonstrating the ethical, practical, and rearticulating features that rhetoric offers.

Highlighting these complex webs of power at play is central to Skid Robot's work, and thus, becomes an interesting point of departure for my thesis. Bodies can perform colloquially in order to transgress hegemonic guises of art—art is much more than the paintings lining the walls of museums and galleries. As Laurie E. Gries underscores, "...things become rhetorically meaningful via the consequentiality they spark in the world."[20] We should, I believe, carefully consider the effectiveness of public art in working towards more genial urban spaces and lifestyles. I, thus, wish to interrogate the webs of power through analyzing the ways in which Skid Robot uses graffiti as an alternative system of rhetorical meaning production for issues of homelessness. My research questions follow from this line of thought.

RQ 1: How does Skid Robot use graffiti art as an alternative system of meaning production (i.e., rhetorical resistance) to (re)produce and disrupt normative and social discourses of homelessness?

RQ 2: How does Skid Robot's graffiti activism function as both vernacular and aesthetic rhetorics?

Object of Study: Skid Robot's *Dialogic Graffiti* Art (via Instagram)

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[18] Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Trashing the System: Social Movement, Intersectional Rhetoric, and Collective Agency in the Young Lords Organization's Garbage Offensive," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 2 (2006): 177.
[19] Ono and Sloop, "Out-law Discourse: The Critical Politics of Material Judgment," 50.
[20] Laurie E. Gries, *Still Life With Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetorics* (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2015): 3.

Skid Robot and his team use street art to shine a light on those who society treats as non-existent. On his personal site, Skid Robot claims:

> The aim of my project is to start a serious dialogue between the political and public sectors, locally and globally, in order to work together in finding and implementing a real solution to the humanitarian issues plaguing our world. Through my art, I hope to raise awareness concerning the crisis of extreme poverty and homelessness in our society and to inspire people to take serious action, either through their ideas, actions or contributions, to help eradicate it. Together we can find a solution, but it all begins by caring for our fellow human beings.

Skid Robot's graffiti seeks to reflect his artist's statement, in that the images he paints consist of what the artist deems "messages of hope" through landscapes, living rooms, angel wings, houses, thrones, and thought bubbles to try to convey the hopes of each person experiencing homelessness that he meets in an attempt to help raise their spirits. Skid Robot then catalogues their stories, sharing them on Instagram to raise awareness of the conditions these people face every day. The artwork always focuses on the person(s) that Skid Robot has been talking to, with the online archives including some background about the focal person(s). Most importantly, Skid Robot's graffiti project is what I'll be calling *dialogic graffiti.* When asked for the inspiration for his graffiti pieces, Skid Robot emphasizes that when he draws around someone, he first talks with them to ask about their lives and aspirations. Together, Skid Robot and the subjects of his pieces, residents of Skid Row, co-create the art based on these conversations of their lives, their dreams, and their thoughts. The idea of dialogic graffiti is central to this thesis, as it highlights the dual role of both Skid Robot and the person or people experiencing homelessness in the creation of the graffiti pieces. The emphasis on the dual role of both parties is particularly important because of its indication of a dual rhetorical voice that is present in the graffiti art on the wall, and thus a dual rhetorical significance.

Anonymous artist Skid Robot's work is reminiscent of another anonymous England-based graffiti artist and political activist, Banksy. Indeed, both Skid Robot and Bansky's uses of satirical street at and subversive epigrams to comment on political and social events have similar goals of critiquing current power structures and ways of being. Although both graffiti artists engage in similar acts of street art as means of reaching similar goals of political and social commentary, Skid Robot offers a new dimension to Banksy's legacy. Skid Robot, as a different kind of graffiti artist, adds a layer of interaction to the graffiti project. His dialogic graffiti emphasizes this interactional piece in that Skid Robot and residents of Skid Row come together to create the art.

Many themes are consistently found among the different social media outlets. The online archive (i.e., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube) can be categorized as aiming toward three *teloi*, with each categorizing a different goal of Skid Robot's. A first *telos* is that of social awareness. Foundational to Skid Robot's work is that idea that awareness of extreme poverty must happen both locally and globally, which is reflected in his portrait style artworks that center the person. A second *telos* is financial donations; on his Instagram page, Skid Robot has advertised print versions of the artwork, where those who visit his page can purchase a print to help in the creation of a non-profit organization dedicated towards helping the homeless. For instance, Skid Robot is currently (as of October 23, 2015) selling sticker versions of his thought bubble graffiti with the intention that people will purchase these thought bubbles, write a message, and put up a sticker in a public place—a legal way of participating in the graffiti work that Skid Robot has started. A third *telos* centers on social and political change, as Skid Robot oftentimes posts facts, personal interviews, or direct calls to action in order to incite a change in how homelessness is conceived. An additional *telos* might include deviance. Skid Robot

mentions that he feels it necessary to cover himself using the darkness of the night in order to accomplish his illegal work, especially as many people who experience living on the streets feel that they are deviant from the norm of society. Skid Robot's Instagram page is updated a few times a week, with his most recent post coming out on April 9, 2016. Often, the most "liked" Instagram photos are uploaded once a week to other social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and YouTube. For this project, I look specifically at Skid Robot's graffiti art on Skid Row as they are mediated through his Instagram accounts. More than a close textual analysis, this thesis will be a study in the politics of mediation through vernacular and aesthetic rhetoric that intervenes into discourses of homelessness.

Methods

I use discursive and visual rhetorical analysis in my study. As Olson, Finnegan, and Hope suggest, "visual rhetoric invites complex responses from viewers, often spontaneous and immediate, but just as frequently, of lingering and reflective consideration. Audience engagement with visual rhetoric may reinforce, challenge, or restructure commonly held assumptions and values and may guide individual choices and collective actions. Indeed, visual rhetoric helps constitute the ways we know, think, and behave."[21] In order to look at Skid Robot's graffiti art, I use a visual rhetorical lens to take to social media where Skid Robot and his team (who are never named or shown) document their self-described mission in hopes of inspiring others to participate and help ignite the "revolution of compassion." To account for both range and specificity, I browse across these social media platforms not to make generalizable claims, but to look for the range of possibilities for disrupting and resisting social and normative discourses of homelessness via Skid Robot's graffiti. Skid Robot's presence on

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[21] Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, and Diane S. Hope, *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2008): 3.

social media has slowly increased over the past year, as the graffiti artist created a personal

website in addition to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, and Youtube accounts where he

posts his art, thoughts, photos, and videos.

As Finnegan suggests, and Foss emphasizes in her chapter on framing the study of visual

rhetoric, visual rhetoric is a "'mode of inquiry, defined as a critical and theoretical orientation

that makes issues of visuality relevant to rhetorical theory.' A rhetorical perspective on visual

artifacts constitutes a particular way of viewing images—a set of conceptual lenses through

which visual symbols become knowable as communicative or rhetorical phenomena."[22] On Skid

Robot's sites, I look specifically towards graffiti that self-labels itself as mediating discourses of

residents of Skid Row.

In addition, Hauser and mcclellan offer four main characteristics to look for in order to

account for the production of rhetorically salient meaning, with an emphasis on the vernacular. I

will also use their heuristic to interrogate and investigate Skid Robot's graffiti and the discourses

that it is intervening into: "(1) *polyvocality*, which makes it possible for vernacular discourse to

(2) *appear under the surface—not always in full view of the "official discourse*, where it can (3)

perform an interrogation of "official" discourse in ways that challenge or resist it, and thus (4)

perform power in mundane, often unnoticed, ways.[23] For instance, figure one pointedly notes

that Bryant, a resident of Skid Row, is asking that people boycott Black Friday. In looking at this

photo with a visual rhetorical lens, I look first at the image itself—the lines, colors, and textures–

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[22] Sonja K. Foss, "Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory" in Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers (eds.), *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2004): 36.
[23] Gerard A. Hauser and erin daina mcclellan, "Vernacular Rhetoric and Social Movements: Performances of Resistance in the Rhetoric of the Everyday" in Sharon McKenzie Stevens and Patricia Malesh (eds.), *Active Voices: Compositing a Rhetoric of Social Movements* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009): 30.

–to infer emotions and ideas of the people and their vernaculars on Skid Row. Second, I look at the caption left by Skid Robot beside the posted photo to further interpret homeless vernaculars as mediated by Skid Robot's sites. This, I believe, aids in focusing on the "symbolic processes by which visual artifacts perform" rhetorical and "communicative acts." [24] Third, I look also at the comments from social media users in order to understand rhetorical responses and framings of the graffiti as a visual artifact, and uptakes of the on-going rhetorical effects. Grounding my analysis in these images, I will discuss how vernacular and subaltern rhetorics emerge and are mediated through these images.

Figure 1:

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/skidrobot/

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[24] Foss, Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory," 304.

Hauser and mcclellan explain vernacular rhetoric as the distinct language and performance of a specific cultural inscription in everyday interactions.[25] Discourses of the everyday often appear in juxtaposition to their "official" counterparts, although not necessarily in ways that are recognized as contrary or resistant by those in power. Through his artwork, Skid Robot brings homeless vernaculars on Skid Row to light, sharing messages and stories as a way to counter hegemonic ideologies of homelessness. As Hauser and mcclellan note, and I mention above, the polyvocality of vernacular discourse allows it to appear under the surface, not always in full view of the "official discourses." Resistant rhetorics can thus appropriate the structures that dominant discourses have used to oppress a marginalized group, adapting and adopting them for their own purposes. In particular, the appropriation of Instagram as a social media outlet to mediate subaltern vernaculars demonstrates the polyvocal, intersectional nature of rhetorical forms (i.e., images, captions, comments, hashtags) that circulate the graffiti. Further, resistant rhetorics challenge the "official" discourse that allows a break with Foucault's panoptic society in order to theorize a space where discourses "rub up against one another in fundamentally different ways that can produce genuinely new alternatives to existing power structures."[26] Vernacular rhetoric proves to be particularly pertinent for examining Skid Robot's intervention into the master narrative of homelessness, as it (a) is a performance of solidarity that constitutes the project as a liberatory social movement (b) reveals "those in movements sometimes have

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[25] Gerard A. Hauser and erin daina mcclellan, "Vernacular Rhetoric and Social Movements: Performances of Resistance in the Rhetoric of the Everyday" in Sharon McKenzie Stevens and Patricia Malesh (eds.), *Active Voices: Compositing a Rhetoric of Social Movements* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009): 29.
[26] Ibid., 32.

negative bonding with authority;" and (c) contains "markers of positionality" where differences between "self and other…are performed in codes of language, dress, and public behaviour."[27]

Specifically, I turn to Instagram to look for the mediated image of graffiti on Skid Row. Instagram stands as my main tool to analyze my object of study because it is the first medium where Skid Robot posts images of his collaborated work; from Instagram, Skid Robot shares these images to other sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. As Kristen Arola argues, interfaces do rhetorical work.[28] Specifically, the design of the space shapes a certain degree of understanding based on a split between the content (i.e., the post) and the template (i.e., the design of the site). As such, if we are to critically engage with the rhetoric of Instagram, we must pay attention to how it is shaping our interactions and ourselves. These considerations will be discussed at length in the conclusion when I discuss the limitations of the study.

Crucially, Instagram allows me to understand what Skid Robot believes and wants this work to be doing, in addition to reading comments from his Instagram followers, some of whom comment that they have also experienced homelessness on Skid Row. This allows for a larger collaboration and participation from people outside of simply those who experience graffiti first hand on Skid Row. However, Instagram limits my study in that I cannot hope to understand the exact thoughts or feelings of current residents of Skid Row when these collaborated graffiti pieces are created, nor can I experience the graffiti in its material, spatial setting. Although Skid Robot might include a caption on his Instagram account that alludes to what residents of Skid Row might be thinking and/or feeling, these are still filtered through Skid Robot's lenses.

Literature Review

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[27] Ibid., 36-7.

[28] Kristin L. Arola, "The Design of Web 2.0: The Rise of the Template, the Fall of Design," *Computers and Composition* 27 (2010): 7.

Communicating Homelessness

Scholars of homelessness have considered the crisis from a variety of perspectives ranging from topics like the causes of homelessness or the gender differences among the homeless to very specific foci on the housing stock or the victimization of people experiencing homelessness.[29] Themes are often related to accommodation and housing issues, defining the concept of "homelessness," and to the health and needs of the people.[30] What surprisingly little research exists in the communication field highlights media influences on public perceptions of homelessness, constructions of identity through narrative storytelling, and rhetorical strategies employed by both homeless people and homeless shelters. This section explores the communication of homelessness from media perspectives, discussing, primarily, how different media sources frame homelessness and how this framing affects public perceptions of homelessness.

Media Influence and Public Perceptions of Homelessness

Media interest in homelessness represents an important source of data that provides useful insight into understanding the broader social factors influencing the issue, particularly through the ways in which varying media frame the social problem differently.[31] As a result of media portrayals, publics often perceive homelessness through different frames depending upon media consumption.[32] Despite receiving attention throughout the past century in popular, historical, and social literature, it was not until the mid-1980s that mass media began to focus

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[29] For a review, see J.M. Henslin, *Homelessness: An annotated bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993).

[30] For a review, see Susanne Klinker, and Suzanne Fitzpatrick, *A Bibliography of Single Homelessness Research* (Bristol, UK: The Policy Press, 2000).

[31] Buck et al., "Media and Professional Interest in Homelessness," 151.

[32] Ibid.; Moira J. Calder, Solina Richter, Katharine Kovacs Burns, and Yuping Mao, "Framing Homelessness for the Canadian Public: The News Media and Homelessness," *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 20, no. 2 (2011): 3.

extensively on homelessness, and particularly, homelessness as a social problem.[33] Although it has been widely assumed that this increase in coverage was due to the actual prevalence of homelessness increasing sharply during the 1980s, in reality, there is little empirical evidence to support this claim.[34] Not surprisingly then, researchers Kramer and Lee argued that people who are homeless are invisible because they are not valued, and Gans described the poor as invisible except when they become a problem to the mainstream community.[35]

Over the last few decades, media portrayals of homelessness have become more negative in tone.[36] Research has suggested that news media can influence public perceptions of the relative salience of issues, which is quite problematic if we take note of the relationship between negative portrayals of homelessness in the media and media influence. Indeed, the amount and type of media coverage of homelessness—in particular, how people experiencing homelessness and homelessness in general are socially constructed—does influence how homelessness issues are publically addressed.[37] Calder, Richter, Burns, and Mao examined newspapers to uncover the media's framing and portrayal of people who are homeless or their issues and circumstances.[38] Four primary factors influenced the media in their selection of frames in relation to the framing of people who presently experience homelessness and their situations: journalistic norms, organizational norms and routines, the influence of the individual, and the construction of social problems as political events heavily influence the use of episodic vs. thematic frames, sympathetic vs. unsympathetic frames, deviance frames, conflict frames,

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[33] Buck et al., "Media and Professional Interest in Homelessness," 152.

[34] Peter H. Rossi, *Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).; Buck et al., "Media and Professional Interest in Homelessness," 152.

[35] As quoted in Calder et al., "Framing Homelessness for the Canadian Public," 6.

[36] Buck et al., "Media and Professional Interest in Homelessness," 152.

[37] Calder et al., "Framing Homelessness for the Canadian Pubic," 3.

[38] Ibid., 5.

dependence frames, attributions frames, seasonal frames, or solutions frames. Calder et al.'s

study demonstrates that through the story frame, the public gains a particular understanding of

the issues faced by homeless populations. The public may wish to rally to address the systemic

factors underlying homelessness (thematic or attributions frames), or they may be influenced to

believe that the person who is experiencing homelessness is a burden, a danger, or nuisance to

society (episodic, deviance, conflict, dependence, or solutions frames).[39] Certainly, then,

increased understandings of the role of news media in public discourse on social issues can help

to illuminate how cultural understandings of homelessness arise.

As meanings circulate in multiple forms, in multiple sites, and are active in all modes of

social experience,[40] media clearly contribute to the cultural understandings of homelessness.

Fiske points out that homelessness is not just a material condition; it saturates these people's

"whole way of life" as "it is the systematicity [of discourse, as opposed to positivist ways of

approaching homelssess,] that makes these practices significant and worthy of interpretation, and

it is their systematicity that is the final object of cultural interpretation."[41] That is, "the ways in

which meanings of homelessness are currently in circulation in the United States, how and from

which social positions they are produced, and what is involved in interpreting and evaluation

them" makes the issue a worthwhile object of study.[42] In a cultural analysis of media

representations conducted by Forte, a newspaper campaign to cast those experiencing

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[39] Ibid., 13.

[40] John Fiske, "For Cultural Interpretation: A Study of the Culture of Homelessness," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, no. 1 (1991): 453.

[41] Ibid., 457.

[42] Fiske, "For Cultural Interpretation: A Study of the Culture of Homelessness," 453.

homelessness in negative terms and justify the closing of a city shelter was examined.[43] Through

the newspaper campaign, it became clear that residents of the city were not sympathetic towards

the homeless, only opting to leave the shelter as is in order to "keep the homeless out of their

backyards and social worlds."[44] Evidently, a cultural assumption of deviance, difference, and

social inequality lingers around ideas of homelessness.

Despite this cultural assumption, the coverage of homelessness varies in the extent to

which media present homelessness as a social problem. Rachel Best's content analysis of 475

newspaper articles challenges the claim that social problems necessarily compete for attention in

a zero-sum game, due to the fact that not all news coverage discusses social problems.[45] Best

found that events sponsored and publicized by organizations triggered articles that were much

more likely to present homelessness as a social problem, suggesting that institutionalised action

by governmental and advocacy organizations can, indeed, call attention to social problems more

consistently and effectively than high-profile unplanned events.[46] This type of research thus

demonstrates that issues calling for action are sometimes covered in the media without being

presented as social problems, drastically influencing public opinion for the worse.

Overall, research on media coverage of homelessness helps to uncover framings of

homelessness in the media and the effects of this framing on the public. This research, however,

does not consider the accounts of people experiencing homelessness themselves, nor does it truly

explore how studying the lives of these people impacts society as a whole—important facets of

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[43] James A. Forte, "Not in My Social World: A Cultural Analysis of Media Representations,
Contested Spaces, and Sympathy for the Homeless," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*
29, no. 4 (2002): 131.
[44] Ibid., 151.
[45] Rachel Best, "Situation or Social Problem: The Influence of Events on Media Coverage of
Homelessness," *Social Problems* 57, no. 1 (2010): 74.
[46] Ibid., 88.

research on the topic. The next section thus explores narrative accounts of homelessness and

discursive strategies used by homeless individuals and shelter workers to best reflect their level

of need, in addition to how researchers use communication research to mitigate homelessness

and call into question discourses of homelessness.

Communicating Homelessness: Social Discourses and Narrative Stories

Discourse refers to "cluster[s] of ideas, images, and practices."[47] Research suggests that

discursive developments of homelessness (re)construct and transform public knowledge about

people who cannot afford housing.[48] Discourse analysts have examined linguistic mechanisms

in everyday talk used to produce and contest homelessness as a deviant identity. For instance,

Toft found that the use of metonyms, metaphors, and lexicalization are used to attach meaning to

deviant behaviors often ascribed to homelessness, such as dirtiness, drugs, and danger.[49]

Huckin's study on forms of textual elision or silence illustrated how silences are particularly

powerful in causing publics to forget the homeless, allowing officials to shape discourses.[50] By

late 1983, media began attributing homelessness to noneconomic causes, such as joblessness,

and by the mid 1990s, the public believed the phenomenon to be firmly linked to substance

abuse, mental illness, and free choice. These explanations of homelessness as the consequences

of personal problems, choice, and instability offered by public officials have become a

compelling piece of the emergent discourse on visible poverty, as it transformed discourses from

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[47] Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the 'Other'." In S. Hall (Ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997): 6.

[48] Celine-Marie Pascale, "The Discursive Creation of Homelessness," *Cultural Studies and Critical Methodologies* 5, no. 2 (2005): 250.

[49] Amoshaun Toft, "Discursive Strategies for the Production of Homeless Subjectivities," *Discourse and Society* (2014): 1-27.

[50] Huckin, "Textual Silence and the Discourse of Homelessness," 347.

homelessness as a critical problem, to homelessness as a less troubling, chronic problem that

afflicts only the deviant.[51]

In the past, discourse on the homeless has focused on undesirable behavior such as

ranting, public urination, stealing, and panhandling, and news articles focused almost exclusively

on the problems that homelessness pose for people with housing.[52] Lindemann found that

despite the San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness' intentions to humanize homeless people

by entrusting them to sell newspapers on the street and keep the profits, this was, in fact, not the

case. Using ethnographic data and document analysis, Lindemann found that the vending

interactions reinforced the stigma associated with homelessness, ultimately positioning the

stigma of homelessness as a "souvenir of the Other."[53] This performative interaction serves to

keep both the homeless and the housed in their respective "place."[54] As such, through

establishing homeless people as alien, fundamentally different, and personally responsible for

their own state of poverty, it is communicated to the housed public that they can, and should,

remain assured of their own stable place in society, insofar as they remain distant from people

experiencing homelessness.

Research on narratives of homelessness collected through interviews with people

experiencing life on the streets or seeking help from shelters hints at the social construction of

homelessness,[55] underscoring the self-editing used to create "useful" accounts of homelessness.

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[51] Huckin, "Textual Silence and the Discourse of Homelessness," 254.

[52] Ibid., 255-257.

[53] Kurt Lindemann, "A Tough Sell: Stigma as Souvenir in the Contested Performances of San
Francisco's Homeless *Street Sheet* Vendors," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 27, no. 1
(2007): 54.

[54] Ibid., 54.

[55] Amir B. Marvasti, "Constructing the Service-Worthy Homeless Through Narrative Ending,"
Journal of Contemporary Ethnography 31, no. 5 (2002): 615.; Harter et al., "The Structuring of
Invisibility Among the Hidden Homeless," 305.

That is, individuals self-edit in order to create a better, more useful narrative for the intended

purpose. Marvasti's data analysis revealed four narrative editing styles: collaborative, directive,

confrontational, and dismissive, which empirically demonstrated variations in how service

worthiness was either achieved or denied. Under the organizational supervision of the shelter,

homeless clients and staff were jointly involved in constructing and conveying the local

relevance of homelessness.[56] Language functions as an ideological practice "mediating between

individuals and the institutional conditions of their existence."[57] Harter and her co-authors'

interviews with educators, case managers, and participant focus groups explore the discursive

(re)production of invisibility among homeless youth, revealing how invisibility shapes, and is

shaped by, processes of stigmatization. Discourses surrounding homelessness involve multiple

and intertexual rules that cannot be remedied by simple solutions.

However, there remains hope that communication research can contribute to the issue of

homelessness, as evidenced by emerging communication scholarship on mitigating homelessness.

Novak and Harter's study on organizing democracy relied on participant observation and

interviews to explore how an organization uses both symbolic and material support for people

currently living without homes or those who may be at risk.[58] In contrast to forces that erase the

homeless from the public, Novak and Harter concluded that StreetWise, a Chicago-based

newspaper organization, ameliorates the experience of homelessness by building communities

and encouraging citizenry, providing employment, raising awareness about poverty, and

enhancing civic discourses. The researchers argue that StreetWise provides scholars with a

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[56] Marvasti, "Constructing the Service-Worthy Homeless," 616.

[57] Harter et al., "The Structuring of Invisibility Among the Hidden Homeless," 307.

[58] David R. Novak and Lynn M. Harter, "'Flipping the Scripts' of Poverty and Panhandling: Organizing Democracy by Creating Connections," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 36, no. 4 (2008): 391.

context within which to understand the organization-society relationships that work to support a democratic way of life. [59] In addition to using communication research to encourage citizenry, researchers have presented a grounded theory of coordination and communication in inter-organizational relationships within the urban homelessness context; that is, coordination occurs to better facilitate advocacy and client service, and to address issues of funding, support, and the public and neighborhood image.[60] As Papa and her co-authors note, "when we promote only unity among the poor or between the poor and other social classes, we risk perpetuating the status quo rather than interrogating it."[61] It is vital that we "remember that the status quo has created the problem of homelessness, and changes are needed in how we form communities so voices of dissent are not suppressed."[62] Specifically, the use of rhetoric may, indeed, be helpful for such changes.

Rhetorical Strategizing for Navigating Accounts of Homelessness

One important tradition of rhetorical theory has focused on practical problems that are capable of resolution by the introduction of discourse in such a way as to move an audience to make a reasoned judgement to mediate the problem.[63] In the context of the homeless shelter, research demonstrates that it is in the favor of both social workers and homeless individuals to make use of rhetoric, as those who are able to best face challenges are individuals who can most

[59] Novak and Harter, "'Flipping the Scripts'", 391.
[60] Katherine Miller, Craig R. Scott, Christina Stage, and Marty Birkholt, "Communication and Coordination in an Interorganizational System: Service Provision for the Urban Homeless," *Communication Research* 22, no. 6 (1999): 683.
[61] Wendy H. Papa, Michael J. Papa, Krishna P. Kandath, Tracy Worrell, and Nithya Muthuswamy, "Dialectic of Unity and Fragmentation in Feeding the Homeless: Promoting Social Justice Through Communication," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 13, no. 4 (2005): 269.
[62] Ibid., 269.
[63] Donald P. Cushman and Phillip K. Tompkins, "A Theory of Rhetoric for Contemporary Society," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 13, no. 1 (1980): 43.

persuasively use the available idioms, motifs, typifications, stereotypes, and images as vernacular and visual resources.[64] In particular, Forte argues that as rhetoricians, social workers demonstrate their abilities to interrupt and classify major claims of homelessness, identify routine and novel arguments, relate the use of rhetorical devices to social memberships, and monitor the assimilation of rhetorical constructions into shared stocks of knowledge.[65] Guided by a similar concept of social problems and the "micropolitics of trouble" perspective, Spencer and McKinney examined the rhetorical strategies used by social workers to conduct intake interviewers with clients experiencing living in homeless shelters. Trouble was a common feature of these encounters, as clients often requested services that were not offered by social workers. As clients used social workers' questions rhetorically to construct their recent biography and current situation, social workers used rhetorical elicitation strategies to gather information about clients, which managed trouble in ways that coincided with material and nonmaterial aspects of the organizational context. Through the use of rhetorical strategies, social workers were able to manage the provision of scarce resources in ways that simultaneously aimed for long-term help for the client.[66] However, these sets of interviews sidestep important issues of oppression, such as race, class, gender, and ableism.

To address this gap in literature on interventions addressing the intersection of homelessness, mental illness, and race, Canadian researchers investigated a Housing First intervention for individuals living with mental illness who were experiencing homelessness. Homelessness is often characterized as a social problem bound by present-centered concerns of

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[64] Forte, "Not in My Social World," 145.

[65] Ibid., 153.

[66] J. William Spencer and Jennifer L. McKinney, "'We Don't Pay for Bus Tickets, but We Can Help You Find Work": The Micropolitics of Trouble in Human Service Encounters," *The Sociological Quarterly* 38, no. 1 (1997): 195.

physical affliction and material deprivation.[67] However, the researchers determined that, through

a commitment to rejecting circulating rhetorics of homelessness as deviant and practicing

rhetorical strategies for successfully framing accounts of homelessness, the Housing First Ethno-

Racial Intensive Case Management program was loyal to their principles of both anti-

racism/anti-oppression and addressing the housing, health, and sociocultural needs of

participants. Through encouraging participant choice and ensuring that the location and home

itself were a good fit for participants, principles of separation of housing and services were

upheld and participants received a standard lease with all the rights and responsibilities of

tenancy.[68] It becomes clear that discourses of homelessness provide an important opportunity for

refining how the rhetoricity of democratic citizenship can be either encouraged or repressed.

That is, discourses of homelessness offer a means of turning towards rhetorical democracies and

inclusion, as opposed to focusing on homelessness as a problem of being present-focused and not

future-oriented.

Rhetorical work on homelessness holds the potential to contribute to a more dynamic

democratic culture, as Middleton's study on the activist and ally group "SafeGround Sacramento"

demonstrates. Middleton's analysis brings to light the lack of attention paid to how marginalized

communities (re)assert their right to be recognized and participate in public forums, suggesting

that the rhetorical strategies used by SafeGround Sacramento—reframing exclusion as a broader

repercussion for the health of Sacramento's democracy—can teach "cultural studies scholars and

rhetorical theorists alike about the strategies through which substantive citizenship is lobbied for

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[67] Melanie Loehwing, "Homelessness as the Unforgiving Minute of the Present: The Rhetorical Tenses of Democratic Citizenship," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96, no. 4 (2010): 380.
[68] Vicky Stergiopoulos, Patricia O'Campo, Agnes Gozdik, Jeyagobi Jeyarathnam, Simon Corneau, Aseefa Sarang, and Stephen W. Hwang, "Moving from Rhetoric to Reality: Adapting Housing First for Homeless Individuals with Mental Illness from Ethno-Racial Groups," *BioMed Central Health Services Research* 12, no. 345 (2012): 10.

and (re)secured by marginalized communities."[69] SafeGround's intervention points toward how activists can use the space of public forums to create opportunities for constructive dialogue and develop means for "resisting oppressive hierarchies enforced by their political exclusion from democratic spheres."[70] Rhetorical strategies can thus help to expand the frame through which homeless people are represented in ways that strengthen their political influence and help explore how marginalized communities can reassert substantive citizenship.

Cushman and Tompkins assert that rhetorical discourse aimed at "motivating collective action depends on the establishing of agreement about the principles for guiding action."[71] In the case of activism for homelessness, rhetorical agreement is of particular importance, yet seems to be quite the task. That is, as Roy notes in her work on paradigms of propertied citizenship, the "spectre of poverty has always hovered in the shadows of the study of American cities" creating "a sense that ineradicable patterns of sociospatial segregation indelibly mark [the] landscape."[72] As many scholars, activists, and concerned citizens have noticed, there has become a nagging awareness of a persistent "new poverty" creeping into everyday life in an obvious manner that must be addressed.

Over the past two decades, a sophisticated body of research has emerged conceptualizing homelessness as a social process embedded in structures of class and race as a spatial practice linked to the continuous capitalist reshaping of city spaces.[73] Contrasted to the "norm" of propertied citizenship, the homeless have been seen as particularly deviant, requiring a degree of

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[69] Michael K. Middleton, "'SafeGround Sacramento' and Rhetorics of Substantive Citizenship," *Western Journal of Communication* 78, no. 2 (2014): 129.
[70] Middleton, "Rhetorics of Substantive Citizenship," 131.
[71] Cushman and Tompkins, "A Theory of Rhetoric for Contemporary Society," 50.
[72] Ananya Roy, "Paradigms of Propertied Citizenship," *Urban Affairs Review* 38, no. 4 (2003): 471.
[73] For a fuller account see Hopper and Hamberg (1984), Dear and Wolch (1987), Hoch and Slayton (1989), and Ralston (1996)

"punishment."[74] As such, those fighting against the dehumanization and under-treatment of people without permanent housing have taken up the issue, advocating in multiple ways for more awareness to be brought to problem—as Skid Robot has begun to do through graffiti art.

Although scholarship and activism, for issues of homelessness may appear to be in abundance, scholarship and activism from a communicative view is, in fact, quite limited. Further still, if one ventures into rhetorical activism for homelessness, databases (i.e., University of Colorado Boulder online databases) will return only two results. The surprisingly few results should thus call us to action, looking for more ways to address the highly widespread issue of homelessness. Looking into the realm of alternative rhetorics—for instance those like graffiti that operate aesthetically—we may begin to venture into other rhetorical spaces for addressing not only issues of homelessness, but also the subaltern in general.

Chapter Previews

Past research on homelessness in rhetorical studies has focused almost exclusively on either rhetorical methods for navigating life in homeless shelters or on deviant positionalities of people experiencing homelessness. Given that, the goal of this thesis is to add to scholarship that illuminates the important role that rhetoric plays as a means of resisting dominant discourses of homelessness. More specifically, this thesis is concerned with art's role in resisting dominant stereotypes by mediating a subaltern vernacular rhetoric. Through analyzing Skid Robot's graffiti art as rhetorical resistance against dominant discourses, sensibilities, and questionable laws on Skid Row, I hope that this thesis can contribute to uncovering the ways in which art, in its multifaceted way, plays a rhetorical, aesthetic, and political role in resisting stereotypes of homelessness. My hope is that through an analysis of Skid Robot's graffiti, this thesis will shine

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[74] Roy, "Paradigms of Propertied Citizenship," 475.

the spotlight on the importance of art as more than "art for art's sake" and illuminate art's very real, affective capacity to intervene, create experiences, and move people, places, and things. In addition, it will extend the theory of vernacular rhetoric into the visual realm, drawing out its capacities and limits as a mediator of subaltern vernaculars.

The overall trajectory of the chapters is intended to lead to how graffiti art, in this case, the work of Skid Robot in Los Angeles's Skid Row, acts as rhetorical resistance, a mediation of a subaltern vernacular, and an interruption of normative and social discourses of homelessness. In terms of scope, I move from analyzing the mediation of subaltern vernaculars on Skid Row, to ways that aesthetics works to intervene in hegemonic discourses and sensibilities of homelessness, to commenting on the politics and ethics of Skid Robot's work. Throughout this thesis I refer to two important concepts: first, starting in Chapter One, I reference "hegemony" on multiple occasions. Second, taking root in Chapter Three, I discuss "the police order." These core terms sound as if they allude to a similar notion of hierarchical systematizing of social or cultural dominance; however, there are subtle differences between the two. While discussing hegemony, I allude mainly to Gramsci's cultural hegemony in that the ruling class manipulates the system of values in a society to reflect their views of the world and make it so that their view becomes the worldview. In this thesis, hegemony describes a deep-seated ideological, *ontological* struggle over common sense where the ruling class or dominant public has exerted power to create a society where their social norms and values become the established social, economic, political, and cultural structure. The police order, on the other hand, is Jacques Rancière's term to describe the implicit rules and conventions that determine the distribution of roles in a community and the forms of exclusion that operate within in. The police order is an *epistemological* means of counting who is visible and invisible, what is noise and what is speech,

and so on. This particular way of counting parts defines the ways of being, doing, and saying that is appropriate to these places.

Chapter II: Skid Robot, (Web)Sites, and the Vernacular of the Subaltern

This chapter analyzes Skid Robot's personal website and social media accounts (Facebook and Instagram) as mediations of a subaltern vernacular rhetorically expressed through a multimodal blend of *dialogic graffiti art,* photographs, and discourse. In order to do this, I explain the development of the concept of the subaltern, drawing on notions of the subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak. I then explore vernacular rhetoric as discussed by Hauser, Ono and Sloop, and Howard, linking the two theories to discuss subaltern vernaculars. I also draw upon Enck-Wanzer's idea of intersectional rhetoric to first make sense of the different modes through which the subaltern vernacular is mediated, and second, to reflect on the decolonizing aim and form of Skid Robot's blended, visually rhetorical work. My aim in this chapter is to analyze Skid Robot's online sites, including both texts and images, as a mediation of a subaltern vernacular that comes together dialogically between Skid Robot and people experiencing homelessness. Further, I investigate how Skid Robot's mediation interrupts hegemonic discourses of homelessness. Overall, this chapter aims to contribute to understandings of vernacular rhetoric and its mediations.

Chapter III: Experiencing Graffiti: Tactics, Aesthetics, and Interventions

While the previous chapter looks at Skid Robot's work as a mediation of a subaltern vernacular, this chapter focuses on ways that aesthetics works to intervene in hegemonic discourses. In this chapter, I sketch out how Skid Robot's works function to intervene in order to redistribute what Rancière calls the sensible in order to create a Deweyan experience. That is, I explain how Skid Robot disrupts the "police order," the social order that represents a set of

implicit rules and conventions that determine the distribution of roles in a community, the forms of exclusion that operate within it, and the perception of the world itself. According to the police order, the poor cannot participate in the community, as their work and ways of being challenges the possibility of having a place, being counted, or having a part by virtue of having no time to participate. Rancière describes this distribution of the sensible as the way in which roles and modes of participation in a common social world are determined by establishing possible modes of perception. I argue that the nature of Skid Robot's work intervenes into the distribution of the sensible, and I examine how Skid Robot's graffiti activism challenges the distribution of the sensible through a visual and text based intervention that interrupts dominant ways of viewing homelessness.

Next, Whitson and Poulakos's work on Nietzsche and the aesthetics of rhetoric will be used to explore the new appearances through which disrupted, previously policed forms of knowledge appear as images and vernaculars of the subaltern. Drawing on Dewey's work on art as experience, this chapter will end by considering the importance of art for the development of an affective experience that impacts our social, political, and educational lives. This consideration underscores the crucial recognition of Skid Robot's work as political activism and rhetorically resistive.

Chapter IV: Conclusions: Ethics, Politics, and Implications of Skid Robot's Work

In the Conclusion, I bring together arguments on the vernacular of the subaltern and aesthetics, experience, and resistance by drawing on Michael Hyde to note next steps and calls to ethics. This conclusion considers the ethical and political dimensions of mediating the subaltern in the way Skid Robot does. I discuss Hyde's Buberian claim that it is in our nature to be called to respond to and to create openings in appropriate ways, as without openings in our lives we

would not be the human beings that we are—that is, we would not *be* at all.[75] I use Hyde's

argument that the *ethos* of human being is rooted in the workings of our spatial and temporal

existence to call into question the ethics of Skid Robot's use of images on the Internet, and what

this means for the bodies of people currently experiencing homelessness on the streets of Skid

Row. The tendrils of Poulakos's sophistic definition of rhetoric as "the art which seeks to capture

in opportune moments that which is appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is

possible,"[76] can be seen throughout the thesis. As Poulakos and Whitson argue, "understood

aesthetically, rhetoric allows people to suspend willingly their disbelief and be exposed to a

world other or seemingly better than the one with which they are familiar, all too familiar."[77]

Sophistic and aesthetic conceptions of rhetoric will take root in the conclusion to discuss the

implications and the limitations of the study and return to the research questions posed above.

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[75] Michael J. Hyde, *Openings: Acknowledging Essential Moments in Human Communication* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2012): 5.

[76] John Poulakas, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16 (1983): 36.

[77] Steve Whitson and John Poulakos, "Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, no. 2 (1993): 138.

CHAPTER II

SKID ROBOT, (WEB)SITES, AND THE VERNACULAR OF THE SUBALTERN

The contemporary guerrilla artist known as "Skid Robot" has brought a new style of

graffiti to raise awareness about homelessness in a way that is starting to receive international

attention. Physically changing the context in which people look at homelessness, Skid Robot has

been credited with offering his graffiti art as a means for transforming how people view

homelessness and how people living without homes feel about themselves. Featured by the

Canadian Television Network News, Skid Robot is being praised for humanizing the struggles of

people living in the slums of Skid Row.[78] Furthermore, Vice Media highlights how the guerrilla

artist's work helps people living on Los Angeles's Skid Row earn much needed money; Birdman,

a longtime resident of Skid Row, makes up to fifty or sixty dollars a day from tourists seeking to

take photos of the graffiti art tagged by Skid Robot.[79] The artist promotes his graffiti work on

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[78] See http://www.ctvnews.ca/world/graffiti-artist-paints-hopes-dreams-for-the-homeless-1.2061589 for full story.

[79] See https://www.vice.com/read/skid-robot-104 for full interview.

social media, encouraging followers to visit crowd-funding sites to support and raise money for the people in his art.[80]

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Skid Robot maneuvers the streets of Skid Row using graffiti to paint homes, thought bubbles, and imaginary landscapes around the harsh realities of homelessness. The artist posts some of these images onto social media outlets, leaving care packages for the subjects of his pieces. In tagging these images on the walls around where people experiencing homelessness sleep, eat, and live, Skid Robot's decision in what to paint comes from the people living without homes themselves. His hope is that the graffiti art can help to focus attention around what the people want to say and shout the messages that are often ignored when said from their mouths. The artist believes that his identity is irrelevant to the message of the art and as such, chooses to remain anonymous.[81]

Innovative responses to homelessness warrant our attention as we are in need for new ways to approach this crisis. Harter and her co-authors maintain that homelessness is one of modern America's gravest forms of poverty, juxtaposing the image of the United States as a "prosperous land of opportunity."[82] The approximately 650,000 people across the U.S. who reported experiencing extended homelessness stand as evidence for Harter et al.'s claim, as one out of 50 children, or 1.5 million children in America, continue to live without a home each year.[83] The National Alliance to End Homelessness cites that on a single night in January 2014, 578,424 people were experiencing homelessness, in that they were either sleeping outside, in an

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[80] Visit https://www.gofundme.com/z96a5sm8 to view GoFundMe campagain.
[81] See the full statement at http://www.skid-robot.com/#!home/mainPage.
[82] Lynn M. Harter, Charlene Berquist, B. Scott Titsworth, David Novak, and Tod Brokaw, "The Structuring of Invisibility Among the Hidden Homeless: The Politics of Space, Stigma, and Identity Construction," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 33, no. 4 (2005): 305-327.
[83] U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. *The 2012 Point-in-Time Estimates of Homelessness: 2012 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report*. (Washington, DC: GPO, 2012).

emergency shelter, or a transitional housing program.[84] According to 2015 American statistics, the largest subpopulation experiencing homelessness were individuals, comprising almost 63 percent of people without homes. Individuals who were chronically experiencing homelessness represented 15 percent of the homeless population, while people in families who recurrently experienced homelessness made up approximately three percent of the homeless population. Approximately 37 percent were people in families (216,261 people in 67,513 households), nine percent of the homeless population was made up of veterans, and unaccompanied youth and children accounted for approximately eight percent of the total homeless population.[85]

In a time when homelessness is so prevalent, European scholar Ricardo Campos suggests that graffiti is particularly interesting because the contrast between the lived world and the social imaginary of the graffiti artist is so conceivably palpable. Campos argues that the "removing and placing of masks, the constant interchanging of worlds, the taking on of divergent roles—all these are a part of the graffiti writer's routine."[86] Straddling the line between these two worlds, Skid Robot's graffiti as a deviation from dominant city regulations offers the prospect of constructing alternative social norms and bonds.[87] As such, the city as a place for transgression and resistance is also a cultural space of order and integration where graffiti can be understood as a blueprint for the empowerment of groups on the margins.[88]

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[84] National Alliance to End Homelessness, "The State of Homelessness in America" (Homeless Research Institute, Washington, DC, 2015), 3.

[85] Ibid., 7.

[86] Ricardo Campos, "Graffiti Writer as Superhero," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 2 (2012): 162.

[87] Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1963); Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1968).

[88] Campos, "Graffiti Writer as Superhero," 162, 167.

In this chapter, I analyze Skid Robot's personal website and social media accounts as mediations of a subaltern vernacular rhetorically expressed through a multimodal blend of graffiti art, photographs, and discourse. Calling up Ono and Sloop's idea of out-law rhetoric, I consider how the illegality of graffiti art disrupts dominant perceptions of homelessness, while also grappling with the illegal presence of human bodies on the streets. Building on the notion of the subaltern, I argue that Skid Robot's personal website and social media accounts stand as sites of expression that function as alternate rhetorical spaces where the vernacular of the subaltern is mediated and circulated. I suggest that Skid Robot's graffiti art and the relating activist information offers a means of revealing subaltern homeless vernaculars; the mediation of these vernaculars via Skid Robot's social media sites aids in the circulation and reception of these crucial messages.

To make this argument, I focus on Skid Robot's Facebook, Instagram, and personal website. To account for both range and specificity, I explore these social media platforms not to make generalizable claims, but to look for the range of inventional possibilities for disrupting and resisting social and normative discourses of homelessness via Skid Robot's graffiti. That is, I analyze Skid Robot's social media pages as places where homeless discourses are mediated and circulated alongside Skid Robot's photography, graffiti art, and activist stances to produce fuller, more substantial vernacular rhetorics. I draw upon Enck-Wanzer's idea of intersectional rhetoric to first make sense of the different modes through which this subaltern vernacular is mediated, and second, to reflect on the decolonizing aim and form of Skid Robot's blended, visually rhetorical work. Overall, I contend that Skid Robot's graffiti, mediated through social media sites, opposes and transforms hegemonic discourses of homelessness using the everyday discourses of

people experiencing life on the streets. The guerrilla artist's social media sites carve a distinct space for homeless vernaculars to fortify and stand as valuable discourses in their own right.

Foregrounding the Subaltern

People who experience homelessness are among the most stigmatized in society.[89] As such, these people can be understood as members of the subaltern.[90] People experiencing homelessness have, for many years, been vaguely understood as a lower ranking class of society. It is this very stigmatization and exclusion, and thus ranking of people experiencing homelessness as inherently different that Skid Robot's graffiti and activist art works to counteract. First used by Gramsci, the notion of the subaltern represented a social class that was fundamentally low ranking, suffering under the hegemonic domination of an elite ruling class that denied them "the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation."[91] With this understanding of Gramsci's subaltern in mind, we can then understand Skid Robot as countering the lower status placed on homeless populations by more dominant publics.

Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti work, collaboratively created with people living on Skid Row, is an active way of intervening into hegemonic understandings of what constitutes homelessness. In order to understand how we are conceptualizing these hegemonic understandings, we turn again to Gramsci. Making revisions to the Marxist tradition, Gramsci criticized the state as a "hegemonic superstructure of power," arguing that the dominant group

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[89] See M. I. Franklin, *Digital Dilemmas: Power, Resistance, and the Internet*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) for a full literature review.
[90] Tracing its origins to Antonio Gramsci, the concept of the subaltern first appeared in "Notes on Italian History" in *Prison Notebooks* between 1929 and 1935 in relation to the workers and peasants who were oppressed under the regime of Mussolini and the National Fascist Party.
[91] Louai, "Retracing the Concept of the Subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak," 4.

controlled the economic, political, and cultural facets of society through hegemony.[92] Gramsci's

idea of the dominant group was one that established a united, subtle hegemony of cultural

thought through aligning itself with other groups. Through the use of common sense, Gramsci

argued that the hegemony co-opted resistance by creating a culture with deceptive benefits and

insincere democratic ideals. Take, for instance, the idea of homelessness: people experiencing

homelessness are not seen as needing help. Rather, there are cultural assumptions of deviance,

difference, and deserved social inequality lingering around ideas of homelessness. Buying into

the hegemonic assumptions surrounding homelessness affords the dominant public a position of

privilege where ideologies of social inequality and exclusion circulate, as homeless members of

the community have put themselves in these situations. Resistance or going against the grain of

dominant culture is seen as futile, as common sense dictates how one should act.

The subaltern position arises for people experiencing homelessness through the ways in

which homelessness confines people within a "physical, intuitional, and emotional space of

difference" where public amenities, goods and services, and physical mobility is limited, if not

totally restricted.[93] Because the constraints of homelessness restrict access to important social

privileges (i.e., those listed above, to name a few), this vulnerable group is particularly exposed

to the effects of change in design, accessibility, and cost—all made in the name of progress.

Gramsci's ideas about the class of peasants as a social, cultural, and political force aware of its

separate consciousness of subalternity fuelled the renewal of the Subaltern Studies Group in the

20th Century, with Ranajit Guha leading the effort. Interestingly, Guha took up the study seeking

to do justice for Indian peasants by exploring the interchange of domination and suppression in

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[92] Joseph P. Zompetti, "Toward a Gramscian Critical Rhetoric," *Western Journal of Communication* 61, no. 1 (1997): 72.

[93] M.I. Franklin, *Digital Dilemmas: Power, Resistance, and the Internet,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 101.

South Asian contexts (i.e., class, caste, age, gender, and office) between 1783 and 1900.[94]

Guha's notion of the subaltern came from a concern with the assumption that the writing of

Indian national history had been controlled by colonial elitism and nationalist-bourgeois elitism

produced by British colonialism—an awareness of dominant common sense, if you will. Seen

through the lens of political mobilization, Guha argued that the difference between the elite and

the subaltern is clear; no matter how heterogeneous subaltern groups may be, the notion of

resistance to the imposed domination of the elite class remains an unchanging characteristic. In

contemporary times, this resistance can be seen on Los Angeles's Skid Row through the work of

Skid Robot as he mobilizes with people experiencing homelessness on the streets through the

rebellious act of illegal graffiti art.

The subaltern position, particularly for homeless populations, is a difficult position to

occupy for reasons that exceed issues of class, social status, gender, and so on. In her 1988 essay,

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak made issues of subalternity clear when she

reconsidered the problems of subalternity and divisions of labor in a globalized world within

current capitalistic politics.[95] This was a particularly important move for several reasons;

significantly, Spivak's move contributes a layer of ethical reasoning to this current study of Skid

Robot and subaltern vernaculars, which will be taken up in more detail in the Conclusion. In her

critique of Gramscian subalternity, Spivak rejected the autonomy of subaltern groups, claiming

that the autonomy of these groups ultimately results in the homogeneity of the subaltern group

and their subjective identity, where all members of the group are seen as having the same

experiences and identities. Further, she argued that methodologies are inherently essentialist in

their definitions of who or what constitute the subaltern. Spivak maintains that the subaltern is

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[94] Louai, "Retracing the Concept of the Subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak," 4.
[95] Louai, "Retracing the Concept of the Subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak," 6.

"truly situational.[96] That word [the subaltern], used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that does not fall under strict class analysis. This is so, because it has no theoretical rigor."[97] Importantly, Spivak refocused issues of the subaltern by, in particular, looking at problems of gender and Indian women during colonial times, finally declaring that the subaltern cannot speak[98]—a claim that was controversially interpreted for the assumption that the subaltern only has a one type of language or voice that might be heard.[99]

The subaltern is thus both an interesting and important concept for investigating homelessness and the class-consciousness associated with it. As Louai brings to the forefront, the subaltern becomes defined in descriptive terms in coordination with a particular marginalized subject position in a given cultural or social context, where subalternity as a condition "becomes

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[96] "Subaltern" began as a description of a certain rank in the military. The word was used under censorship by Gramsci: he called Marxism "monism" and was obliged to call the proletarian "subaltern." See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's Foe Reading Defoe's Cruso/Roxana," in Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (eds) *Consequences of Theory: Selected Papers of the English Institute, 1987-1988,* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999).

[97] Spivak, "Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's Foe Reading Defoe's Cruso/Roxana," 154.

[98] Louai, "Retracing the Concept of the Subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak," 7.

[99] In the mid 1990s, Zompetti revisited Gramsci's work to turn rhetorical scholars towards what he termed a Gramscian critical rhetoric. Critiquing communication literature for its narrow focus on Gramsci as merely a replacement for "ideology," Zompetti called on Ono and Sloop's suggestion that as critical scholars, we must do more than simply critique power structures and their inherent influence on meaning production and circulation. The critic must recognize that two-sided nature of the critique of domination and the critique of freedom. Crucially, Zompetti emphasizes the push for a pragmatic *telos* as a means for an ethical call to action, where *telos* is a commitment to possibility that is rooted in the produced outcomes of rhetorical critique. Specifically, Gramsci's historically situated and monumental analysis of hegemonic developments can be applied to what McKerrow calls "conditions of domination." As Gramsci notes, hegemony's discursive appearances supersede economic superstructures, materializing through aggregates of power that become manifest via cultural demonstrations. A Gramscian critical rhetoric thus advocates for, first, a critique of the rhetorical situation in order to recognize subaltern relationships and subjectivities, and second, a critical *telos* that encourages alternative modes of thought, perspectives, and paths for action.

an umbrella concept."[100] Keeping in mind Spivak's argument, the ethics of subalternity warns against such a position of accepting permanent subordination, as she insists that the task of academics is to pave the way for subaltern groups to speak freely for themselves. As I will argue below, Skid Robot's graffiti is an intersectional mediation of the subaltern that resists hegemonic discourses of homelessness. The guerrilla artist's activism highlights the need for more research specific to (a) homeless populations as a class of the subaltern, and (b) ways to intervene into social, political, and rhetorical discourses for disrupting these narratives. Although I take a decidedly Gramscian stance on subalternity, Spivak's concerns do not go unnoticed and will be taken up in the conclusion as what I might call opening-closing thoughts.

<div align="center">**Intersectional Vernacular Rhetoric**</div>

The bodies and voices of everyday people and things are pivotal resources of argumentation, power, and method. Together, the bodies, voices, thoughts, and discourse of everyday people constitute several rhetorical forms with their own agencies, which are mediated through social media. Rhetoricians should listen to everyday people and take into account the importance of the ordinary—that is, the vernacular. The vernaculars of Los Angeles's homeless population are particularly interesting, as they appear to stand in opposition to hegemonic common sense narrativizations of homelessness and offer glimpses into the unique vernaculars of people experiencing homelessness on Skid Row.

Intersectional Rhetoric and Multimodal Sense-Making

On his social media sites, Skid Robot engages in intersectional and vernacular rhetorics that demonstrate the extent to which residents of Los Angeles's Skid Row have fortified their own discourses. Intersectional rhetorics mediated on Skid Robot's Instagram page use a blend of

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[100] Louai, "Retracing the Concept of the Subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak," 7.

graffiti art, photographs, and discourse. The guerrilla artist's work strives to expose and

decolonize oppressive discourses of mainstream narratives on homelessness. I suggest that Skid

Robot's multimodal work requires, and makes good use of, an innovative, intersectional rhetoric

that draws together fragmentary vernacular rhetorics and is "inventive and decolonizing both in

its aim and in its form."[101] In response to the critique that rhetoricians forgo the converging

rhetorical forms, Darrel Enck-Wanzer offers the concept of an intersectional rhetoric "that places

multiple rhetorical forms…on relatively equal footing, is not leader-centered, and draws from a

number of diverse discursive political or rhetorical conventions."[102] Enck-Wanzer focuses on

the Young Lords Organization (YLO), a New York City based group of Puerto Rican members

gathered together to address the lack of sanitation attention given to their East Harlem

community. Noting how the YLO used diverse, intersecting discursive forms to produce a

rhetorically nouvelle movement, Enck-Wanzer demonstrates how the movement articulated a

sense of agency through a rhetoric that equalizes bodies, images, and speech. These rhetorical

forms refer to verbal, visual, or embodied manifestations of rhetorical performances enacting

their own agencies; one is not privileged over the other. An intersectional rhetoric prompts the

critic to approach rhetorical texts and performances with the fundamental assumption that

"different forms intersect with each other equally," hindering the instinct to assume that work is

being done primarily by one form over the other.[103] This puts us in a position to recognize the

significance of the verbal, visual, and embodied rhetorics of Skid Robot's work. Further,

recognizing the intersectional rhetoric at play in Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti work mediated on

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[101] Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Trashing the System: Social Movement, Intersectional Rhetoric, and Collective Agency in the Young Lords Organization's Garbage Offensive," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 2 (2006): 176.
[102] Enck-Wanzer, "Trashing the System," 177.
[103] Ibid., 181.

Instagram offers possibilities for appreciating how people experiencing homelessness foster their own senses of power.

As Enck-Wanzer emphasizes, the act of resistance should not be reduced to instrumentality, as this neglects the constructive results of their performance. As one example of this intersectional rhetoric, consider an image on Skid Robot's Instagram page (Figure 2). The captioned words, hashtags, body of Ksmooth, photography, and graffiti are rhetorically important in several ways. In one way, the caption beside this "Instagrammed" photo serve as a rhetorically powerful exegesis of un-surveilled police brutality and the effects of this brutality on Black bodies. In the context of a particularly racially-fuelled moment in America, the words captioned here reflect a moment of deep anger felt by Black communities across the board, whether housed or not. The hashtags here do significant work of their own in the social media world. Each hashtag links to every other post that has used the same hashtag, creating an interesting and widely circulated online community. Following, for instance, #icantbreathe brings an Instagram user to the 307,688 (as of March 26, 2016) other Instagrammed photos that have used this hashtag. Similar to this photograph, many of the other pictures on Instagram demand justice for Eric Garner and attention toward Black Lives Matter, demonstrating the extremely wide breadth of an online community that spans the United States to Canada to Australia. Further, Ksmooth's body is positioned in such a way that it appears that he is clutching at his throat. While this particular position is suggestive in and of itself, its significance is heightened with the captioned words and hashtags linking it to a larger online community.

The photography adds another layer to this picture. The way in which the shadows behind Ksmooth's body are photographed are remarkably eerie, adding a dimension of mystery and suspicion to the image, reflecting the secrecy around Eric Garner's case. Each of the

previous rhetorical forms are crucial for the last piece: the graffitied speech bubble reading, "I can't breathe!" to the right of Ksmooth's body. The heavy black spray paint drips down the side of the building, adds the finishing touch to overall rhetoricity of the piece as the drips illustrate the last breathes that escaped Garner. This photograph is an especially emotionally rhetorical image. Each rhetorical form lends itself equally to the overall affect of the piece, and each form needs the other (i.e., caption, hashtags, photography, body posture, graffiti) for the full rhetorical effect.

Figure 2:

Source Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/skidrobot/

This picture, in its fullness, promotes a different image of homelessness. In contrast to the ways in which people who experience homelessness have been described as "self-centered,

uneducated, freeloading bums who choose to live on the streets,"[104] "giving up on the rat race of modern society to live unfettered by bills, taxes, mortgage payments, and related worries,"[105] Ksmooth engages in the deliberate act of holding his neck and requesting that Skid Robot use these words, "I can't breathe," in the photograph. The pose and the words in black paint behind Ksmooth are instructive of an active life that is (a) concerned with more than just himself and his current situation on the street, and (b) educated about current events and politics. In these ways, Ksmooth demonstrates quite clearly the ways in which he (and others living on Skid Row) are more than capable of acting as critical citizens to comment on racial injustices in the United States.

This opportunity—Skid Robot asking Ksmooth what he wanted to say in that moment, spray painting the building behind him, and then following up with posting his words on social media—may not come again for Ksmooth. Despite the conditions around the interaction between Skid Robot and Ksmooth, Ksmooth did not request that Skid Robot ask his followers to donate money or food, nor did he ask Skid Robot to spray paint some grandiose image using bright colors to attract tourists who might pay him to snap a photo with the art. Rather, Ksmooth used the graffiti, the photograph, and the comments to make a politically charged statement concerning the state of life in America today. Ksmooth's body and words, the graffiti on the wall, and the caption of the photo equally participate in the "transfer and continuity of knowledge"[106], particularly in the context of the discourses and stereotypes surrounding homelessness in general. This piece, using a blend of graffiti, discourse, and photography, functions rhetorically to defy

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[104] C.E. King, "Homelessness in America," *The Humanist* 49, no. 8 (1989): 8.
[105] James D. Wright, "Address Unknown: Homelessness in Contemporary America," *Society* 26, no. 6 (1989): 47-48.
[106] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 5.

conceptions of people experiencing homelessness as uneducated, self-centered, and oblivious to current events; and to protest police brutality and the injustices faced by Black America.

Vernacular Rhetoric

As argued previously, rhetoric can, and should, account for bodies experiencing homelessness and the crucial arguments that these bodies can make. It is essential to understand that analyzing homelessness on Skid Row using vernacular rhetoric no longer conceptualizes "*the* public" as some steadily existing creature who lives to legitimize all public matters; rather, this theoretical framing pluralizes the idea of the public, shifting the conceptual focus to the formation of *publics*."[107] Of importance to note is that publics can be moved through counter-hegemonic rhetoric to adopt new views of homelessness. Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti art works as an economy of empowerment and subordination where the vernacular emerges as a hybrid works to accomplish this difficult task.[108] A vernacular rhetorical model allows for active analysis of a broader range of expression, orienting researchers towards the discourse of the people, which Hauser notes includes but does not privilege spokespeople, accounting for public opinion with sensitivity to the dialogic aspects by which negotiations are conducted. [109] On Skid Row, the homeless subaltern stand as a counterpublic that, through their own vernaculars, speak into and against narrativizations of homelessness by dominant publics. A framing of vernacular rhetoric thus pushes for a rehabilitation of public opinion as a concept that is sensitive to and informative of what publics actually think, which serves to emphasize discourses of homelessness, rather than simply the master narrative.

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[107] Hauser and mcclellan, "Vernacular Rhetoric and Social Movements," 30.
[108] Robert Glenn Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no. 5 (2008): 491.
[109] Ibid., 100.

Because Skid Robot posts all of his work on public social media platforms, it is crucial to understand how media plays an important role in the circulation and uptake of subaltern vernaculars. In terms of studying an online website where Skid Robot posts images and relays interviews with people experiencing homelessness, Robert Glenn Howard suggests that participatory websites "have the potential to be more empowering than other kinds of media objects because they offer network locations where local agents can express themselves."[110] Howard conceives Internet-enabled participatory media as "a vernacular web of communication performance that hybridizes the institutional and noninstitutional."[111] It is precisely these participatory media that "hybridize multiple agencies in the texts that they produce. Rejecting reified notions of pure or authentic vernacular, participation in this web can be seen to open up new venues for transformative public discourse."[112]

Based on these cues, Howard notes that the vernacular emerges when discourses are marked as alternate to the institutional.[113] This is clearly seen on Skid Row, as people experiencing homelessness are decidedly marked as different, as abject, to the dominant culture of the housed. Supported by ideologically perpetuated ideas of what it means to be homeless, these people often remain on the streets of Skid Row. Kent Ono and John Sloop call for critics to explore these vernacular discourses, as they "resonate within and from historically oppressed communities,"[114] defining vernacular discourses as those that "emerge from discussions between

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[110] Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," 492.
[111] Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," 491.
[112] Ibid., 492.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," *Communication Monographs* 62, no. 1 (1995): 20.

members of self-identified smaller communities within the larger civic community."[115]

According to Ono and Sloop's perspective, vernacular discourse is a discourse that is produced by those who differentiate themselves as alternate to the larger "civic community" by identifying with a historically subordinated or subaltern community.[116] Specifically, out-law discourses are "found in the vernacular, the practice of everyday life, that oppose or are separate from dominant discourses…. Regardless of intent, then, at times vernacular discourses disrupt dominant discourses and take possession of dominant communities."[117] As we have already seen above with intersectional rhetoric, Skid Robot takes up out-law vernaculars that are in solidarity with Black Lives Matter and against police brutality. As we will see below, these vernaculars are also anti-capitalist, anti-Trump, and anti-poverty. The artist uses these vernaculars to contrast and intervene into dominant rhetorics of house and home. Based on these understandings of vernacular rhetorics and subalternity, I am interested in how vernacular subaltern discourses of homeless experiences are distinct from dominant discourses of civic engagement, social norms, and economic privilege, and how Skid Robot employs a critical *telos* in working to share homeless vernaculars through his own Instagram page.

Skid Robot, Graffiti, and the Vernacular of the Subaltern

To understand how Skid Robot's websites perform as rhetorical sites for the vernacular of the subaltern, we must first understand graffiti's pivotal role. The study of graffiti offers the rhetorical scholar an intersection of rebellion and discourse that has been under-theorized; although scholars use the idea of graffiti to understand how the art operates and motivates, it is often left vaguely defined, with several different interpretations. At its best, graffiti can be

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[115] Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, *Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration, and California's Proposition 187,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002): 13.

[116] Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," 493.

[117] Ibid., 60-1.

defined as an unauthorized publically displayed symbol.[118] By analyzing graffiti, one can see

that the rhetorical power of the art form functions by associating the image of some rebel or

outlaw, a resister, and the contesting nature of the practice of graffiti which makes it a common

element in riots and revolutions.[119] Ferrell and Weide argue that researchers concerned with

conceptualizing the nature of power in the late modern city can find insights within graffiti, as

graffiti often constitutes a sort of aesthetic resistance to the homogenizing effects of corporate

culture and legal control. Political and economic authorities' aggressive attacks on graffiti thus

reflect their own defense of urban consumption, neighborhood property values, and "aesthetics

of authority."[120]

Brighenti notes that the walls of the city become subject to both strategic and tactical uses,

which are, in fact territorial formations that shape different uses of walls in the urban

environment.[121] The public is the arena where territories are created—the public domain, which

is public space and public sphere at the same time, is a zone of convergence and tension between

the material and the immaterial. Thus, graffiti can be called a form of resistance, as it is a

creative, productive force that is more than simply a reactive one. As Brighenti argues, "it is not

skeptical doubt, but the fundamental act that severs relational territories from predetermined

memberships and opens up the public domain as a fluctuating, processual and affective

territory."[122] From this perspective, graffiti art assumes its full significance as a radical

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[118] See Brass, 2015 for a complete review of this literature and definition.

[119] Georgiana Nicoarea, "The Contentious Rhetoric of the Cairene Walls: When Graffiti Meets Popular Poetry," *University of Bucharest Center for Arab Studies: Graffiti, Writing and Street Art in the Arab World* 15, no. 1 (2015): 109.

[120] Jeff Ferrell and Robert D. Weide, "Spot Theory," *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action* 14, nos. 1-2 (2010): 48.

[121] Andrea Mubi Brighenti, "At the Wall: Graffiti Writers, Urban Territoriality, and the Public Domain," *Space and Culture* 13, no. 3 (2010): 329.

[122] Ibid., 330.

interrogation of public territories, a questioning of the social relationships that define the public domain. Skid Robot's graffiti problematizes dominant ways of conceptualizing homelessness, intervening into hegemonic discourses. In tagging, "#feedme" (see figure 3), Skid Robot's graffiti sparks a discourse imploring people to recognize that bodies experiencing homelessness are no different from housed bodies. All bodies, regardless of rank, require sustenance to survive. The resistive nature of graffiti has influenced Skid Robot's work and activism, catalyzing a discourse akin to vigilantism that functions to push back against the walls that keep particular people out on the streets.

Figure 3:

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/skidrobot/

Out-law Discourse and Critical Politics

When asked about how the dominant public receives the graffiti art, Skid Robot notes that, **"**The reception by most people has been positive, and not many people view it negatively,

except for the fact that it's like destruction of somebody else's property."[123] Although Skid Robot's art may be regarded as destruction, I argue that this negates neither the significance nor consequentiality of the activist voices that it represents. In fact, it is the illegal nature of graffiti art juxtaposed with the legality of homelessness on Skid Row (coupled with the paradox of laws criminalizing homeless behaviors) that, in part, makes this an interesting and powerful case.

In general, laws supporting people without homes place obligations on the state to support or house people experiencing homelessness. However, there is a growing trend in the Unites States towards criminalizing the state of homelessness in the belief that punishment for homeless behavior will discourage people from choosing to be homeless. Not only does this line of thinking assume that bodies experiencing homelessness possess certain traits that push them to the streets, but it also places blame onto these peoples' ways of life—a tactic that neither deters nor encourages any particular kind of lifestyle. As previously discussed, studies have shown that social scientific research conducted on an individual-interview level, or what researchers deem the "person-centered perspective," tend to overemphasize what is "wrong" with people who experience homelessness, casting shame upon those who live on the streets.[124] Although such research may be useful in determining individuals' vulnerability to homelessness, it also leads to questionable interpretations of individual traits as the causes of homelessness. Ono and Sloop's idea of out-law rhetoric address the disjuncture between discourses that the state recognizes, terming them out-law (homeless) and in-law rhetorics (housed). Reflecting on historical moments of racially fuelled violence, Ono and Sloop argue that particular people do not have the chance to be considered "good" because of the fact that they are situated as "always outside, as

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[123] See https://www.vice.com/read/skid-robot-104 for full interview.
[124] Phillip O. Buck, Paul A. Toro, and Melanie A. Ramos, "Media and Professional Interest in Homelessness over 30 Years (1975–2003)," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 4, no. 1 (2004): 152.

always already positioned as immoral within a specifically prescribed notion of justice."[125] Following this observation of power at play, the authors put forth out-law rhetoric as a discourse sharing similar conceptions of justice that are different than a culture's dominant ideas of judgment, although these logics need not be inherently opposed to each other.[126] Skid Robot's quest for justice for bodies on the streets employs out-law discourses and their logics to transform dominant ways of knowing, confront ideologically unsound conceptions of justice (i.e., criminalizing homelessness), and engage in solidarity with the subaltern group. Although we know not much of Skid Robot's personal history due to his anonymous identity, we can assume that he is not part of the subaltern group because of the privilege that he embodies through engaging in illegal graffiti, his lack of fear of police authority despite being threatened with prison time if caught, and the care packages he leaves when visiting people experiencing homelessness on the streets.

Skid Robot's mobilization of guerilla graffiti art as activism and dissent, in addition to community organized alliances against homelessness, stand as examples of the development from reflexivity to praxis. On Los Angeles's Skid Row, vernaculars can be seen at the street level in the informal interactions that Skid Robot records: they are the raw words and stories heard and shared, the pleas for recognition and action, and comments left on pictures from current and prior residents of Skid Row. For instance, part of the out-law vernacular critiques dominant capitalist structures (see figure 4). Black Friday's corporate hailings promote a frenzy of monetary and bodily displacement. Yet, this temporary displacement comes with benefits that bodies experiencing homelessness do not have the pleasure of reaping.

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[125] John M. Sloop and Kent A. Ono, "Out-law Discourse: The Critical Politics of Material Judgment," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 30, no. 1 (1997): 50.
[126] Ibid., 51.

Figure 4:

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/skidrobot/

People with permanent addresses, a place to call home, rush their intimate Thanksgiving

gatherings to camp out in front of stores, forgoing a night in their beds under roofs in order to be

the first in line to purchase the newest television set or phone at a slashed price. In figure 4

(above), Skid Robot's graffiti sends a message from Bryant, a resident of Skid Row—boycott

Black Friday. Again, we can see the importance of the intersectional rhetoric at work when

discerning subaltern vernaculars. From Bryant's staged body, to graffitied message that comes in

hashtag form, "#BoycottBlackFriday," to the caption reading, "Bryant had something to say to

the general public…," these different rhetorical forms intersect to bring a fuller impression of

what is at stake in the scene. This intersectional rhetoric thus provides a glimpse of the

components of a subaltern vernacular, revealing the complexity of these vernaculars.

Certain bodies are able to perform the "colloquial" actions of Black Friday, keeping

from their minds the extreme privilege that they carry in having the opportunity to take part in

the event. For these bodies, camping out for Black Friday is an affair with friends to remember,

not thinking of the people who must camp out on Skid Row, often without a tent, sleeping bag, or pillow, in order to survive. On this one night, camping out on public sidewalks, on public property, is overlooked and endorsed. For bodies without homes, Black Friday becomes a capitalist reminder of the ways in which the privilege of housed bodies forgoes the illegality of sleeping on public streets. Bodies who would normally sleep in a house are exempt. In these out-law calls to action—in Bryant's out-law call to action—the vernacular of the subaltern via graffiti challenges hegemonic traditions and ways of knowing. They confront the dominant group with why, where, and how they use their resources, whether they be resources of time, money, or effort. The graffiti represents and resists.

It thus becomes apparent, even at the dawn of Skid Robot's movement, that out-law discourses have begun to affect dominant modes of being and ways of living. What is crucial to note, though, is that no single individual can completely be an out-law or in-law, as out-law discourses are just that—discourses. Therefore, we must look further toward the entire body of vernaculars where Skid Robot is situated and constituted; that is, the "commonsensical assumptions that make up the daily lives of the individuals who practice a discourse."[127] Understanding how out-law vernacular discourses are used and created by the subaltern, and then represented and circulated across Skid Robot's social media sites, holds the promise of leading to changes in public understandings of homelessness. In particular, #BoycottBlackFriday stands as an example of an anti-capitalist vernacular that is mediated on Instagram and articulated as a representation of the subaltern exercising political speech and engaging in social criticism. As Ono and Sloop note, alternative ways of knowing are capable of many things, one of which is to transform cultural logics. Most importantly, out-law discourses are capable of resistance,

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[127] Ono and Sloop, "Out-law Discourse," 62.

especially when placed against dominant publics. Circulating freely on a public site, there is no question that the homeless intersectional subaltern vernaculars bump up against master narratives of homelessness produced by dominant publics. And so, we look toward Skid Robot's websites as places where out-law discourse can be seen within the mediated circulating subaltern vernaculars.

(Web)sites and the Mediation of the Vernacular of the Subaltern

Ono and Sloop remind us that vernacular discourse is constituted by culture—music, art, criticism, dance, and architecture of the local community—and that it should be the vocation of critical scholars to follow the path of those have discussed the discourse of the oppressed.[128] This is a reminder that Enck-Wanzer also evokes when discussing the limitations of contemporary research, providing his intersectional rhetoric as a means of looking at all aspects of culture (music, art, criticism, dance, etc.) without privileging one of these forms over the other. Skid Robot stands with those experiencing homelessness, sharing their voices with the online world. As such, the subjectivities and relations of hegemonic and subaltern publics created and enacted through multiple positions come to be first recognized through critique. Skid Robot has engaged in this initial critique through exposing and speaking out against the marginalization of those experiencing homelessness, leading to what Zompetti and Ono and Sloop term a critical *telos*.[129] I argue that Skid Robot's websites have become a jumping point for this critical *telos* in that the guerilla artist's actions and graffiti art are the outcome of his investigation of the situation on Skid Row. Skid Robot's art does more than simply bring attention to the issue of homelessness. Indeed, this graffiti art and the relating activist information, carried out and then

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[128] Ono and Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," 20.

[129] Zompetti, "Toward a Gramscian Critical Rhetoric," 75.

posted on social media, offers a means of revealing subaltern homeless vernaculars, carving a space for them as valuable discourses in their own right.

Homeless vernaculars on Skid Row articulate a sense of community. This discourse is not only counterhegemonic but also affirmative, co-opting and organizing elements of dominant culture.[130] As Skid Robot has noted, "Sometimes people aren't really looking for money; they're looking for compassion. That's the main basis for what I'm doing. This is art for compassion; it's saying that if we can care about those who are around us who are in need, [we should] help our neighbor, help our fellow [hu]man."[131] In first noting the terms of solidarity, Skid Robot undergirds the project as one of standing with those who experience homelessness, and not simply for or in place of them. It is, thus, not that he presumes to speak for them, but rather, with them. Skid Robot's use of an anonymous name and mask to cover his face counteracts accusations that he engages in these activist endeavours simply for fame. As such, "the reconstructions [the subaltern vernacular] enacts are the results of subaltern agents."[132] These subaltern agents are, more specifically, mediations of the subaltern that are remixed with Skid Robot's graffiti art, photography, website, and political endeavors, that produce fuller intersectional vernacular rhetorics. Through his stance of solidarity, homeless vernaculars on Skid Row remain distinct from dominant discourse despite being composed of some of the same institutional elements; that is, social media and the Internet.

In advocating a range of issues related to homelessness, Skid Robot takes on the role of what Hauser deems a spokesperson for people experiencing homelessness on Skid Row. This can be further understood through the lens of Howard's vernacular web of participatory media. On

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[130] Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," 494.
[131] See https://www.vice.com/read/skid-robot-104 for full interview.
[132] Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," 494.

his Facebook page, Skid Robot leaves posts for his followers ranging from re-posted Instagram graffiti images, to news reports of current homeless issues, to local Los Angeles events that are organized by those who have experienced homelessness (see figure 5). These posts, although coming into circulation via Skid Robot's social media accounts, remain representative of the real-life injustices and hardships faced by people experiencing homelessness each day (see figure 6, comments from @temptedblaze). In participatory media, communication processes combine with structural forces and actions of people who are intertwined in the complex, reciprocal, and structural relationships of both vernacular and institutional authorities.[133] On Skid Robot's websites (i.e., Instagram, Facebook, and his personal site), homeless vernacular authority becomes open and accessible to anyone who engages with these particular webs of structured discourse via the images and activist content that is posted. However, as Howard argues, vernacular authority is only granted when one speaks as subordinate to the institutional and "because this subordination is emergent in discourse, access to such authority is possible only in degrees as alterity from which institutional power is asserted or enforced."[134] Thus, the question of universal access, a question that often emerges with critiques of public domain access, does not diminish the authority of homeless vernaculars; rather, it assists in the circulation, uptake, and understating of these subaltern vernaculars.

Figure 5:

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[133] Howard, "The Vernacular Web of Participatory Media," 497.
[134] Ibid.

Source: Adapted from Fisher King (Skid Robot's) Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/skidrobot?fref=ts

Figure 6:

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/skidrobot/

Dislodging Hegemonic Discourses of Homelessness

Ono and Sloop argue that vernacular discourse needs to be given critical attention such that new understandings of community relationships and contingencies can arise. A critique of vernacular rhetoric works to exemplify other possible realities for the subaltern—not to articulate a vernacular space for further marginalization. In noting how Skid Robot's websites function as sites of expression for the vernacular of the subaltern to circulate, it is crucial to also bring to the forefront the transitory nature of the homeless subaltern. That these communities are always in transition, and thus vernaculars are always changing, emphasizes how homeless vernaculars on Skid Row are always in process. However, vernaculars emphasized by Skid Robot and used in this paper can be used to construct what Ono and Sloop call "strategic representations" in order to counter hegemonic groups, even though these representations and mediations are always in flux. [135]

In calling up these strategic representations as subaltern rhetorics to dislodge dominant discourses of homelessness, it is important to also acknowledge how vernaculars on Skid Row are just that—plural vernacular*s*. Thus, these discourses do not stand solely in opposition to homelessness, but also share in other rhetorical and cultural vernaculars that stand against problematic ideologies. As shown in the images below (see figure 7, 8, and 9), vernaculars on Skid Row also stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, against police brutality, are anti-capitalist, anti-Trump, and anti-poverty. Vernaculars are multi-dimensional, transformational, and always in flux, making them particularly equipped to battle the hegemony.

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[135] Ono and Sloop, "The Critique of Vernacular Discourse," 26.

Figure 7:

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/skidrobot/

Figure 8:

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/skidrobot/

Figure 9:

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/skidrobot/

(Some Not So) Closing Thoughts

In reflecting upon the Gramscian notion of the subaltern and the ways in which Skid

Robot's websites function as spaces for the vernacular of the subaltern to be freely mediated and

then circulated for eyes and ears outside of Los Angeles to see and hear, Spivak's cautions

cannot, and should not, be dismissed. I, quite loudly, hear Spivak's call to think carefully about

the ways in which the subaltern is ventriloquized. As she notes, the ventriloquism of the

subaltern is the intellectual's profession, their merchandise necessary for business. In many

moments that we have seen throughout it does appear that the images are staged, with multiple

residents of Skid Row engaging in political performances that perhaps reflect Skid Robot's

agenda more than their own. However, one cannot argue that Skid Robot's websites offer

snapshots of the thoughts that people who have lived and continue to live on Skid Row are

thinking, apart from their current experiences of homelessness. The artist reminds the larger community that people are more than their conditions, illnesses, and appearances. In this way, Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti art is a kind of complex activism that also, in some manners, does act in ventriloquizing ways. Though it can be negative, it is sometimes necessary, as it is the only way that some audiences will hear the subaltern—specifically, the homeless subaltern. We must, though, always keep in the forefront of our minds the modes of power, ideology, discipline, and history simultaneously at play in discourses, even at the vernacular level.

So, do the subaltern speak on Skid Robot's sites? Can they speak on the Internet? I think, yes. With support organizations and advocacy groups rallying around homelessness, increasing the time and effort put into maintaining various sorts of online profiles, people can take note of the hardships and ideologically unsound notions surrounding narratives of life on the street. To close, I leave you with the words of de Certeau:

> [A] life that is closed upon itself needs doors and windows: authorities that can be heard, points of reference that allow a sociocultural "exchange." Some credible signs are needed because they are also an *outlet* of experience; that is the condition of its possibility.[136]

Skid Robot's website and social media accounts do more than only advocate and support. The artist's guerrilla graffiti art as rhetorical and cultural resistance calls out hegemonic discourses and paradoxical laws. Skid Robot's art calls in those who are sympathetic to the cause and stands as a space for discourses of people without homes to freely exist and circulate. Bodies on Skid Row may not own homes. However, Skid Robot's sites offer much-needed places of residence for the vernacular of the subaltern to reside.

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[136] Michel de Certeau, *Culture in the Plural*, Edited by Luce Giard, Translated by Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 12.

CHAPTER III

EXPERIENCING GRAFFITI: TACTICS, AESTHETICS, AND INTERVENTIONS

As surveillance on Skid Row increases and the number of homeless bodies pile up, Skid Robot has pushed for heightened awareness and action from the city. "The American public and our politicians should be ashamed," the artist contends. "People need to recognize the consequences of our apathy and our lack of compassion towards the homeless and impoverished."[137] However, this has not come without retaliation. In an interview with Vice Media, Skid Robot explains how city authorities and politicians have spoken against him, threatening jail time for the artist if he is caught on the streets.[138] Nonetheless, threats have not stopped the activist; he pledges to continue this mission of raising awareness and working with the people on Skid Row who are experiencing homelessness.

To many, the appalling sanitary conditions and abject poverty on Skid Row is the norm. Once a place marked by transience and short-term street life associated with railroad jobs, the area is now a 54-block district that constitutes the nation's largest concentration of people experiencing chronic, unsheltered homelessness. Over 2,000 people live and sleep on public sidewalks under tents and tattered tarps. However, poor living conditions are the least of one's worries when authorities enter the scene. For instance, while a court settlement now allows people to sleep on the sidewalk overnight, people can only avoid arrest if they are up, off the sidewalk, and invisible to the public eye by 6:00 a.m. the following morning. If they do not

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[137] Rohan Smith, "Graffiti artist Skid Robot tackling homeless apathy on America's most dangerous streets," *News.com.au*, April 13, 2015, http://www.news.com.au/world/north-america/graffiti-artist-skid-robot-tackling-homeless-apathy-on-americas-most-dangerous-streets/news-story/b436d6305f216ee30da6e1924b2e7bff

[138] See http://www.vice.com/en_ca/read/skid-robot-104 for full interview.

comply, people sleeping on the neighbourhood streets risk facing charges of "illegal lodging."

Annie Moody, a long-time resident of Skid Row, estimates that the Los Angeles police have

arrested her almost 60 times in the past six years. At the intersection of 6th Street and Towne

Avenue Moody refuses to become invisible, standing her ground in a space she claims as her

home. Police have described her as a homeless "anchor"—her defiance encourages others to

remain in the streets, undermining the daily efforts to "clean up" Skid Row.[139] Because of her

resistance to simply move along when the sun rises each morning, Moody has been tried 18

times, convicted 14 times, and jailed for a total of 15 months. Moody's example of opposition to

the idea of how people experiencing homelessness should act stands as one amongst many.

In another instance of "cleaning up" Skid Row, six Los Angeles police officers engaged

in what CNN and the LA Times describe as "a confrontation" with Charly "Africa" Keunang, a

reference to his home continent, in front of his tent. Captured on video on March 1, 2015,

Keunang was shot five to seven times after he emerged from his tent, swinging his arms

furiously to protect himself. He had refused to move from the street. Later, the city declared that

the police, in an effort to maintain order, were justified in protecting themselves against

Keunang's combative actions and his violent history as a drug dealer.[140] The chief of the Los

Angeles Police Department responded that, "…reality is, this is much more than a problem that

the police alone can solve." [141] Yet, it is unclear what "problem" he was referring to. What does

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[139] See http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-c1-homeless-arrests-20140429-m-story.html for full story.

[140] See http://abc7.com/news/panel-lapd-justified-in-death-of-homeless-black-man-in-skid-row/1184134/ for full news story.

[141] See http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/03/us/who-is-lapd-shooting-man-shot/index.html and http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-lapd-shooting-skid-row-sg-storygallery.html for full story and video.

become clear, though, is that bodies that dare to be outspoken, dare to refuse to be invisible, become distrustful to public eyes.

While the previous chapter looked at Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti work as a mediation of a subaltern vernacular, this chapter focuses on ways that aesthetics work to intervene into hegemonic discourses. More specifically, I explore how the aesthetic nature of Skid Robot's graffiti work intervenes into what Jacques Rancière calls the distribution of the sensible. I first examine how Skid Robot's graffiti activism on Skid Row changes the distribution of the sensible through a visual and text based intervention that calls out partisan forms of knowledge. I then suggest that Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti points us towards images and vernaculars of the subaltern, which create new appearances in the manner suggested by Whitson and Poulakos. I then draw on Dewey's work on art as experience to consider the importance of art for the development of an affective experience that impacts our social, political, and educational lives. This consideration underscores the crucial recognition of Skid Robot's work as rhetorically resistive political activism.

Overall, I contend that Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti art serves to disrupt stale a police distribution of the sensible that demands we adhere to fixed conceptualizations of homelessness. Cultural assumptions of deviance, difference, and social inequality linger around ideas of homelessness. These assumptions fuel highly negative and harmful master narratives around homelessness that continue to cast people experiencing homelessness as subaltern Others. The living art created by Skid Robot and residents of Skid Row creates a space for the rearrangement of the distribution of the sensible regarding homelessness. This image of an alternate order via graffiti opens up the possibilities for affective aesthetic experiences that hold the promise of stronger, more diverse communities.

Distributions of the Sensible, Police Orders, and Politics

French philosopher Jacques Rancière is an exponent of bottom-up politics—a politics that defends the marginalized, the unheard, and the unseen without contempt or disdain. As Ethan Stoneman so aptly notes, there has been a trend in rhetorical scholarship to expose rhetoric's potential to disrupt dominant manners of discourse and rationality in order to uncover the power of its counterforces.[142] Rancière's political theory offers ways of interpreting how dominant publics have produced nodes of homelessness discourse that come to influence how the general public understands, thinks, and knows about the issue of homelessness—a phenomenon that Rancière terms the distribution or partition of the sensible.[143] Rancière's political theory highlights inegalitarian distributions of the sensible, offering a means through which to identify and rectify unjust circumstances. To that end, I argue that Rancière's notions of distributions of the sensible aid in distinguishing structures of perception on Los Angeles's Skid Row, which have influenced discourses of homelessness. Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti art intervenes into what Rancière calls police orders, reorient the sensible, and politically subjectivize people experiencing homelessness, that is, those who have no part in the police order.

At its most basic level, Rancière's project to restore politics can be seen as an opposition between two competing orders of human being-together: what he calls "the police" and "politics." In earlier work, Rancière illustrates philosophy's historical use of the trope of the craftsperson or worker to demonstrate how the "poor," Rancière's generic word for those who are separate from

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[142] Ethan Stoneman, "Appropriate Indecorum Rhetoric and Aesthetics in the Political Theory of Jacques Rancière," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44, no. 3 (2011): 130.

[143] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004): 12-13, 42-5.

the main group, cannot participate in the community.[144] The "police order," the social order,

represents a set of implicit rules and conventions that determine the distribution of roles in a

community and the forms of exclusion that operate within it. According to the police order, the

poor cannot participate in the community, as their work and ways of being challenges the

possibility of having a place, being counted, or having a part by virtue of having no time to

participate. As Rancière writes:

> The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees those bodies are assigned by names to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.[145]

The police order is founded on the "distribution of the sensible," or the way in which roles and

modes of participation in a common social world are determined by establishing modes of

perception and intelligibility. The central function of a police order is to ensure that the poor do

not participate in the whole, organizing hierarchies and creating the conditions for society itself.

Here, I quote Rancière at length:

> I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respects parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determines the manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. Aristotle states that a citizen is someone who *has a part* in the act of governing and being governed. However, another form of distribution precedes this act of partaking in government: the distribution that determines those who have a part in the community of citizens…. The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which this activity is performed.[146]

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[144] Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (London: Duke University Press, 2003).
[145] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999): 29.
[146] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 7.

As we see, Rancière notes that distribution implies both inclusion and exclusion, in that the social (police) order is conceived as an anti-democratic, anti-political order, which attempts to maintain the existing pattern of inclusions and exclusions. As noted, politics involves opposition to the police order, a challenge by the excluded, "the part which has no part," in the name of equality and the attempt to bring about a re-configuration of the distribution of the sensible. The social order is thus defined as an anti-political "police" order, and politics is conceived as essentially oppositional.

In general, Rancière's politics is constituted by any contestation of the police order. Politics shares an intimate relationship with his conception of *logos*, wherein only those with *logos* can participate in the common public. Here, *logos* is not simply the act of speaking—the *logos* motivating politics is also a way of counting who participates and who does not.[147] *Logos* is foundational to politics in that it is a way of regulating who can speak and who is authorized to speak. Thus, *logos* can be understood as speech and as a counting mechanism, as it is an account of speech determining who can and who cannot speak, counting who participates and who cannot. For Rancière, politics revolves around the "part of no part," the element of a social system that has no voice or place within that system; politics centers on the uncounted or the element for which other elements speak. Thus, politics is a phenomenon that occurs when the order of visibility and invisibility is contested and the invisible, those who have no real speaking part in the visible community, rises up and speaks. Rancière notes that "politics exists because the *logos* is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the *account* that is made of this speech."[148] Politics is the event that brings to the forefront the distinction between what

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[147] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 26.
[148] Ibid., 22-23.

counts as speech and what simply signals noise. However, no singular thing is in and of itself

political; rather, politics is a type of event that surfaces in response to police orders and

reconfigures the relationships between the position of the subaltern "part who has no part" in its

relation to the community.[149]

Perceptions and Sensibilities

Current social distributions of the sensible surrounding homelessness are partitioned

through a police order that marginalizes and disciplines people who experience homelessness.

Rancière's concept of policing governs the ways in which bodies appear and the ways in which

bodies are perceived to take up space. One way in which homeless bodies are policed is through

mass media portrayals; publics often perceive homelessness through different frames depending

upon media consumption.[150] For instance, researchers Eric Kramer and Loobum Lee argued that

people who experience homelessness become invisible simply because they are not valued, and

Herbert J. Gans described the poor as invisible except when they become a problem to the

mainstream community.[151] Moreover, homelessness has come to be deemed antithetical to

citizenship and political participation in the police order's distribution of the sensible. On Skid

Row in particular, as the stories of Anne Moody and Charly Keunang illustrate, the homeless

population has been policed into a collective social body that is marked as distinct from the rest

of the city in terms of status, rank, and privilege. Moody has faced criminal charges for her

resistance to such policing, and Keunang lost his life. Clearly, this particular subaltern group is

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[149] Ibid., 32.

[150] Phillip O. Buck, Paul A. Toro, and Melanie A. Ramos, "Media and Professional Interest in Homelessness over 30 Years (1975–2003)," *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 4, no. 1 (2004): 151 ; Moira J. Calder, Solina Richter, Katharine Kovacs Burns, and Yuping Mao, "Framing Homelessness for the Canadian Public: The News Media and Homelessness," *Canadian Journal of Urban Research* 20, no. 2 (2011): 3.

[151] As quoted in Calder et al., "Framing Homelessness for the Canadian Public," 6.

always already denied access to decision-making roles in the organization and distribution of power.

As meanings circulate in multiple forms, in multiple sites, and are active in all modes of social experience,[152] the use of media as a mode of circulation clearly contributes to the cultural understandings and perceptions of homelessness. John Fiske points out that homelessness is not merely a material condition; it saturates people's "whole way of life" as "it is the systematicity [of discourse] that makes these practices significant and worthy of interpretation, and it is their systematicity that is the final object of cultural interpretation."[153] That is, "the ways in which meanings of homelessness are currently in circulation in the United States, how and from which social positions they are produced, and what is involved in interpreting and evaluation them" creates a perception of homelessness that encourages suspicion and separatism.[154] For instance, in a cultural analysis of media representations conducted by James Forte, a newspaper campaign to cast those experiencing homelessness in negative terms and justify the closing of a city shelter was examined. Through the newspaper campaign, it became clear that residents of the city were not sympathetic towards the homeless, only opting to leave the shelter open in order to "keep the homeless out of their backyards and social worlds."[155] Evidently, there is a spatial element to the policing of homeless bodies. A cultural assumption of deviance, difference, and social inequality lingers around ideas of homelessness, and these perceptions of homelessness constitute the police order, delimiting forms of inclusion and exclusion. That is, those who are perceived as the

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[152] John Fiske, "For Cultural Interpretation: A Study of the Culture of Homelessness," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8, no. 1 (1991): 453.

[153] Ibid., 457.

[154] Ibid., 453.

[155] James A. Forte, "Not in My Social World: A Cultural Analysis of Media Representations, Contested Spaces, and Sympathy for the Homeless," *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 29, no. 4 (2002): 131.

employable, trustworthy, housed citizen are included, and those who are perceived as an unemployable, suspicious, and homeless body are excluded from the main community. Places like homeless shelters, while imperative for bodies that are actually experiencing life on the streets, are seen as nothing more than a space to herd people who are excluded from the main community to keep them out of sight and out of mind.

Graffiti, Aesthetics, and Interventions

Skid Robot's graffiti is an aesthetic rhetoric that intervenes into our current distribution of the sensible. Importantly, what this dialogic graffiti does is emphasize the homeless subaltern. More than simply bringing attention to the horrendous conditions of homelessness, the graffiti re-characterizes homeless life on Skid Row, giving voice to a group that was previously rendered voiceless. Graffiti art on Skid Row as a rhetorical aesthetic changes the normative distribution of the sensible to include different discourses, ideologies, and ways of knowing and seeing. Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti is a different kind of art than the graffiti to which many are accustomed. The graffiti art that we are seeing on Skid Row is an intersectional rhetorical art form that comes to be through dialogue with those experiencing homelessness; these people become the subjects of the art pieces. In bringing together several different modes of visual, textual, and embodied rhetorical forms, Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti intervenes into the current distribution of the homeless sensible via an aesthetic appearance. Through its aesthetic appearances, I argue that the dialogic graffiti project on Skid Row mediates a homeless vernacular that cultivates aesthetic experiences. These encounters with the graffiti art on Instagram redistribute the sensible regarding homelessness—a process that only comes to fruition by generating aesthetic *experience.*

Rancière's political theory nicely connects aesthetics, interventions, and politics through emphasizing the importance of equality and empowering forms of dissensus. In rhetorical studies, there have been efforts to bring rhetoric's aesthetic dimensions to the forefront, highlighting rhetoric's ability to "create, sustain, and transform perception via the symbolic manipulation of appearances."[156] Rancière's political theory contributes to such a mission, in that it expands the range of possibilities for strategic and tactical modes of aesthetics to interrupt oppressive and dominant systems. I contend that Rancière's concept of aesthetics works through Skid Robot's art to redistribute the current partitions of the homeless sensible as perceived on Los Angeles's Skid Row.

Aesthetics, according to Rancière, refers to neither art theory nor art as an object of study. Properly speaking, Rancière's conceptualization of aesthetics refers to a regime of art; these regimes are intellectual accounts of art and labor history, demonstrating the ways in which politics and aesthetics are inherently linked. While the ethical regime of Plato's time linked artistic images with their social utility and the representational regime of the Classical Age elevated art above the common laborer to bourgeois status, the modern aesthetic regime promotes the equality of represented subjects, destroys systems that isolate art as singular, and urges the recognition of meaning in things themselves. In its more general form, aesthetics links up to the distribution of the sensible in that aesthetics is bound up in the political battle over the image of society—what is permissible to say or to show.[157] As a result, modern aesthetics is a direct advocate and determinant of a more egalitarian regime of the sensible. Art is thus one way in which the police order or the distribution of the sensible can be contested and reconfigured.

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[156] Stoneman 130; See, e.g., Farrell 1993; Whitson and Poulakos 1993; Vitanza 1997; Greene 1998.

[157] Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 84-6, 90, 96

Although current distributions of the sensible around homelessness render certain elements of the world invisible, these distributions themselves also make themselves invisible. The police order and its regime of sensibility are largely seen as natural and obvious—at surface level discussions, many do not see the segregation and subordination of people experiencing homelessness as problematic. Skid Robot's graffiti as an aesthetic redistributes the sensible to emphasize the inherent meaning in people themselves, refocusing public attention to a different sensible that has been emancipated from the police order and mediated through Instagram. Through the images of tagged graffiti and people experiencing homelessness posted on Instagram, publics are made privy to this invisible sector of society, a part that has no part. While the police order casts homeless populations as deviant, decrepit, and subordinate, the aesthetics of Instagram posts reveal the humanity of Skid Row's residents. In making visible the invisible, there is a rupture in the police order. I will illustrate this dynamic in greater detail below.

In rupturing the police order, the possibility for social change emerges through moments of dissensus—conflicts between two regimes of sense. Dissensus is the important process by which actors disrupt the police order's regime of sensibility. Rancière argues the following:

> The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in one…. Dissensus is not the confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself. Politics makes visible that which had no reason to be seen, it lodges one world into another…the particular feature of political dissensus is that the partners are no more constituted than is the object or the very scene of discussion…. Political argument is at one and the same time the *demonstration* of a possible world where the argument could count as argument, addressed by a subject qualified to argue, upon an identified object, to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he or she "normally" has no reasons to either see or hear.[158]

Dissensus marks out a political argument where the possibility of rupturing the police order is seen. Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti art uses a dissensual aesthetic to make visible what is

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[158] Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (2001): 31.

invisible in the current distribution of the sensible regarding homelessness, and is one way in which the naturalness and obviousness of the police order can be contested. That is, through tagging graffiti on the buildings of Skid Row and circulating images of the art and the co-collaborator of the piece (i.e., a resident of Skid Row), graffiti contests the relationship between people experiencing homelessness and the rest of the city, demonstrating the way in which the police order itself is a simulacrum. Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti is one way that the contingency of the distribution of the sensible is brought into visibility. The very nature of aesthetics is premised on a democracy of being without hierarchy, an egalitarian regime of the sensible.

Aesthetic Appearances and Subaltern Vernaculars

Rancière's aesthetic model emphasizes the rhetorical and political performances of dissensus, aesthetic appearance, and assumptions of equality exhibited by Skid Robot's graffiti project. That is, the ways in which Rancière's political theory stresses an emancipatory and persuasive mode of political subjectivization suggests that Skid Robot's disruption of perceptions of homelessness via graffiti is a welcomed act of appearance. For Rancière, politics is very much a matter of subjects; a political subject is one that challenges the established ways of being and knowing, bringing forth cases of political dispute. Through subjectivization, political subjects confront the police order, bring a different idea of the sensible into existence, and produces bodies and voices that were previously unidentifiable.[159]

The aesthetics of politics makes bodies that were previously invisible appear, and renders audible the voices that were perceived to be noise. Thus, homeless bodies and the abilities of those bodies that were previously discounted from the police order are made perceptible by the aesthetics of politics. As such, the dialogic graffiti brought to audiences via Skid Robot's

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[159] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 94.

Instagram account disrupts the current sensible, appearing as subaltern vernaculars; these subaltern vernaculars articulate an affirmative sense of community that counter the police distribution and imagine other possible realities for people experiencing homelessness. This way of "making appear" illustrates "a kind of community of sense experience that works on the world of assumption, of the *as if* that includes those who are not included by revealing a mode of existence of sense experience that has eluded the allocation of parts and lots."[160] The appearance of subaltern vernaculars signals a rhetorical sensibility that has enabled Skid Robot and his collaborators who are experiencing homelessness to resist social identification of inferiority through tactics of dissensus, which appear as graffiti images.

If we follow Nietzsche's stance on rhetoric as aesthetics, I believe that we can recognize how subaltern vernaculars appear on Skid Row through tracing the inherent link between rhetorical sensibilities and aesthetics. Steve Whitson and John Poulakos argue that for Nietzsche, subjects speak as a means of staking their claim in relation to things, rather than to proclaim what they know about them—what Nietzsche terms an aesthetic stance. That is, through speech people create connections between themselves and other things as opposed to strictly speaking about what they believe to be true, right, or wrong about them. Nietzsche's aesthetics of appearance argues that the aesthetics of rhetoric treats the orator's actions and utterances as those of the artist. In essence, Nietzsche's critique here stands as an important reminder that all rhetorical endeavors are artful tasks. This reinforces how both the rhetorical nature of homeless vernaculars inherently makes them aesthetic appearances, and the aesthetic nature of homeless vernaculars mediated on Instagram makes them rhetorical.

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[160] Rancière, *Disagreement*, 58.

Subaltern appearances on Skid Row serve to re-order how we understand police

distributions of the sensible on Skid Row. As Nietzsche argues, "…we need appearances in order

to be able to live."[161] In and through their language, subaltern vernaculars summon appearances

that are not and can never be complete descriptions of being; however, these acts put forward a

particular perspective or sensible of homeless life on Skid Row. The different regime of

sensibility presented through subaltern vernaculars functions aesthetically as a means of

providing ways to summon alternative orders and rearrange the sensible; a different sensible in

and of itself is an artistic product of the graffiti.

Importantly, understood aesthetically the rhetoricity of the graffiti "allows people to

suspend willingly their disbelief and be exposed to a world other…than the one with which they

are familiar…."[162] Skid Robot's co-created graffiti art does not propose dialectic truths; rather,

the mediation of these subaltern vernaculars offers different perceptions of how homeless life on

Skid Row is experienced. As Nietzsche writes, "What at first was appearance becomes in the end,

almost invariable, the essence and is effective as such."[163] This describes the creation of (new)

police orders. As per Nietzsche's critique, we should understand the subaltern vernacular as a

rhetoric that does its work aesthetically in order to rearrange the current distribution of the

sensible. While these images are circulating among audiences there lies the potential for the

transformation from appearances to reality. Thus, in arguing that Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti

reveals a hidden perception of what homeless life looks like, we pay compliment to the success

of Skid Robot's aesthetic intervention.

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[161] Steve Whitson and John Poulakos, "Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, no. 2 (1993): 130.
[162] Ibid., 138.
[163] As quoted in Whitson and Poulakos, "Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric," 138.

Appearance to Reality: Aesthetic Experiences

An aesthetic rhetoric, as advanced by Nietzsche, focuses on the body as an "excitable entity"; its task is to appeal to bodily senses—it employs a sensual language that surpasses sounds, smells, textures, flavors, and sights of the world. Furthermore, the strengths of an aesthetic rhetoric lie in the extent to which an audience is affected.[164] Crucially, an aesthetic rhetoric is capable of highlighting the workings of power and the way in which it is innately linked with the captivating words and images that conceal the consequences of adhering to the police order. The aesthetic rhetoricity of the homeless vernacular's appearance on Skid Row moves its audience by means of affective experience. It is then through this experience that the subaltern appearance might turn to a reality that demands change in how homeless populations are policed. That is, in staking their graffitied claim in relation to the rest of the city, people experiencing homelessness on Skid Row engage in an aesthetic intervention that advances a homeless sensible, intervening into the police order.

Similar to Nietzsche, John Dewey argues that art is not a direct reflection of a reality; art does, though, see to it that reality is organized, simplified, and transformed in such a way that it places the individual and community in a context of greater order and unity. Skid Robot's graffiti art represents life as experienced by those co-creating the pieces on Skid Row, organizing the public by taking the materials of experience and then elucidating and focusing the content matter. Experience, according to Dewey, needs to be understood in terms of the everyday conditions of life: life happens not only in an environment, but also in interaction with that environment. Skid Robot and his collaborators on Skid Row cultivate resistance and tension surrounding the current police order to unveil a different sensible in order to achieve a different kind of experience.

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[164] Whitson and Poulakos, "Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric," 141-2.

Experience signifies active engagement with the world, in its highest form involving an identification of self and world—such experience is the beginning of art. These experiences are continuous, aesthetic, and set into action what Dewey terms "an impulsion." Impulsions, different from impulses, which "designate a movement outward and forward of the whole organism to which special impulses are auxiliary."[165]

Skid Robot's graffiti sits as an important example of artwork capable of generating *an* aesthetic experience that redistributes the sensible. For Dewey:

> …we have *an* experience when the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment. Then and only then is it integrated within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences. A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing equality and self-sufficiency. It is *an* experience."[166]

Importantly, an experience is marked off from other experiences, containing its own individualizing qualities. Contrary to the ways in which philosophers theorize experience, Dewey believes that *an* experience is compatible with everyday practices and usages. Life, according to Dewey, is a collection of experiences and histories that each have their own plots and conclusions. Skid Robot teams up with residents of Skid Row who have first hand experience of life on Skid Row, bringing separate elements together and fusing them into unity enhancing their communal identity. The graffiti pieces themselves reflect this unity, cultivating *an* experience right from the get-go. The appearance of the graffiti evokes emotion both for those creating and consuming: the content of art pieces creates experiences through bringing to the forefront the past involvements and background of the one creating the piece. Further, it is an

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[165] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1934), 60.
[166] Ibid., 36-7.

experience in and of itself as it becomes familiar for people interacting with the piece. As such, it is important, as Dewey argues, that we focus more on the experience of the graffiti images rather than on the object itself in order to fully realize the resistive nature of Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti project.

For Dewey, the importance of art lies in his belief that art is "the only media of complete and unhindered communication between [hu]man and [hu]man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community and experience."[167] Art surpasses the limits of language—while language involves only what is said and how, art includes the content of the work itself, the form of the content, and the feelings and emotions associated with coming into contact with the artwork. The aesthetic form of Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti art comes into being when the relationship between content, form, and emotion within the graffiti is fit for a particular kind of communication. The graffiti invites certain modes of interaction, which are influenced by the aesthetic experience. On Skid Row, Skid Robot and his collaborators help to communicate experiences of homelessness through materials that the public world can understand: art. Whereas the art product itself (the graffiti tagged onto the side of a building, homeless bodies, the use of Instagram captions and hashtags, etc.) is physical, the work of art is active and experienced. When these graffiti images enter into experience, they take part in complex interactions that have their own histories, careers, movements, pasts, and presents: energy is manifest and organized toward some goal. Audiences interact with these mediated images via Instagram in a way that organizes the energy of the graffiti pieces, intensifying, clarifying, and concentrating the appearance as an experience.

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[167] Ibid., 109.

In intensifying, clarifying, and concentrating energies, the power of the graffiti images to move audiences is understood. These experiences constitute an aesthetic perception that differs from the ordinary; aesthetic qualities are emotional, where emotions are not static—they are qualities of a complex, changing experience. For Dewey, emotions, as aspects of events and objects, are not private but belong to one who is concerned with movement and change—they are parts of an on-going situation. Art brings together the same evolving relation that makes an experience what it is.

Moving from reception of art to production, Dewey argues that the artist ends the process when they perceive the product to be good. The aesthetic experience, connected with the experience of producing, links aesthetic satisfaction with the activity that gave rise to it. Importantly, the process of artistic production, the process of collaborating on these graffiti images, is involved from the start with perception and an awareness of the evolving object and its aesthetics qualities. The graffiti is thus an aesthetic experience for those experiencing homelessness who have become part of the art process. One of the key audiences for this art is producers (residents of Skid Row) themselves who, through the art process, come to a place where they see themselves reflected back in the artworks. With this recognition, residents of Skid Row are able to conceive for themselves a different order of the sensible, cultivating this experience for others who might encounter this graffiti art. On Skid Row, graffiti images continue to arise as the sensitivity of the collaborating artists continues to shape and reshape the work. These graffiti images as art works each have unique qualities. However, these qualities are based on their concentrated meaning found in the world. The graffiti art expresses meanings, supplying us with the experiences to understand the statements being offered from the subaltern

vernaculars. Aesthetic art thus constitutes an experience, and the graffiti project on Skid Row certainly holds the potential for generating this kind of aesthetic experience.

The ways in which this aesthetic experience work demonstrates the political nature of the dialogic graffiti. Through the intersection of visual (graffiti and photography), textual (Instagram photo captions, comments from followers, hashtags), and embodied (staged body posturing in pictures) rhetorical forms during the artistic process, Skid Robot's dialogic project cultivates an aesthetic experience for both the producers and consumers of the graffiti that suggests the possibilities of different orders of the sensible regarding homelessness. In coming face to face with an aesthetic experience, different publics become more aware of the way that police orders have co-opted the ways through which we come to understand homelessness. The political potential of a different sensible regarding homelessness becomes an attainable idea when people experience for themselves the rhetorical power of these intersecting subaltern vernaculars that shine through aesthetically—as I will now illustrate through analyzing some examples.

Analyzing Skid Robot

For a demonstration of how subaltern vernaculars create appearances that potentially generate aesthetic experiences, we turn to two specific instances from Instagram (figures 10, 11, 12, and 13). For Skid Robot, as for Rancière, equality is a universal given in the sense that it is an assumption available and applicable to all human beings. For Skid Robot, equality is not a right that must be earned, allocated, or protected, nor does it demand unique qualifications.

Figure 10:

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram page, https://www.instagram.com/p/5p6YyQJ8Ig/?taken-by=skidrobot

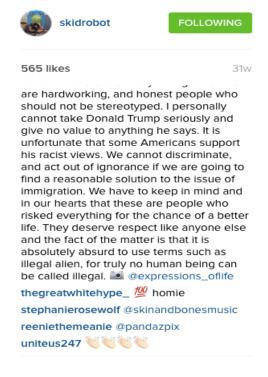Figure 11 (continued photo caption from Figure 10):

Figure 12:

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram page, https://www.instagram.com/p/8yif85p8BY/?taken-by=skidrobot

Figure 13 (continued photo caption from Figure 12):

These images first intervene into the police order by demonstrating that they are dissensual, in that they interrogate and oppose police portrayals of homeless bodies. Both of these captions beside the graffiti images emphasize and contradict current distributions of the police order. Dominant ideas of homelessness lead with three assumptions: first, there is the mentality that people deserve out of life what they put in, and as such, people experiencing homelessness are inferior and merit street life for their lack of planning and/or contributions to society; second, there is the belief that people experiencing homelessness are dangerous because of their mental health; and third, there is the idea that life on the streets hinders people's understandings of current events. Taking a stand against the assertions made by 2016 Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump against immigrants to the United States, Skid Robot, Ivan, and Ramón demonstrate in figure two the universal nature of equality by stating in the caption on their photo, "they [migrants] deserve respect like anyone else and the fact of the matter is that it is absolutely absurd to use terms such illegal alien, for truly no human being can be called illegal." Skid Robot's graffiti art, specifically mediated though Instagram with photo captions, sheds light on the importance of equity and intervenes into the police order's depiction of homelessness, seen in figure twelve. "She is not a statistic, she is a gentle human being who needs help" (see figure 12). These two images in particular counter the appearance of homeless bodies in the police order, albeit in very different ways.

The collaboration between Skid Robot and residents of Skid Row in and of itself demonstrates a kind of reaching out and across lines in two ways. First, Skid Robot's reaching out towards people experiencing homelessness by engaging in this graffiti project exemplifies an important humanistic means of reaching out through physical interactions on the streets of Skid Row. Second, Skid Robot's Instagram page suggests another means of extending arms as it is

posted onto the social media site and then circulated to users who follow Skid Robot. By reaching out via Instagram, these images, through engaging an intersectional subaltern vernacular, are capable of sparking a reaction from Instagram users and re-orienting perceptions online. As users begin to engage with the images online, there is the very real potential for the embodied, visual, and textual rhetorical forms of the image to create experiences for Instagram users and challenge police orders.

Skid Robot's art challenges the distribution of the sensible by drawing out the political agency and humanity of those experiencing homelessness, showing them in new locations that bring the part that has no part into the center. In figures one and three, two main "places" can be discerned that challenge the police order: a place of *citizenship* and a place of "*queen*." The redistribution of parts who have no part (people experiencing homelessness, illegal immigrants, and people living with mental illness) is the central political work from which attitudes of compassion or solidarity follow. These attitudes are essential in that they are a type of challenging dissensus to the police order, mediated through Instagram.

First, Ivan and Ramón take a very clear stance on the 2016 political campaign, strongly opposing the perception that life on the streets hinders one from engaging in current events. "Trump es un culero" ("Trump is an asshole") is more than a simple statement. Appearing as a subaltern vernacular, this image brings to light that homelessness does not equate with lack of opinion. Rather, political issues, particularly for Ivan and Ramón, are of the utmost importance, and people on Skid Row have opinions on the way in which the Republican candidate is maintaining the police order. Ivan and Ramón have gone from working in the garment industry to collecting cans on Skid Row in order to survive. As such, a political candidate that would enforce some sort of positive immigration reform is crucial in that immigrants who have been

relegated to Skid Row because of being laid off would have the opportunity to apply for

unemployment benefits. Here, Ivan and Ramón take a stand against Donald Trump's anti-

immigrant policies, demonstrating that they are aware of social issues and oppose his use of

rhetoric that feeds into maintaining the current police order. In sharing their story, they share also

the story of the 11.3 million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States in 2014.[168]

In standing together in solidarity, Ivan and Ramón offer an image of a united front

against both anti-immigrant and anti-homelessness reforms; their willingness to take this stand

offers a different sense of assertiveness, rather than passivity, to challenge the police order. Their

crossed arms and the speech bubble reading, "Trump es un culero," make a strong statement

against the current police order surrounding homelessness and immigration. In collaborating with

Skid Robot and consenting to post their faces on social media, Ivan and Ramón run the risk of

deportation—Ivan, Ramón, and Skid Robot offer homeless vernaculars of political intelligence,

immigration reform, and solidarity in numbers as they come together to make this appearance on

Instagram and on the streets of Skid Row. These homeless vernaculars stand as a challenging

dissensus to the police order and appear assertively on social media and on the streets of Skid

Row. Importantly, this challenging dissensus intervenes into a police sensible that characterizes

homelessness as laziness and social defiance insofar as they stake their claim in social and

political topics that affect all people, regardless of socioeconomic status.

The subaltern vernaculars illustrated in figures three and four further reinforce how

vernaculars of solidarity can introduce a sense of compassion on Skid Row. Captioned "A Queen

Without a Castle," the main subject of the piece, who Instagram commenters have taken to

calling "the queen" in the absence of her name, represents a reality of many who live on Skid

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[168] See http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/19/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/.

Row. As the caption of the photo reads, "She didn't say much nor gave us her name. It was apparent that she was mentally ill. She was drawn to the colors and smiled at the painting. Kiki [another resident of Skid Row] asked her to take a seat and be #queen for a day." Many illustrations of people living with mental illness on Skid Row are depicted as dangerous, suspicious, and in need of confinement. These perceptions of mental illness feed into the police order and its regime of sensibility, arguing that because of the high level of mental illness on Skid Row the homeless population should be segregated to protect the integrity of the rest of the community. The image of the queen without a castle actively negates this perception of mental illness as dangerous. Sitting in a long forgotten "throne" on the streets of Skid Row, "the queen" is nothing but smiles. She looks at ease, posing for the camera. As Skid Robot is apt to point out, the queen is "a gentle human being" who is "not a statistic."

In bringing this image to Instagram, highlighting the beauty in her smile, and then specifically explaining how Kiki had invited her to take a seat with them, Skid Robot and Kiki as a team exemplify the important roles played by compassion and solidarity among residents of Skid Row. This significant moment highlights Dewey's assertion that producers of art in particular are equipped for an experience. Solidified through the image and then mediated on Instagram, Kiki and the queen are privy to an experience that is capable of changing the way that they understand their place in the police order. Kiki looked out for the queen, invited her to take part, and gave her attention that she most likely had not received in a while. Further, the collaborators intervene into a police order that masks homeless bodies, and especially homeless bodies living with mental illness, as dangerous and a threat to society, offering these different vernaculars of solidarity and compassion as counters to the police. People experiencing homelessness are not one-dimensional organisms deserving of life on the street as a result of the

stories of their lives. The dissensus taking place centers political intelligence, immigration reform, solidarity, and compassion as ways to offer audiences specific illustrations of how the police order's ways of appearance have co-opted the modes in which general publics perceive people experiencing homelessness.

Overall, Skid Robot's graffiti art aestheticizes the multiple homeless vernaculars that challenge the police order and its regime of sensibility by demonstrating the multi-dimensional facets of the homeless experience on Skid Row. What this does, then, is bring to the forefront bodies that have been systemically ignored and forgotten. Rachel Hall argues that opaque bodies, visual bodies that "possess interiors and thus allude to realms beyond the visible," raise suspicion by daring to show something that is not completely visually accessible or visible to those monitoring them.[169] Driven by an impulse to understand the world in terns of visibility, the aesthetics of transparency is fuelled by a need to "turn the world (the body) inside-out such that there would no longer be any secrets or interiors, human or geographical, in which our enemies (or the enemy within) might find refuge."[170] Publics become conditioned to fear that which they cannot completely understand. With fears of state punishment hovering over their heads, both the homeless and housed feel the weight of homelessness discourses shaping their everyday actions, modes of being, and ways of understanding, albeit extremely differently.

The aesthetics of transparency requires that the good citizen (i.e., the housed) allow their body to be made transparent in order to translate the "heterogeneous body into useful, visual information."[171] The aesthetics of transparency becomes an attempt to force a correlation

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[169] Rachel Hall, *The Transparent Traveller: The Performance and Culture of Airport Security*, (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015): 7.

[170] Rachel Hall, "Of Ziploc Bags and Black Holes: The Aesthetics of Transparency in the War on Terror," *The Communication Review* 10 (2007): 320.

[171] Hall, "Of Ziploc Bags and Black Holes," 323.

between a body's interiority and exteriority, or, to turn a body inside-out in order to forgo the complexity of correlation as a whole.[172] When it is deemed that a body cannot be made transparent, it is said to be viewed as opaque (i.e., a body experiencing homelessness); the police order normalizes the idea that the opaque body cannot be allowed to be vocal out of fear that it may produce something dangerous, violent, and/or threatening. Transparency has become the goal of many Western ideals—a formula for creating the conditions for docility. Through their stigmatization, people who experience homelessness become viewed as chronically opaque, unable to render themselves transparent to the public eye. An opaque body has been forced to become a voiceless body, and, as Hall states, "the body without words is no body at all."[173]

Hall's discussion of opaque and transparent bodies emphasizes the ways in which homeless bodies are policed to remain out of sight and out of mind. City surveillance techniques and enforcers demand that homeless bodies become understood as docile, simple, and easy to read under the police regime of sensibility. Together, residents of Skid Row and the mirror-masked Skid Robot navigate the streets of the forgotten L.A. neighbourhood, tagging the walls of dilapidated buildings and strategically posting the art on social media sites to create experiences.

Homeless vernaculars on Skid Row are more than the perception that the police order advances; they offer stances of dissensus by focusing on the 2016 political race, immigrant reform, and racism; compassion for mental health; challenges to the city of Los Angeles on housing facilities; and practices of friendship. Dewey asserts that new materials demand new techniques, and that the artist is a born experimenter; through experimentation, Skid Robot has opened up new areas and reveals new qualities of the familiar—vernaculars that highlight

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[172] Hall, "Of Ziploc Bags and Black Holes," 321.
[173] Ibid., 339.

challenging dissensus to the police order. In the creation of the graffiti pieces, there is an aesthetic experience of surrender and reflection as Skid Robot, Ivan, Ramón, and "the queen" come together to contemplate the graffiti piece and forfeit their stories to the public. This phase of experience is interrupted to attend to the experience of overwhelming impression, where the art piece itself captures the attention of audiences to move them towards action.

Toward Interventions, Dissensus, and Aesthetic Communities

First and foremost, communication is the foundation of all activities that brings together human beings for the purpose of community—art is a wide-ranging mode of language for such purposes. Although art instructs by way of communicating, Dewey argues that we need to understand such instruction as including the imagination; moral action depends on being able to imaginatively put oneself into another's position. Art encourages just this, and demonstrates its way of intervening through appealing to the *pathos* and *logos* of the community. As Dewey notes, "The function of art has always been to break through the crust of conventionalized and routine consciousness. Common things…are means with which the deeper levels of life are touched so that they spring up as desire and thought. This process is art…. Artists have always been the real purveyors of news, for it is not the outward happening in itself which is new, but the kindling by it of emotion, perception and appreciation."[174] Overall, the importance in Skid Robot's artistic intervention into the police distribution lies in its attempt of searching for and building an interactive community between distinctive, marginalized parts.

Skid Robot's collaborative graffiti project offers a space for the appearance of the subaltern vernacular to be freely mediated and circulated for eyes outside of Los Angeles to see and hear. These appearances intervene into the current homeless police sensible to render visible

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[174] John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1927), 183-4.

the homeless bodies that have been made invisible and given no real part by the police order, demonstrating how a different sensible is in and of itself an artistic product of the graffiti. In finally sensing these appearances, audiences are made privy to how the mediation of these subaltern vernaculars offers different perceptions of homeless life on Skid Row. In coming into contact with these graffitied images and their textual, visual, and embodied content on Instagram, there opens the possibility for audiences to have *an* experience. Herein also lies the potential for a reorientation towards the possibility of a different kind of police order—an ingrained alternative sensible in which people experiencing homelessness, immigrants, and people living with mental illness would be made to count and be seen differently as part of the whole.

Through the comments left on Skid Robot's Instagram photos, we can sense that there may be some sort of compulsion towards action as a result of these experiences. For instance, Eric Garcetti, the current mayor of Los Angeles, has felt the drive to comment on messages from Skid Robot's collaborative project on Instagram, responding that he "couldn't agree more. This coming month [October 2015], with the country and the City Council, we will release plans to address the homeless crisis building on raising the minimum wage and the 5000+ vets we have housed this year and last. Thx for your voice."[175] Although there is little information on how this promise from Mayor Garcetti has panned out, it is clear that the impulsion for action has been initiated. Evidently, the aesthetic experience of a new homeless sensible in the form of subaltern vernaculars has been kick started.

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[175] See https://www.instagram.com/p/74r7N4p8GY/?taken-by=skidrobot for this comment from LA mayor's Instagram account, @ericgarcetti. This comment was made in response to a direct message from Skid Robot; this graffiti message was tagged onto a building in Skid Row 23 weeks ago (the end of September 2015) and read, "@EricGarcetti you can take a man's home but you can't take his spirit—Skid Robot."

In closing, I argue that Skid Robot's collaborative mission to change the perception of the homeless experience is ethically appropriate, in that inequalities between social and economic classes of people are unjust. As Stoneman writes, "Within police distributions of the sensible, *to prepon* requires the political rhetor to react rather than to adjust to the norms of communication and display—or, better yet, to 'adapt' via tactics of confrontative, nonadjustment."[176] We see this explicitly with the mental health speech of Kiki and the queen, and the citizen speech of Ivan and Ramón where the norms of everyday homeless life are reacted against by Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti art. In this sense, Skid Robot's dissensual aesthetic campaign takes the necessary steps to counter structures of domination. In bringing together the voices of people experiencing homelessness, violence, and rejection on Skid Row, Skid Robot's dialogic campaign seeks to engage in politics as a performative dissensus contra the police order and questions the naturalness of the idea "this is how it is." As a response to the sensible that renders homeless bodies invisible, dangerous, and inferior, Skid Robot's graffiti project rhetorically resists the police order's current distribution of what is appropriate, challenging it for the very fact of its *in*appropriateness.

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[176] Stoneman, "Appropriate Indecorum Rhetoric," 142.

CHAPER IV

CONCLUSIONS: ETHICS, POLITICS, AND IMPLICATIONS OF SKID ROBOT'S WORK

Over a century ago, in 1900, the average American died at the age of 50. Compare that with the average age of 78 that most Americans can expect to live until now, and there is no question that the medical and technological advancements of the last hundred years have made an impact on the human life. Yet today, in 2016, the average age of death for someone experiencing homelessness is equivalent to that of the average American in 1900: 50 years old.[177] Crowded and poorly ventilated shelters, extreme weather on the streets, physical and mental health conditions that go untreated, and the high rates of violence towards people living either permanently or temporarily on the streets continue to perpetuate difficult and horrific living conditions for those experiencing homelessness.

"Skid Robot. An anonymous artist among the streets of skidrow, giving to those in need. Creating a dialogue for a solution to extreme poverty through art."[178] These are the words that adorn that top of Skid Robot's Instagram page, offering a lens through which to view the 225-image curation of pictures. With now over 21.7k followers, the graffiti artist's work is reaching eyes and ears across the globe, garnering international attention. Many continue to praise his work, which features residents of Los Angeles's Skid Row in front of a backdrop of graffitied art. Notably, as previously discussed, these pieces are co-created with the subjects of the artworks; Skid Robot has noted in past interviews with Vice Media that the inspiration for his graffiti work always comes from the people experiencing homelessness on Skid Row themselves—a

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[177] Jim O'Connell. *Premature Mortality in Homeless Populations: A Review of the Literature* (Nashville: National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2005): 13.
[178] See Skid Robot's Instagram page https://www.instagram.com/skidrobot/.

significant and noteworthy interactive piece of his graffiti project that differentiates him from

other graffiti artists of his kind (i.e., the infamous Banksy). However, Skid Robot notes that there

have been moments of shame in his work, as he openly admits to the possibility of the work

being construed as a sham since at first glance, it appears that he is using people experiencing

homelessness as props.[179] But in a world where the horrific deaths of people experiencing

homelessness are nothing more than headlines, this begs the question of ethics.

In this conclusion to the thesis, I bring together arguments on the vernacular of the

subaltern and aesthetics, experience, and resistance by drawing on James C. Scott's discussion of

dominant and hidden transcripts and Michael J. Hyde on the call to openings to note next steps

and calls to ethics. This conclusion considers the ethical and political dimensions in mediating

the subaltern. I discuss Hyde's claim that it is in our nature to be called to respond to and create

openings in appropriate ways, as without openings in our lives we would not be the human

beings that we are—that is, we would not *be* at all.[180] I use Hyde's argument that the *ethos* of

human being is rooted in the workings of our spatial and temporal existence to call into question

the ethics of Skid Robot's use of images on the Internet, and what this means for the bodies of

people experiencing homelessness on the streets. The tendrils of Poulakos's sophistic definition

of rhetoric, "rhetoric is the art which seeks to capture in opportune moments that which is

appropriate and attempts to suggest that which is possible,"[181] can be seen throughout the thesis

and will be emphasized here. As Poulakos and Whitson argue, "understood aesthetically, rhetoric

allows people to suspend willingly their disbelief and be exposed to a world other or seemingly

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[179] See full interview at http://www.vice.com/read/skid-robot-104.
[180] Michael J. Hyde, *Openings: Acknowledging Essential Moments in Human Communication* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2012): 5.
[181] John Poulakas, "Toward a Sophistic Definition of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16 (1983): 36.

better than the one with which they are familiar, all too familiar."[182] Aesthetic conceptions of

rhetoric will take root in the final lines to discuss the implications and the limitations of the study.

The *Ethos* of Rhetoric and the Call to Openness

Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti work is a complex project in that it is "doing" several

things. In the Introduction, I argued that highlighting the complex webs of power at play in how

homelessness is socially construed is central to Skid Robot's work. Often, conceptions of

deviance, difference, and deserved social inequality linger around ideas of homelessness. Skid

Robot's work seeks to contest these ideological ideas of homelessness. This counter to the

ordered, stereotypical way of thinking about homelessness comes through most powerfully, I

believe, when the graffiti images incorporate the stories of the people in the images. However, it

is important to consider and question the methods through which these vernaculars and

distributions of the sensible regarding homelessness are uncovered and circulated.

Recall in Chapter Two the mediated vernacular of the homeless subaltern shone through

most brightly when Skid Robot collaborated with Ksmooth (see figure 14). In this image,

Ksmooth's body, positioned to imitate the body of a person who cannot breathe in order to bring

attention to Eric Garner's death, demonstrates the multi-dimensional facets of the homeless

vernacular—which do not just circulate around ideas of house and home, but encompass topics

that range from Black Lives Matter to humanity to a sense of political agency. Recall also

Chapter Three's use of the image of two Mexican men, Ivan and Ramón (see figure 15),

proclaiming "Trump es un culero" to re-articulate the ways in which people experiencing

homelessness engage in several different forms of dissensus as a way of re-distributing the police

ordered way of thinking about homelessness. The intersectional rhetoric of the ensemble of the

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[182] Steve Whitson and John Poulakos, "Nietzche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 79, no. 2 (1993): 138.

two men experiencing homelessness, the graffiti art, the photograph, and the Instagram post together challenge and potentially rearrange the distribution of the sensible. Thus, what becomes of consequence here is the ways in which these bodies are used to transgress not only hegemonic understandings of graffiti art, but also hegemonic understandings of homelessness.

Figure 14:

Source Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/skidrobot/

Figure 15:

@RicardoPalave<

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram page, https://www.instagram.com/p/5p6YyQJ8Ig/?taken-by=skidrobot

One would be hard pressed to find someone who would criticize Skid Robot's intent to bring about awareness of homelessness issues—it is clear that Skid Robot's goal of raising awareness about the conditions of homeless life is a worthy endeavour, and one that does, indeed, warrant attention. It might not be as difficult, however, to find a critic of his methods. Indeed, how the graffiti and image captions on Instagram work to both mediate subaltern vernaculars and re-distribute the sensible around homelessness is a crucial and significant portion of his project. Yet, interrogating the ways in which Skid Robot chooses to do this work is an important aspect of understanding the project in full, especially when it comes to understanding the role of his collaborators. While the positive consequences of his work should not be forgotten or undermined, it is essential to understand the ethics of including human subjects in images on an online media platform that seeks to mediate what we might understand as the "hidden transcripts" of life on the streets.

Skid Robot and the Ethics of Graffiti, Mediation, and Publicity

In his work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, James Scott suggests the following:

> The meaning of the text, in either case, is rarely straightforward; it is often meant to communicate one thing to those in the know and another to outsiders and authorities. If we have access to the hidden transcript (analogous to the secret notes or conversations of the philosopher) or to a more reckless expression of opinion (analogous to subsequent texts produced under freer conditions) the task of interpretation is somewhat easier. Without these comparative texts, we are obliged to search for noninnocent meanings using our cultural knowledge—much in the way an experience censor might![183]

Scott uses the term "hidden transcript" for the critique of power that transpires out of sight—a dialogue that the powerful do not see or hear. According to Scott, hidden transcripts characterize discourse that takes place "offstage" so to speak; Scott's conceptualization of hidden transcripts suggests that they are beyond the direct observation of power holders and are specific to a social site and a particular group of people. Each hidden transcript is more than simply a speech act, and includes a range of visual, textual, and embodied intersectional practices that symbolize the zones of contestation between dominant and subordinate groups. Through this discussion of hidden transcripts, Scott underscores a crucial claim that holds great potential for homeless populations: historical evidence demonstrates that subordinate groups are capable of revolutionary thoughts that renounce existing forms of domination.[184] This, I should hope, sounds reminiscent of the homeless subaltern vernaculars that have been mediated on Skid Robot's Instagram and other social networking sites. Understanding homeless vernaculars as pieces of hidden transcripts on Skid Row emphasizes the power that can be found within these subaltern transcripts that have been subsequently publicized and circulated on social media.

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[183] James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 184.

[184] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 101.

People experiencing homelessness have, for many years, been accepted as a lower ranking class of society; their ways of speaking, being, and knowing have long been ignored by the police order's regime of sensibility. The current way of policing homeless bodies to be opaque and unseen has rendered the voices of people experiencing homelessness inaudible to dominant publics. However, in cultivating several vernaculars that offer clear demonstrations of Skid Row residents' political agency and humanity, it is evident that there is a particular power in engaging, developing, and circulating these hidden transcripts. These hidden transcripts underscore how residents of Skid Row participate in Black Lives Matter campaigns (refer to figure 14) and how they engage with Republican Presidential Candidate Donald Trump (refer back to figure 15).

Scott's discussion of hidden transcripts further reminds of the aesthetics of transparency and the potential power of opaque bodies. The aesthetics of transparency demand that democratic citizens (i.e., the housed) render their bodies transparent in order to translate the "heterogeneous body into useful, visual information."[185] As discussed in the previous chapter, the aesthetics of transparency is an attempt to turn a body inside-out in order to forgo the complexity of correlation as a whole. When it is deemed that a body cannot be made transparent, it is viewed as opaque (i.e., a body experiencing homelessness); the police order normalizes the idea that the opaque body cannot be allowed to be vocal out of fear that it may produce something dangerous, violent, and/or threatening. Transparency has become the goal of many Western ideals—a formula for creating the conditions for docility and keeping the police order in check. Through their stigmatization, people who experience homelessness become viewed as chronically opaque, unable to render themselves transparent to the public eye. To the dominant public, the opaque

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[185] Rachel Hall, "Of Ziploc Bags and Black Holes: The Aesthetics of Transparency in the War on Terror," *The Communication Review* 10 (2007): 320.

body has been forced to become a voiceless body. However, what dominant publics ignore is the power of opaque bodies to create their own vernaculars and transcripts, and what publicizing and circulating these transcripts does for opaque communities. As demonstrated in previous chapters, bringing hidden vernaculars to the public's attention holds possibilities of disrupting the police order and its regime of sensibility while also providing a sense of satisfaction for the subaltern who have previously policed their own emotions.[186] That is, in bridging the divide between public and hidden vernaculars, the subaltern community on Skid Row is offered a means of personal fulfillment through breaking their silence and sharing their sense of agency and humanity.

Skid Robot's work on the streets of Skid Row mediating subaltern transcripts (vernaculars) is a way of remaking the police order, and is certainly an important and noteworthy venture. However, Scott's claim that, "If we have access to the hidden transcript…or to a more reckless expression of opinion…the task of interpretation is somewhat easier," provokes questions of ethical methodology. While it is undeniable that access to hidden transcripts (subaltern vernaculars) is a necessary step in reading, interpreting, and understanding the often fleeting political and rhetorical conduct of subaltern groups, the question of how we might procure and interpret hidden vernaculars is crucial. In order to call out prevailing public transcripts and understand the often fugitive, political conduct of subordinate groups, the passage implies that researchers, and Skid Robot, use our authority as dominant researchers to obtain hidden transcripts. As Phaedra C. Pezzullo reminds us, "the possibilities and limitations of changing a cultural formation from within have long been debated…. The risk is that those who

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[186] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 213.

struggle from within will become co-opted by pre-given political dynamics."[187] This is precisely the danger that I am apprehensive of in the case of Skid Robot. The language used by Scott to describe the acquisition and interpretation of susceptible hidden transcripts falls into the trap of elitist assumptions of possession—a fear that I also have of some of Skid Robot's ways of "capturing the moment" on camera. To assume that the task of obtaining and subsequently interpreting subaltern transcripts is "somewhat easy" presumes that the researcher (political scientist, anthropologist, historian, activist, etc.) possesses the knowledge, whether experiential or intellectual, to decipher the textual, visual, or embodied vernacular. This particular passage helps to call into question the ethics of Skid Robot's means of obtaining, interpreting, and consequently employing the content of hidden transcripts cultivated on the streets of Skid Row.

On Skid Row, we see Skid Robot engaging in a similar means of domination—although "domination" might be a particularly harsh term for what he is doing. Nevertheless, if we follow Scott's line of thinking we can see how Skid Robot's quest for justice might become a little more complicated than meets the eye. Although the 2014 Vice Media interview conducted with the burgeoning guerrilla artist suggests outright that this graffiti project is collaborative in that the graffiti art takes root in the aspirations of those experiencing homelessness, we cannot guarantee that this is always the case. There are moments on Instagram where we see an image of an (apparently) sleeping person dreaming of graffitied money or food. At first glance, we might think little of the implications of consent. However, in cases like these where an apparently sleeping subject graces the top of Instagram's homepage, it is difficult not to wonder at how Skid Robot might, indeed, be engaging in the use of people as props. Moreover, these particular

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[187] Phaedra C. Pezzullo, "Contextualizing Boycotts and Buycotts: The Impure Politics of Consumer-Based Advocacy in an Age of Global Ecological Crises," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2011): 127.

images further distinguish the differences between Skid Robot and those he seeks to work with and help: Skid Robot holds the privilege of returning to a home, camera and technology in hand, while those experiencing homelessness continue to do just that—experience life on the streets. This is a complicated place to work from, particularly as it is clear that Skid Robot's intentions are to help those living on the streets. However, this still does not negate the use of people as props in photos, opening interesting lines of inquiry. For instance, are the people who are photographed while they are sleeping offered a way of seeing the photographs? Are they compensated for being the subjects of the pieces? Although Skid Robot mentions that he is always sure to leave care packages for the people of his pictures, there remains a sense of unease when it comes to graffiting around, and then snapping a photo of, an apparently sleeping person. Perhaps what the public (myself included) is looking for here is a clearer lens through which to understand Skid Robot's work and the ethics of mediation.

In terms of the ethics of mediation, Scott's discussion of the dominant ways of discovering hidden transcripts suggests that there is a hidden or subaltern vernacular that someone who is not part of the community can understand. In mediating a subaltern vernacular through Instagram, these are concerns that we must consider about Skid Robot's project. Here, Spivak's cautions of speaking for the subaltern cannot be forgotten. Recall that Spivak reconsidered the problems of subalternity in terms of divisions of labor in a globalized world within current capitalistic politics.[188] In her critique of Gramscian subalternity, Spivak rejected the autonomy of subaltern groups, claiming that the autonomy of these groups ultimately results in the homogeneity of the subaltern group and their subjective identity, where all members of the group are seen as having the same experiences and identities. Further, she argued that

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[188] Pezzullo, "Contextualizing Boycotts and Buycotts," 6.

methodologies are inherently essentialist in their definitions of who or what constitute the subaltern, maintaining that the subaltern cannot speak because others are continually speaking for these groups.

Scott and Spivak both point us towards the important consideration of how we might attempt to interpret Skid Robot's work both in life and online. There is a danger in assuming that Skid Robot is interpreting and then circulating the homeless vernacular for us—it should be clear that he is not. Skid Robot is by no means deciphering and then disseminating what these subaltern vernaculars mean. Rather, Skid Robot acts as a spokesperson to offer the public glimpses of how homeless vernaculars manifest themselves on the street, specifically using graffiti to highlight what these vernaculars are. It is the methods through which these vernaculars appear as graffiti that might cause some moments of concern. For instance, if we think of the vernacular that circulates around the theme of Black Lives Matter, it is not a so much a question of whether or not it is ethical to mediate the graffitied image of Ksmooth holding his neck because "I can't breathe"; instead, the concerns arise when we consider how we got to the point of the image. That is, how did Skid Robot and Ksmooth reach to the theme of Black Lives Matter? Who was the initiator? Who decided that Ksmooth's body should be positioned in such a way that he is holding his throat? And so on. Although Skid Robot has alluded in the past that it is those he meets on the streets who are the inspirations for the pieces and that these topics arise through dialogue, we cannot be certain who really is orchestrating the ways in which these images we find on Instagram pan out. Skid Robot cannot, per se, claim to be an "expert" in interpreting and circulating these homeless vernaculars—certainly this would be alarming for it would appear that he is indeed appearing to claim to speak for these people. However, Skid Robot has articulated, through the language and words of people experiencing homelessness, the

feelings and experiences that they could not express to the public themselves. This is not because Skid Robot is speaking for this population, but because the homeless population has been drowned out of mainstream society and ignored. However, there is no certainty when it comes to these ethical questions, since much, if not all, of what we see on Instagram is a final product of a larger process. Thus, it is not so much a question of representation as it is a question of ventriloquism.

As noted previously, Spivak cautions that the ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the intellectual's profession, their merchandise necessary for business. In many moments that we have seen throughout, it does appear that the images are staged, with multiple residents of Skid Row engaging in political performances that perhaps reflects Skid Robot's agenda more than their own—we have no ways of knowing based solely off these images. However, one cannot argue that Skid Robot's websites offer snapshots of the thoughts that people who have lived and continue to live on Skid Row are thinking, apart from their current experiences of homelessness. The artist reminds the larger community that people are more than their conditions, illnesses, and appearances. In this way, Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti art is a kind of complex activism that also, in some ways, does act in ventriloquizing manners. Though it can be negative, it is sometimes necessary, as it is the only way that some audiences will hear the subaltern— specifically, the homeless subaltern

Michael Hyde's work claims that openings, particular moments in communication that define openings in space and time, are ontologically significant.[189] Human beings have the unique capability of opening a place in space and time where "being" itself is given a chance to be acknowledged and appreciated. This event, Hyde argues, echoes in the primordial meaning of

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[189] Michael J. Hyde, *Openings: Acknowledging Essential Moments in Human Communication* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2012), 14.

ethos.[190] The *ethos* of acknowledgement can create an environment of openness; the *ethos* of

rhetoric makes use of our inventive and symbolic capacity to construct dwelling places that are

stimulating and aesthetically, psychologically, socially, and theologically instructive and

receptive. Skid Robot apparently takes on this particular posture of rhetorical and conscious

openness to people experiencing homelessness, and this, Hyde would argue, can have noticeable

effects on the ways that people experience the reality of existence. Skid Robot's being of

openness and mission of constructing a place of aesthetic instruction and reception via the

graffiti project has created a sense of humanity on Skid Row as residents of the neighborhood

come together. Figure sixteen suggests this outreach as we see in the caption that Kiki, a woman

who lives on Skid Row, reaches out to "the queen" in the photograph and asks her to participate.

Hyde argues that this *ethos* of human being is rooted in the workings of our spatial and temporal

existence—it is in our being as humans to be open to others. Skid Robot, despite some "ethically

ambiguous" situations, has committed to trying to understand and mediate the subaltern

vernaculars and transcripts, understanding that this should be a result of turning to the Others of

homeless groups within these moments of openness.

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[190] Hyde, *Openings*, 17.

Figure 16:

The Instagram post shows a photograph of a person seated in an armchair against a brick wall with spray-painted throne/crown artwork, and the accompanying caption reads:

skidrobot · FOLLOWING

705 likes · 20w

skidrobot "A Queen Without a Castle"

She didn't say much nor gave us her name. It was apparent that she was mentally ill. She was drawn to the colors and smiled at the painting. Kiki asked her to take a seat and be #queen for a day

She sat down and gave a beautiful warm smile. It really hit deep.

She's is not a statistic, she is a gentle human being who needs help. She's been abandoned and is unable to fend for herself.

This is the grim reality for the mentally ill that inhabit the streets of #skidrow. It is a #crime against #humanity to leave so many people that are unwell in the mind living on the streets. Many of them fall victim to violent crime,

Add a comment...

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram page, https://www.instagram.com/p/8yif85p8BY/?taken-by=skidrobot

As Scott cautions more than once, the greater the disparity in power between the dominant and the subordinate and the more arbitrarily it is exercised, the more the public transcript of the subaltern will take on a stereotyped, ritualistic cast.[191] These stereotypical beliefs of homelessness become highly difficult to challenge, and can be understood as the police order and its regime of sensibility. As such, we cannot fall into the trap of assuming that our intentions to upset such power imbalances exempt us from being drawn into these stereotypical understandings of the subaltern. It is thus, important that we consider Hyde's work, pulling from phenomenologists such as Buber and Levinas, in the importance of acknowledging openings in human communication if we seek to learn about these subaltern vernaculars.

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[191] Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 3.

Hyde argues that our being defines an opening, a place, an *ethos*, where the disclosing of truth can be experienced firsthand and where, in turn, injustices can be remedied.[192] While the spatial and temporal structure of existence asks that we stay tuned for open-mindedness, it is also important to keep in mind how rhetorical competence is a capacity that is respectful of the essence of language—this is most successfully done through listening. The answer to the ethical call is not a sense of speaking to, with, or about people experiencing homelessness. Rather, the ethical call asks for a listening that suspends one's intentions and prior knowledge of the self and the Other in order to be present and welcome the alterity of the Other. Although we cannot for certain claim that Skid Robot has opened himself up to people experiencing homelessness in such a way that completely suspends his willfulness, we can note that he is already a different kind of graffiti activist. As mentioned in Chapter One, Skid Robot adds a layer of interaction to the graffiti project that other graffiti activists (e.g., Banksy) do not. His dialogic graffiti emphasizes this interactional piece in that Skid Robot and residents of Skid Row come together to create the art.

In working with the Other, the Other must come first; we are creatures who have a fundamental and ethical responsibility to create discursive, textual, and performative openings for ourselves[193] and others. While this may not completely ensure that dominant publics do not continue to dominate subordinate groups, the moment of acknowledgement is an ethical one that considers the relations between people. In the pursuit of opening the possibilities of release from subordination, the ethical encounter acknowledges the Other as a human and in the case of Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti project, portrays people experiencing homelessness as more than simply their living conditions.

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[192] Ibid.,

[193] Hyde*, Openings*, 210.

If Skid Robot wishes to heed the call to the Other more intently with this graffiti project, he must be sure to put those experiencing homelessness first. Although he might argue that this is what he is doing with this graffiti project—putting people who are experiencing homelessness on Skid Row first—there must be more transparency and the voices of the people on Skid Row must come through more clearly. That is, the actual voices of people experiencing homelessness need to be mediated online (perhaps video-based YouTube rather than Instagram's image-based platform), rather than simply photos or captions. Videos and in-depth interviews will only add to an impressive online curation, mediating a more genuine subaltern voice to be circulated. Despite the inadequacies in how Skid Robot records his methods of the graffiti process, leading to an ethically ambiguous situation, we cannot deny the positive implications and rhetorical opportunities of glimpsing these hidden transcripts of homeless life.

Opportunities, Rhetorical Aesthetics, and Capabilities
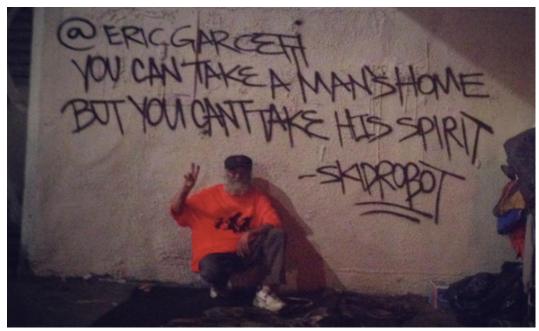
In Skid Robot's graffiti work, we see how the assembly and performance of bodies on Skid Row, subsequently mediated via Instagram, actively demonstrates that art is much more than the paintings lining the walls of museums and galleries—art is being used as a way to counter the stereotypes. In the Introduction, I outlined two research questions that are central to this study. I first asked how Skid Robot uses graffiti art as an alternative system of meaning production (i.e., rhetorical resistance) to (re)produce and disrupt normative and social discourses of homelessness. Second, I asked how Skid Robot's graffiti activism function as both vernacular and aesthetic rhetorics. In answering the first question, Laurie E. Gries's emphasis on rhetorical meaning is crucial. Gries's emphasis on how "...things become rhetorically meaningful via the

consequentiality they spark in the world"[194] underscores the rhetoricity of Skid Robot's project. Skid Robot uses graffiti as an alternative system of rhetorical meaning production for issues of homelessness. In Chapters Two and Three, I specifically worked to answer this question through first analyzing how Skid Robot's Instagram page functions as a site of expression that mediate an intersectional homeless vernacular (comprised of graffiti, photography, Instagram captions, and hashtags), and second, explaining how this intersectional vernacular works to change the distribution of the sensible regarding homelessness. In working towards and achieving some semblance of change, Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti becomes rhetorically meaningful. Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti counters stereotypical images of homelessness, shares glimpses of the homeless subaltern vernacular on Skid Row, and re-distributes the sensible to offer understandings of homelessness that imagine a different kind of police order.

Importantly, Skid Robot seems reflexive about what it means to be an activist for social change: He knows not to be a "dick," to quote his Vice Media interview, and he is aware that there needs to be some sort of compensation for putting people experiencing homelessness in his photos, even though they are part of the creative process. Skid Robot resists normative discourses of homelessness, the discourses that I write against in this thesis, by engaging, being with, and acknowledging residents on Skid Row. Skid Robot's resistance recognizes and counteracts social norms by desiring to transform both politics and political life. Skid Robot opposes, withstands, antagonizes, and combats Los Angeles's laws against people living on the streets, challenging Los Angeles mayor, Eric Garcetti, to act on the inhumane laws set forth by the city (see figure 17). By directly calling out Mayor Garcetti with the art, Skid Robot demonstrates his stance in ending homelessness in Los Angeles.

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[194] Laurie E. Gries, *Still Life With Rhetoric: A New Materialist Approach for Visual Rhetorics* (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2015): 3.

Figure 17:

Source: Adapted from Skid Robot's Instagram page, https://www.instagram.com/p/73ne_WJ8NN/?taken-by=skidrobot

My second research question asked how Skid Robot's graffiti activism functions as both vernacular and aesthetic rhetorics. An aesthetic rhetoric that focuses on the body as an "excitable entity" appeals to bodily senses to kick start a political community—it employs an artistic language that transcends sounds, smells, textures, flavors, and sights of the world. Skid Robot's works do just this, as Skid Robot and his collaborators cultivate resistance and tension surrounding the current order to unveil a different sensible in order to achieve a unified experience. Skid Robot's graffiti as a vernacular and aesthetic rhetoric speaks up against the injustices people experiencing homelessness face as a result of living on Los Angeles's Skid Row, and Skid Robot has made it known to Mayor Garcetti that they will not continue to accept the current order as it its.

The strengths of an aesthetic rhetoric lie in the extent to which an audience is affected.[195] Using his voice and the voices of those experiencing homelessness to speak out against the horrific conditions on Skid Row is a strength of Skid Robot's project. Crucially, this specific aesthetic rhetoric on Skid Row and mediated through Instagram is capable of highlighting the workings of power and the way in which it is innately linked with the captivating words of the police order that conceal alternate modes of meaning production. The aesthetic rhetoricity of this homeless vernacular's appearance on Skid Row moves its audience by means of affective experience. It is then through this experience that the subaltern appearance might turn to a reality that demands change in how homeless populations are policed.

From studying Skid Robot, we see that this particular aesthetic rhetoric is equipped to resist the challenges posed by normative discourses and images of homelessness. If Poulakos's conceptualization of rhetoric holds fast and rhetoric is the art that suggests possibilities, and I believe it does, then Skid Robot has, indeed, engaged in a rhetorical project. Skid Robot has demonstrated through his art that other alternatives exist for understanding homeless life exist. Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti art has interrupted systems of meaning and the distribution of the sensible to suggest that we might see people experiencing homelessness differently—from this stems the hope that we might treat people experiencing homelessness differently, whether it be through public policy or everyday interactions. Time and time again, through offering snapshots of a subaltern vernacular and re-distributing the homeless sensible, we see the rhetorical nature of Skid Robot's project.

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[195] Whitson and Poulakos, "Nietzsche and the Aesthetics of Rhetoric," 141-2.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions for Studying Skid Robot

The implications of studying a guerrilla graffiti artist, for me, are clear. As scholars of rhetoric and culture, an important thought for consideration includes what assumptions we take for granted. Using an impure politics, Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti takes these questions and throws them in the faces of academics stuck in their ivory towers. Skid Row has been a neighborhood obscured from the rest of the Los Angeles for many years, with the rest of the city slowly trying to overshadow the grim conditions. Skid Robot, a long-time resident of Los Angeles, uses an impure politics and illegal graffiti to tag one of the city's forgotten neighborhoods and draw attention to the people living there. Here, the use of an impure politics emphasizes just how complicated the police order and hegemonic ideas of homelessness are, highlighting "the need for contingent and pragmatic practices of social change, or what [Lawrence] Grossberg calls 'a modest politics that struggles to effect real change, that enters into the often boring challenges of strategy and compromise. An impure politics fighting for high stakes.'"[196] Obscuring his own identity, Skid Robot wears a mirrored mask on his face while working on Skid Row to emphasize that he is not the sole hero in this tale. The mirrored mask suggests that Skid Robot is a reflection of what others can, and should, do; it is a calling to help those on Skid Row for others in places of privilege to answer. Hyde's argument that the *ethos* of human being is rooted in the workings of our spatial and temporal existence echoes true here, and while posting these images without fuller stories on Instagram does indeed pose some ethical challenges, Skid Robot really does take up Hyde's call. Once a place of neglect, where police roamed the streets in an attempt to "clean up" Skid Row, the neighborhood has now received attention as people around the world turn towards the forgotten part of the city.

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[196] Pezzullo, "Contextualizing Boycotts and Buycotts," 127.

Studying Skid Robot offers both a glimpse into activist life on Los Angeles's Skid Row and a sense of the rhetoricity of the graffiti project itself. Specifically, Skid Robot's project suggests that there is still much to be offered to a theory of vernacular rhetoric. It is no question, as we have discussed, that some of Skid Robot's methods in mediating a subaltern vernacular on Instagram are problematic. In addition to fuller understandings (perhaps through interviews or videos) of the thoughts and opinions of people experiencing homelessness, a need for more transparency in terms of the process is clear. Rhetorically, Skid Robot's multimodal work has made good use of an innovative, intersectional rhetoric that takes into account the different vernacular rhetorics and that is "inventive and decolonizing both in its aim and in its form."[197]. Importantly, what an intersectional rhetoric does, then, is prompt the critic to approach discourse with the fundamental assumption that these different rhetorical forms intersect with each other equally, hindering the instinct to assume that work is being done primarily by one form over the other.[198] As such, we can appreciate equally the significance of the verbal, visual, and embodied rhetorics of Skid Robot's work.

The rhetorical mediation of this work is important. First, these images, captions, and comments from followers on Instagram capture a snapshot of how the bodies and voices of everyday people and things are pivotal resources of argumentation, power, and method. It is crucial that rhetoricians listen to everyday people and take into account the importance of the ordinary, that is, the vernacular. Rhetoric can, and should, account for bodies experiencing homelessness and the crucial arguments that these bodies can make—a central claim of this thesis. Skid Robot demonstrates how subaltern vernaculars can be, intersectional. Not only are

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[197] Darrel Enck-Wanzer, "Trashing the System: Social Movement, Intersectional Rhetoric, and Collective Agency in the Young Lords Organization's Garbage Offensive," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 2 (2006): 176.
[198] Ibid., 181.

they participatory, particularly when mediated through the Internet, as Robert Glenn Howard argues, but vernacular theories of rhetoric are fragmentary and appears in several ways on Skid Row. Skid Robot's collaborative project exemplifies how subaltern vernaculars can be mediated by a spokesperson (a term proposed by Hauser) and can take forms that are more than simply discourse. Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti project suggests that vernacular rhetorics are artistic in their forms, as they find themselves embodied in graffiti on Skid Row. Coming through not only in the images themselves, the comments of Instagram followers, snippets of conversations with people experiencing homelessness offered as photo captions, and Skid Robot's personal thoughts in the captions merge as a way of telling a different story of the vernaculars on Skid Row. Through Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti project, we can understand the multimodal nature of the homeless vernacular on Los Angeles's Skid Row. The unique blend of voices, images, and ways of mediating these images on several social media platforms demonstrates that vernacular rhetorics are seen, felt, and experienced.

While studying Skid Robot has led to a deeper understanding of the rhetoricity of graffiti in mediating subaltern vernaculars to re-organize how we understand life on the streets, the limitations of a study such as this must be noted. First, this thesis lacks a study of the rhetorical methods of using Instagram, or another social media platform, for mediating and circulating images and information. That is, there is little attention given to the affordances of social media. Much is lost in not fully exploring what social media has to offer in understanding Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti project. What the artist's Instagram followers comment, where they are commenting from, where these photos are posted, and the sequence of the photos are important facets of studying social media, and will be an interesting addition to this project at a later day. Further, the notions of anonymity and safety in commenting on one of Skid Robot's Instagram

photos are concepts that might prove fruitful in understanding the sense of apathy surrounding issues of homelessness on Skid Row and elsewhere in the world.

Second, a limitation of studying Skid Robot's project through Instagram hinders my ability to fully comprehend the affective nature of his graffiti work on Skid Row. Because I am sifting my understandings of Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti through social media sites, online interviews, and his personal website, there is the chance that my opinions and suggestions have been influenced by that which I have read—as might be the case with any rhetorical criticisms of a text. Rhetorical field methods would have proved fruitful for a study such as these to see Skid Robot at work first hand. Using rhetorical field methods and being on the scene would add interesting and dynamic levels to this study that the current investigation simply cannot glean via Instagram.

Following this study, research in rhetorical studies could take a number of directions. Rhetorical analysis of Skid Robot's graffiti activism on Skid Row could lead to further research on the circulation and uptake of the artist's posts on each of his different social media sites, or scholars could study the differences in how the graffiti is experienced when encountered first hand on the streets of Skid Row as opposed to on social media sites. Other options for further research include the use of rhetorical field methods on site in Los Angeles to assess the affectability of the graffiti art, or engagement with a new materialist ontology to map the relational networks between human bodies and other material, social, and abstract entities at play on Skid Row. Above all, however, this study demonstrates a need for future directions of rhetorical studies to address issues of homelessness from a vernacular perspective.

Vernacular rhetorics consider how the bodies and voices of everyday people and things are pivotal resources of argumentation, power, and method, taking into account the importance

of the ordinary. This study has demonstrated how the multimodal, intersectional nature of Skid Robot's dialogic graffiti project on Skid Row takes into account the bodies of people experiencing homelessness and the arguments that intersecting bodies, graffiti art, Instagram photo captions, hasghtags, and Instagram user comments can make to reconsider the current police order and its regime of sensibility. Further research in rhetorical studies should build on these arguments and claims, as additional studies could reveal fascinating findings that could be used to improve our understandings of homelessness and help real people cope with and challenge current problematic and harmful conceptualizations of homelessness that threaten their everyday lived experiences.

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