
Listen to the Story: Banksy, Tyler the Creator, and the Growing Nihilistic Mindset

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Abstract

Art, as an expression of feelings, worldviews, and personal beliefs, is a reflection of our environment and how we interact with it. In this way, urban art such as rap music and graffiti can serve as a lens through which we are able to examine the state of the urban environment. Building on community literature that addresses the presence of nihilism in rap music, this work will establish that nihilism is a prevalent theme in the work of two artists: Tyler the Creator's rap music and BANKSY's graffiti art. By examining the growing subculture and appeal of urban art in relation to these two artists, this paper will argue that BANKSY and Tyler the Creator belong to a new wave of urban art, one that appeals to and originates from people of all races and classes. The current work will then examine these artists' motives in including nihilism within their art in order to argue that the disillusionment and nihilism once found primarily within inner cities is now spreading to new frontiers. Using this analysis, the current work will raise questions as to the possible causes and consequences of this spreading nihilistic mindset.

Introduction

Art acts as a collective mirror through which we can more closely examine and learn about our society, our surroundings, and ourselves. As John Lennon once said, "My role in society, or any artist's or poet's role, is to try and express what we all feel. Not to tell people how to feel. Not as a preacher, not as a leader, but as a reflection of us all".¹ We can learn about an oppressive government from the art of the oppressed; we can learn about the insane asylum from the art of the patient; we can learn about the jail from the art of the inmate. It follows, then, that we can learn about urban environments by examining the art of the urbanite. This paper will examine the work of two urban artists, Tyler the Creator and BANKSY, in order to argue that the disillusionment and nihilism once found primarily within inner cities is now spreading to new frontiers.² Originally, urban artistic expression such as graffiti art and rap music served as a way to respond to the growing nihilistic mindset in the inner cities, but today a broader subculture is beginning to utilize this tool to express their dissent. Using graffiti artist BANKSY and rap artist Tyler the Creator as models of this new frontier of urban art, this paper will establish that nihilism is a prevalent theme within their work and use this analysis in order to raise questions as to the possible causes and consequences of this spreading nihilistic mindset.

¹ Anderson, Jennifer Joline. *John Lennon: Legendary Musician & Beatle* (Edina, Minnesota: ABDO Pub. Co., 2010), 1.

² It is common to present the pseudonyms of graffiti artists in all capital letters, and that is the style that will be used throughout this paper.

Charis E. Kubrin's essay "I See Death Around the Corner: Nihilism in Rap Music," provides the most relevant and comprehensive examination of nihilism in urban artistic expression within the current literature. In her essay, Kubrin engages in an in-depth analysis of over four hundred rap songs from 1992 to 2000 and explores how the nihilistic themes in these songs reflect the street code present in black youth culture in the inner city.³ Kubrin focuses her work specifically on *gangsta rap*, a genre of rap pioneered by gang members describing "life in the ghetto from the perspective of a criminal."⁴

This paper will build upon Kubrin's work by examining the work of rap musician Tyler the Creator and graffiti artist BANKSY in an effort to focus in on a new, post-2000 wave of urban art. This new direction of urban art draws heavily on the same themes of nihilism as in the past, but arises from a broader subculture and appeals to a wider audience. Originally, Kubrin did not explore post-2000 music due to the increasing influence of record labels on rap lyrics and the fear that more recent lyrics would focus more on "exaggerated fantasies" than on real issues.⁵ Through the example of Tyler the Creator, this paper will propose that although such fantasies may not always represent reality on the streets, they are reflective of a larger nihilistic attitude and mindset that is a reality within the urban community and beyond.

"Nothing is true, nothing is good, God is dead": What is Nihilism and Why Do We Care?

There are two branches of nihilism, negative nihilism and reactive nihilism. Negative nihilism refers to the degradation of life through the belief in higher values – by believing in the fiction of higher values, we then render the rest of life unreal. There are no higher values, as they are inherently fictional, and thus no life, as the belief in the fictional has rendered reality nonexistent.⁶ Reactive nihilism is the response to the realization of negative nihilism. Realizing that higher values only depreciate life, the reactive nihilist begins to reject higher values, coming to the conclusion that, to paraphrase Nietzsche, "Nothing is true, nothing is good, God is dead."^{7,8} This paper

³ Charis E. Kubrin, "I See Death Around the Corner: Nihilism in Rap Music," *Sociological Perspectives* 8,

⁴ Kubrin, "I See Death Around the Corner," 435. No. 4 (2005): 433, accessed August 28, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sop.2005.48.4.433>.

c.f. Kubrin p. 434-439 for more information on gangsta rap, its origins, and how it serves as a reflection of the urban community.

⁵ Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997), 69, quoted in Charis E. Kubrin, "I See Death Around the Corner: Nihilism in Rap Music," *Sociological Perspectives* 8, no. 4 (2005): 442-443, accessed August 28, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sop.2005.48.4.433>.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 147.

⁷ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 148.

⁸ Johan Goudsblom, *Nihilism and Culture* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), 30-

will focus specifically on reactive nihilism. The three characteristics of nihilism that Kubrin chooses to focus on in her analysis are: “bleak surroundings with little hope, pervasive violence in the ghetto, and preoccupation with death and dying.”⁹ Based on the literature consulted, this paper will utilize a broader definition.^{10,11} The three characteristics I will focus on are: the rejection of higher values, the devaluation of life and property, and the loss of hope in one’s surroundings.

This definition of nihilism raises a number of important questions. If we are examining the work of nihilistic artists, and nihilists reject everything, then do the artists believe in nothing? How can art be about nothing? And, more importantly, why should we care about nothing? In addressing these questions, we must make two important distinctions. First, the art we are examining contains nihilistic themes; this does not mean that the artists themselves are necessarily nihilists. Artists who paint battle scenes are not by default war hawks; they are, on the contrary, painting an image that reflects an aspect of reality, and depending on the content of the painting, it is equally likely that the artist could be critically commenting on the battle depicted. As we will discuss in more depth later in the paper, BANKSY and Tyler the Creator either purposefully include nihilistic themes in their work as a direct act of protest, or include these themes in a personal effort to disseminate nihilistic feelings originally directed towards some other entity (i.e. the government, the structure of society, authority figures).

Second, although it seems pointless to care about nothing, it is vitally important to care about the causes and the consequences of nothing. If a broad audience is drawn to the themes of nihilism that Tyler and BANKSY utilize in their work, we need to ask ourselves why such a large portion of society is feeling a loss of hope in their surroundings, rejecting higher values, and devaluing life and property. These are all actions and feelings that, at heart, undermine the current structure of our society, government, and cities. Anticipating the possible consequences of these feelings can help us to resolve the structural issues causing them.

The Spontaneous Urge to Create: What is Urban Art?

Within the current literature, the phrase *urban art* is thrown around as being synonymous with terms such as *street art* or *graffiti art*. The definition of urban art tends to vary from source to source, ranging from the general “art created within an urban center” to the more specific “un-commissioned graffiti art.” In order to clarify this broad term, within this paper we will define urban artistic expression as art containing the following three characteristics:

1. The artistic form must originate within an urban environment.

⁹ Kubrin, "I See Death Around the Corner," 444.

¹⁰ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 147-148.

¹¹ Goudsblom, *Nihilism and Culture*, 30-34.

2. The artistic form must consistently refer to and draw from its urban roots.
3. The artistic form is accessible to and originated from the common urban man. Please note that by *common*, I do not mean to insinuate that the urban artistic form must originate from the lower class, just that it is accessible to everyone, regardless of formal education or wealth.

Urban art is such a broad category comprised of such diverse genres of art that it is difficult to ascribe one particular set of aesthetic features to it. For the sake of this paper, we will focus on urban art as a location and theme related genre, and focus on aesthetic features within the more specific subgenres of graffiti art and rap music. In order to define these aesthetic features, and to establish that BANKSY's graffiti art and Tyler the Creator's rap music are modes of urban artistic expression, it is necessary to engage in a deeper discussion of rap and graffiti.

Defying Conformity: The History and Aesthetic of Graffiti Art

In his essay "Art in the Streets," Jeffrey Deitch, director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, describes graffiti art as being created by teenagers, "...emerg[ing] from housing projects, subway yards, and bleak suburban parking lots."¹² According to Deitch, graffiti art exploded in the 1970s within urban centers, becoming more mainstream in the 1980s with artists introducing graffiti to galleries and giving the art form "artistic credibility."¹³ Graffiti art also permeated mainstream culture through other publicly accessible mediums such as music videos or popular films.¹⁴ Interestingly, Deitch also describes graffiti art as paralleling the hip-hop movement, the "artistic vocabulary [of graffiti] spilling over into break dancing, street fashion, and the language and rhythms of rap music."¹⁵ Largely due to the increased enforcement of anti-graffiti laws, street art stagnated during the late '80s and early '90s, rejuvenating in later years with the work of artists such as COST, REVS, Barry McGee, Shepard Fairey, and, of course, the Bristol-based anonymous street artist commonly referred to as BANKSY.¹⁶

During graffiti's heyday in the 1970s and '80s, style wars would often break out. During these, graffiti crews would compete with each other to create the largest, most stylistically complex artwork in the most visible, hard-to-reach places in order to earn fame and respect. These style wars were especially prominent in New York City, often called the birthplace of modern graffiti.

¹² Jeffrey Deitch, "Art in the Streets," in *Art in the Streets*, ed. Brooklyn Museum (New York City, New York: MOCA, 2011), 10.

¹³ Deitch, "Art in the Streets," 10-11.

¹⁴ c.f. Deitch pages 11-12 for more information on the growth of graffiti art through music videos and films.

¹⁵ Deitch, "Art in the Streets," 10.

¹⁶ Deitch, "Art in the Streets," 13-14.

Looking at graffiti aesthetically, it is important to note that graffiti as a genre of art is much more difficult to describe than hip-hop as a genre of music. Although hip-hop is defined by clear aesthetic features (i.e. a beat overlaid with spoken word), the only true defining characteristic of graffiti is that it is art painted illegally on another's property, and even that definition has become fuzzy recently with graffiti artists who paint on legal walls. To avoid confusion, within this paper we will focus on uncommissioned graffiti art, or art created by the urban populace without the permission of the government or community.

In addition, although most often we associate graffiti with the aesthetic of the New York style wars (complex letter distortions, bright colors), graffiti has a broad enough definition that truly any type of illegal art could be included under its umbrella.¹⁷ BANKSY's graffiti style, for example, does not strongly resemble that of New York graffiti giant FUZZ 1's work, nor does it resemble the work of Lebanon graffiti artist duo Omar and Mohamed Kabbani. In addition, although graffiti is typically found in the spray paint medium, there is no rule saying that an unsanctioned sculpture cannot be graffiti too.

Having said that, within the spray paint sector of graffiti, styles typically fall into one of four categories: tags, throw-ups, pieces, and productions.¹⁸ A tag is an artist's basic signature, which serves as a sort of "I was here" sign for the writer, allowing him or her to achieve fame. A throw-up is a larger, more elaborate tag, or as photographers James and Karla Murray put it in their book *Broken Windows: Graffiti NYC*, "quickly executed block or bubble-shaped letter outlines, with or without a layer of spray paint for fill-in."¹⁹ Pieces, short for masterpieces, are even more elaborate signatures, with complex lettering, typography, and various colors. Finally, a production is an elaborate mural that can include lettering and/or characters.²⁰

Still, this definition remains broad. Graffiti too then is perhaps best defined thematically. In her 1998 study *Writing on the Run: The History and Transformation of Street Graffiti in Montreal in the 1990s*, Louise Gauthier identified two different categories of graffiti: political and personal. According to Gauthier, political graffiti is primarily "...anonymous [and] culturally motivated..." while personal graffiti is focused on "getting up" your name/tag and achieving fame.²¹

I argue that there is some grey area within Gauthier's distinction. There is, of course, the ambiguity of artists like BANKSY, who have tags that they paint side by side with productions containing strong political messages. Similarly, the idea of personal

¹⁷ See Appendix A, Figure 1 for an image depicting the "wild-style" of the New York style wars.

¹⁸ See Appendix A, Figures 2, 3, 4, 5 for examples of a tag, throw-up, piece, and production, respectively.

¹⁹ James and Karla Murray, *Broken Windows: Graffiti NYC* (Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2002), 39.

²⁰ Murray, *Broken Windows: Graffiti NYC*, 39.

²¹ Steven T. Olberg, *Political Graffiti on the West Bank Wall in Israel/Palestine* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 20.

fame achieved via a pseudonym (i.e. BANKSY, Blue, Phase 2) also makes the categorization of graffiti difficult.

More significantly, I would argue that all graffiti is political in a sense. Graffiti by its very nature is a protest—whether you paint a simple tag or a complex piece, you are painting it on property that does not belong to you, and this very act serves as a protest against the owner of the wall you are painting on, the establishment that forbids you from painting on that wall, and/or the theoretical concepts of authority and law. Regardless of the content of your painting, this is a powerful statement. The common practice of racking, or stealing, painting supplies only adds to this anti-authoritarian stance. In the words of graffiti artist West One, "...there is something naturally rebellious about it [graffiti]. Young kids aren't afraid to defy conformity, to defy the public and be like, 'FUCK IT, I'm going to take this risk to paint.'"²²

Having said that, the distinction Gauthier makes is key in defining the graffiti aesthetic. The majority of what she dubs personal graffiti centers on the "...typographical design of the letter..." and the manipulation of this design (i.e. tags, throw-ups, and pieces).²³ Political graffiti, although often still utilizing typography, draws more on the style of murals and productions containing characters and depictions of a scene.

The Urban Calligrapher: BANKSY and Graffiti as a Model of Urban Art

Although not originally a strictly urban art form, modern graffiti has grown within city centers, perhaps because the city offers so many natural canvases, from subway walls to bridges and highways. BANKSY humorously relays this idea in his book *Wall and Piece* with images of spray-painted cows and pigs, juxtaposed with the caption "If you grow up in a town where they don't have subway trains you have to find something else to paint on. It's not as easy as it sounds because most subway train drivers don't wander around with shotguns."²⁴

Every work of graffiti also inherently refers back to the city, as the wall or sign it is painted on is both part of the city and part of the art. In BANKSY's words, graffiti is "...actually one of the more honest art forms available. There is no elitism or hype, it exhibits on the best walls a town has to offer and nobody is put off by the price of admission."²⁵ BANKSY continues in his *Advice on painting with stencils*: "A regular 400 mL can of paint will give you up to 40 A4 sized stencils. This means you can become incredibly famous/unpopular in a small town virtually overnight for approximately ten

²² Murray, *Broken Windows: Graffiti NYC*, 105.

²³ Roger Gastman, Caleb Neelon, and Anthony Smyrski, *Street World: Urban Art and Culture from Five Continents* (New York: Abrams, 2007), 129.

²⁴ Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (London: Century, 2006), 152.

²⁵ Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, 8.

pounds".²⁶ Even if you don't have ten pounds (or dollars), it is common among some graffiti artists to rack, or steal, their spray paint and supplies.²⁷

Graffiti is a unique art form in the sense that it is ever changing. In a way similar to Internet forums and sites like Wikipedia, graffiti is constantly being edited. As pointed out by John Hudson in his essay "BANKSY: The story so far . . . ," even BANKSY's work sometimes falls "victim to fellow graffiti artists."²⁸ This speaks to the honesty of graffiti—as it is constantly being edited, the current popular opinion is always on top.

Some, like Hudson, question how BANKSY is still able to truly represent the popular opinion of the common urban man when he displays his pieces in galleries and sells them for millions to celebrities like Angelina Jolie. However, in the words of Paul Gough in his essay "BANKSY: The Urban Calligrapher," "BANKSY may have entered the mainstream, stepping out of the shadows of urban Britain into the glitz of Hollywood, but...he still has an unerring ability to pass penetrating comment on the hot issues of the day."²⁹ Regardless, in order to prevent inaccuracies, this paper will focus specifically on BANKSY's graffiti art, not his gallery work.

As a result, graffiti art can be classified as a model of urban art, as it has flourished within urban centers, it continuously references the urban environment via the location of the painting as well as its content, and it is accessible and relevant to the common urban man.

The Story of the City: The History and Aesthetic of Hip-Hop Music

Paul Gilroy, Professor at the London School of Economics and author of a chronicle of African cultural history entitled *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, describes rap music as "a hybrid form nurtured by the social relations of the South Bronx where Jamaican sound system culture was transplanted during the 1970s and put down new roots."³⁰ Hip-hop as we know it today grew from these urban roots, and rap music still continuously references and draws from its origins. As stated earlier, hip-hop centers around the musical aesthetic of a beat overlaid with spoken word, but, like graffiti, its thematic aesthetic and cultural significance is perhaps more relevant.

Hip-hop is, at heart, a storytelling device; in the words of Thomas R. Britt in his essay *The Mobile Hood: Realness and the Rules of the Game*, "One of the foremost virtues of

²⁶ Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, 237.

²⁷ Murray, *Broken Windows: Graffiti NYC*, 29.

²⁸ John Hudson, "Banksy: The Story So Far," in *Banksy: The Bristol Legacy*, ed. Paul Gough (Bristol: Redcliffe Press Ltd., 2012), 23.

²⁹ Paul Gough, "Banksy: The Urban Calligrapher," in *Banksy: The Bristol Legacy*, ed. Paul Gough (Bristol: Redcliffe Press Ltd., 2012), 145.

³⁰ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 33, quoted in Lisa Calvente, "The Black Atlantic Revisited : Nihilism, Matrices of Struggle, and Hip Hop Culture" (MA Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002), 51-52.

the rap genre is a unique capacity to connect lived experiences with various lyrical inventions and extrapolations.”³¹ This speaks to the concept of reality and fantasy mentioned earlier, mixing authentic experiences with exaggerated imagery. Britt describes rap music as having a cinematic quality, demanding “heroes and villains”; in this sense, hip-hop takes real experiences and issues and dramatizes or expounds on them in order to place an emphasis on that reality.³² Ultimately, the aesthetic at the heart of rap music is that it tells a story; the political story of cultural oppression, the self-success story of fame and wealth, the story of poverty, the story of family and community, the story of frustration, anger, and death, the story of the city.

Representin’: Tyler the Creator and Rap Music as a Model of Urban Art

As American philosophy professor Crispin Sartwell points out in his essay *Rap Music and the Uses of Stereotype*, this reference to urban surroundings is made apparent in “the rapper’s claim to be ‘representing’...some constituency.”³³ In this way, “Rap refers its authority to represent to the hood, gang, or crew, and makes an issue of whether the rapper has stayed true to that constituency or turned her back on them.”³⁴ The realness and authority of a rap artist amongst the urban constituency are dependent upon the rapper’s ability to represent the urban reality.³⁵ Additionally, the medium of rap music, like that of graffiti, is easily accessible to the masses. The spoken word is free, and the need for a well-known label to gain popularity is quickly diminishing; artists like Tyler the Creator and his collective Odd Future spread their music and found notoriety through the internet, releasing EPs, posting videos, and blogging online.³⁶ This technology-based growth is analogous to the spread of graffiti through music videos and popular films in the 1980s.³⁷ Due to this, rap music can be classified as urban art: it originated in the urban environment of the South Bronx, it consistently represents these roots, and to this day rap music is still art of the common urban man, often starting on the streets and later gaining widespread popular appeal. Now that we have established an aesthetic and historic basis for rap music and graffiti art and identified these two genres as urban art, we can begin to discuss the growing subculture and appeal of urban art.

³¹ Thomas R. Britt, “The Mobile Hood: Realness and the Rules of the Game,” in *Habitus of the Hood*, ed. Chris Richardson and Hans A. Skott Myhre, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 217.

³² Ibid.

³³ Crispin Sartwell, “Rap Music and the Uses of Stereotype,” in *Reflections: An Anthology of African American Philosophy*, ed. William H Hardy, (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 2000), 375.

³⁴ Sartwell, “Rap Music and the Uses of Stereotype,” 375.

³⁵ Sartwell, “Rap Music and the Uses of Stereotype,” 375.

³⁶ Thomas Conner. “To Odd Future rapper, ‘it’s funny’ that rape, murder lyrics anger people,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 12, 2011, sec. Entertainment, accessed November 27, 2012, <http://www.suntimes.com/entertainment/music/6477157-421/hot-button-hip-hop.html>.

³⁷ Deitch, “Art in the Streets,” 11.

“Say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud”: A Broader Subcultural Basis for Urban Art

If we are aiming to raise questions about the causes of nihilism in hip-hop and graffiti, it follows that we should examine the subcultures that these genres grow from. Much of the current literature, including Kubrin’s research, focuses on rap music as stemming from the African-American urban community, and therefore it may seem that rap music is more representative of an African-American reality than an urban reality. However, recent shifts in the lyrics and style of rap music suggest that hip-hop is moving away from defining the African-American persona and towards defining the urban citizen. USC School of Cinematic Arts professor and pop culture expert Todd Boyd discusses this recent phenomenon in his book *Am I Black Enough for You?*, stating that:

Audience members of all races use the music as a form of resistance or rebellion, with the truly disadvantaged Black male serving as the supreme representative of adolescent angst, minority disenfranchisement, and an overall sense of cynicism about American society. Thus gangsta rap provides a vehicle for cathartic expression well beyond an exclusively Black space.³⁸

Boyd goes on to discuss the white rapper Vanilla Ice, and his identification with the African American experience because he “grew up in the midst of...poverty and was once a victim of gang violence.”³⁹ In this sense, his lower-class upbringing, not his race, made him “Black.”⁴⁰ Boyd expands on this idea, referencing the film *The Commitments* in which working class white Dubliners aspire to create the world’s greatest soul band. Boyd asserts that “...the group members can identify with African American [soul] music because of their multiple oppression as Northern Irish working-class Catholics” and highlights a quote from the main character of the movie: “The Irish are the Blacks of Europe, and the Dubliners are the Blacks of Ireland, and the Northsiders are the Blacks of Dublin. So say it loud, I’m Black and I’m proud.”⁴¹ In this sense, anybody dealing with oppression is, on a certain level, able to identify with the black experience and thus utilize traditionally African-American forms of expression such as hip-hop in order to express themselves. Lisa Calvente, assistant professor of Intercultural Communication and Performance Studies at DePaul University, reinforces this point in her essay *The Black Atlantic Revisited: Nihilism, Matrices of Struggle, and Hip Hop Culture*, stating that “...hip hop music is a form of musical expression that unifies multiple sites of struggle. It is not an exclusively black musical expressive form”.⁴² It is important to

³⁸ Todd Boyd, *Am I Black Enough For You?: Popular Culture from the ‘Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997), 64. Kubrin, like Boyd, acknowledges that rap artists today have shifted away from discussing the general black experience to more specifically addressing the experience of lower-class urban citizens (c.f. Kubrin p. 435).

³⁹ Ibid, 40.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 40.

⁴¹ Ibid, 41.

⁴² Lisa Calvente, *The Black Atlantic Revisited: Nihilism, Matrices of Struggle, and Hip Hop Culture* (MA Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002), 67.

note that this does not discredit hip-hop as an expression of black culture, stating only that it also speaks to and, more recently, originates from a larger, not solely African-American, whole.

Similarly, in her book *The Graffiti Subculture*, qualitative and ethnographic research specialist Nancy MacDonald conducts an in-depth analysis of the different positions on why the graffiti subculture exists. She presents arguments focusing on class struggle, race, youth, and masculinity. Ultimately, through an extensive analysis, she argues that the primary two factors in the creation of the graffiti subculture are youth and masculinity.⁴³

Initially, the absence of race and class from these determining factors was surprising to me. However, Baruch College ethnographer and sociologist Gregory Snyder supports MacDonald's argument in his book *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground*. Snyder asserts that, "[Graffiti] [w]riters are white-skinned, brown-skinned, light-skinned and dark-skinned; they are rich and poor, smart and dumb; most are male... ." ⁴⁴ New York graffiti artist LADY PINK agrees with this point, saying, "...basically everybody in the world believes that most writers are either from the inner city, from the ghetto, black and Puerto Rican, but white is never really discussed. There were a lot of white writers from wealthy families, from upper-middle-class and middle-class backgrounds." ⁴⁵ LADY PINK herself states that she has lived in mostly middle-class neighborhoods in New York City.⁴⁶

Susan A. Phillips, a criminal justice reform expert conducting field work and research at Pitzer College, also writes in her book *Wallbangin'*, "Mixed areas with racially integrated high schools may wind up with racially integrated [graffiti] crews; many times these are in more middle-class parts of town. In the inner city, where racial divisions even within mixed neighborhoods are more marked, crews may continue to be solidly one thing or another," emphasizing the fact that there are not clear racial or class demarcations that allow one to participate in the graffiti subculture.⁴⁷

Although Snyder argues that MacDonald ignores women graffiti artists in her analysis, he does admit that "While graffiti talent is not gendered, graffiti writers must literally fight for their reputations, and this turns off many women, who often choose to concentrate their efforts on legal walls." ⁴⁸ Even female graffiti artists LADY PINK and DIVA agree that there is not a lot of support for female artists within the graffiti community. Both of them stated that they had to work a lot harder to earn their name

⁴³ Nancy MacDonald, *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity in London and New York* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), c.f. MacDonald pgs. for a more thorough explanation and analysis.

⁴⁴ Gregory Snyder, *Graffiti Lives: Beyond the Tag in New York's Urban Underground* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 2.

⁴⁵ Ivor, Miller, *Aerosol Kingdom: Subway Painters of New York City* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 17.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Susan A. Phillips, *Wallbangin': Graffiti and Gangs in L.A.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 332.

⁴⁸ Snyder, *Graffiti Lives*, 4.

in the graffiti world, and even after having established themselves as talented artists, many of their male peers refuse to paint next to them. For these reasons, most females initially interested in graffiti drop out or pursue other art forms.⁴⁹

Graffiti, then, also appears to belong to a wider culture, perhaps even in a greater sense than hip-hop music. Although hip-hop is strongly rooted in African-American culture, and has recently expanded to a wider audience, graffiti as a method of expression has existed since ancient times, even appearing in the ruins of Pompeii.⁵⁰ Although modern graffiti is most often associated with the style wars of the 1970s and 80s in New York City, the popularity of graffiti spurred by this time period has spawned a myriad of styles used across the world and by people of all types. In the words of former graffiti artist and current art critic Roger Gastman, "The power and visibility for the street's stage have brought the world's diverse subcultures together to share the same space."⁵¹

In conclusion, although the graffiti and hip-hop subcultures originated due to many different factors including youth, masculinity, race, and class status, ultimately the factor that connects the two is a feeling of oppression that, in the case of rap music, allows one to connect with the African-American experience, or, in the case of graffiti art, provokes one to express dissent via a violation of property norms. Tyler the Creator and BANKSY are both prime examples of this expansion of the graffiti/hip-hop subcultures, with Tyler as a rap artist born and raised in Ladera Heights, a middle-class Los Angeles neighborhood, and BANKSY as a white European graffiti artist.

Breaking Down Walls: The Growing Appeal of Urban Art

Tyler the Creator and BANKSY also appeal to a broad audience, having both gained their fame and recognition primarily via the Internet. Through this medium, they were able to reach a much wider audience than their original urban environment, connecting with people worldwide. Just as the graffiti and hip-hop subcultures are expanding within the urban environment, their audience is expanding outside of it. BANKSY and Tyler are unique in that they appeal to a wide audience composed of many races and classes. In their book *Arabic Graffiti*, Arabic typographer Pascal Zoghbi and graffiti artist, writer, and publisher Dan Stone Karl describe BANKSY's graffiti art in Bethlehem and Jerusalem as "...engag[ing] a Western audience and contribut[ing] to an awareness of the reality on the ground and the asymmetrical power struggle between Palestinians and Israelis."⁵² BANKSY's images in particular communicate this

⁴⁹ Murray, *Broken Windows: Graffiti NYC*, 165.

⁵⁰ J.A. Baird and Claire Taylor, *Ancient Graffiti in Context* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 2.

⁵¹ Gastman, Neelon, and Smyrski, *Street World*, 30.

⁵² Don Stone Karl and Pascal Zoghbi, *Arabic Graffiti* (Berlin: From Here to Fame Publishing, 2011), 65.

to a mass audience via the media and Internet with flabbergasting economy and efficiency."⁵³

Similarly, in her article *Odd Future, L.A.'s Hottest Nihilistic Art Rap Collective, Will Turn Their Tumblr Into a Photography Book* Ann Binlot explains how "OFWGKTA earned a cult following through *its webpage*, streaming music videos, its Tumblr, and various Twitter accounts . . ."⁵⁴ Although admittedly in a different way than BANKSY, Tyler appeals to an audience that extends beyond the typical hip-hop subculture, attracting the "...angsty teen set that twenty-five years ago probably would have been listening to punk rock."⁵⁵

Also important in this transfer of communication is the aspect of travel. According to Gastman, "Travel and exploration are near the essence of street cultures, and the travelers who have used their passions to cross the boundaries of nations are at the heart of the process of cultural change."⁵⁶ According to identity politics and education expert Stephen T. Olberg, back in the train era in New York City, painting on highly mobile subways allowed graffiti to "originate in poor neighborhoods and travel throughout the city into areas of greater affluence...cross[ing] sociological and ethnographic boundaries and break[ing] down walls that normally block communication."⁵⁷ Today, in many cities around the world, train graffiti is still prevalent. But where it is not, graffiti artists aim to place their art in the most highly visible spots a city has to offer, and some, like BANKSY, travel the world to spread their message.

BANKSY and Tyler's enormous popular appeal emphasizes the cultural relevance and influence of graffiti art outside of the city center. This popularity serves as a venue for widespread knowledge of the issues in urban environments and the potential for change.

The theme of nihilism in BANKSY and Tyler's artwork is worth examining precisely because it has implications for such a wide audience.

A. The Rejection of Higher Values

1. BANKSY

The first characteristic of nihilism, the rejection of higher values, is seen primarily through two themes in BANKSY's art: the rejection of law and the rejection of religion. The rejection of the law can be seen in BANKSY's many paintings depicting policemen in compromising or degrading positions. For example, on page 1 of his book *Wall and*

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ann Binlot, "Odd Future, L.A.'s Hottest Nihilistic Art Rap Collective, Will Turn Their Tumblr Into a Photography Book," *ArtInfo* (New York), (2011): URL: <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/38314/odd-future-las-hottest-nihilistic-art-rap-collective-will-turn-their-tumblr-into-a-photography-book>.

⁵⁵ Colton S., "Tyler, The Creator – Wolf Album Review." *The Versed*, (2012): URL: <http://theversed.com/2013/04/01/tyler-the-creator-wolf-album-review/>.

⁵⁶ Gastman, Neelon, and Smyrski, *Street World*, 34.

⁵⁷ Steven T. Olberg, *Political graffiti on the West Bank wall in Israel / Palestine* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 27.

Piece is an image of one of BANKSY's works, featuring a policeman flipping off the viewer; on page 25 is another rebellious policeman, spray painting the words *Thug for Life* onto a wall in purple lettering.^{58,59} Page 84 presents another law enforcement officer, sitting nonchalantly on a bench next to the word *arse* framed above his head, and on page 37 is a British soldier peeing on a wall.^{60,61,62} Placing figures of authority in such situations diminishes their power and transforms the law into a laughable matter. Along the same lines, a number of BANKSY's images promote anarchy and disorder through direct statements or symbols. For instance, on page 67 of *Wall and Piece*, BANKSY tags a monument with the phrase "Designated Riot Area," and in Figure 6, a British soldier paints the anarchy symbol on a wall, openly rejecting the institution of which he is purportedly a member.⁶³

The rejection of religious values is seen in BANKSY's use of traditional religious figures such as angels. Page 112 of *Wall and Piece* features a dejected and downtrodden male angelic figure with a bottle of alcohol and a cigarette.⁶⁴ This reflects a distinct loss of faith in the higher state of being traditionally represented by angels. Similarly, in another one of BANKSY's images, a female angel is shown with a gun hovering amidst her halo.⁶⁵ This contradictory imagery depicts a peaceful figure worshipping a symbol of violence, implying hypocrisy and diminishing the angel's traditional role as a guardian.

2. Tyler the Creator

Tyler the Creator also demonstrates the rejection of higher values through the rejection of religion and social institutions. Lyrics such as "Jesus called, he said he's sick of the disses/

I told him to quit bitching/this isn't a fucking hotline for a fucking shrink"⁶⁶ or "My only problem is death/Fuck heaven, I ain't showing no religion respect"⁶⁷ degrade traditional religious figures and dismiss the concept of religion. Tyler is a self-proclaimed atheist and the rejection of religion is a theme throughout his music.

⁵⁸ Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, location unknown. In *Wall and Piece*, by Banksy. London: Century, 2006, page 1.

⁵⁹Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, location unknown. In *Wall and Piece*, by Banksy. London: Century, 2006, page 25.

⁶⁰Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, location unknown. In *Wall and Piece*, by Banksy. London: Century, 2006, page 25.

⁶¹ Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, garage wall in Highbury. In *Wall and Piece*, by Banksy. London: Century, 2006, page 84.

⁶² Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, Borough, London. In *Wall and Piece*, by Banksy. London: Century, 2006, page 37.

⁶³ Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, Trafalgar Square. In *Wall and Piece*, by Banksy. London: Century, 2006, page 67. See Appendix A, Figure 6.

⁶⁴ Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, location unknown. In *Wall and Piece*, by Banksy. London: Century, 2006 page 112.

⁶⁵ Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, Naples, Italy. *Wordpress*.
<http://galamee.wordpress.com/2008/09/19/banksy-the-greatest/> (accessed November 27, 2012).

⁶⁶ Tyler the Creator, *Yonkers*, 2011 by XL, MP3.

⁶⁷ Tyler the Creator, *Nightmare*, 2011 by XL, MP3.

Odd Future's music also contains many lyrics that echo Nietzsche's sentiment "Nothing is true, nothing is good, God is dead".⁶⁸ Lines such as "Kill people, burn shit, fuck school/Odd Future here to steer you to what the fuck's cool/ Fuck rules, skate life, rape, write, repeat twice" demonstrate Tyler's headfirst dive into negative nihilism, depreciating social institutions and higher values with a vehemence so strong that his lyrics are often interpreted as being ironic.⁶⁹

B. The Devaluation of Life and Property

1. BANKSY

The devaluation of life and property is seen through various themes in BANKSY's work, including property abuse and BANKSY's use of rats as symbols of the urban citizen. Graffiti is inherently a devaluation of property ownership; in order to create graffiti in the traditional, illegal sense, one has to devalue the authority of the law and the concept of ownership to some degree. Renowned New York art critic Carlo McCormick reinforces this point in his essay "The Writing on the Wall," describing graffiti art as "inherently anti-institutional."⁷⁰ An overt example of this devaluation of property is seen in Figure 7, which is an image of a BANKSY stencil reading "Designated Graffiti Area."⁷¹ This piece, duplicated in many cities around the world, undermines the traditional view of property as belonging to and being controlled by one entity and instead opens it up as a public art space.

In addition to a disregard for property rights, BANKSY's art often features violent imagery, as seen in the previously mentioned depiction of the angel with a gun over her head. BANKSY also has a series of photos that juxtapose famous figures, such as the Mona Lisa, with imagery. This contraposition reflects a devaluation of life by icons representative of society, and can be seen in BANKSY's stencil painting in Soho, New York entitled *Mona Lisa with Rocket Launcher*.⁷²

Finally, a great deal of BANKSY's work centers on images of rats. BANKSY describes his use of rats in his book *Wall and Piece*, saying that, "They exist without permission. They are hated, hunted and persecuted. They live in quiet desperation amongst the filth. And yet they are capable of bringing entire civilizations to their knees. If you are dirty, insignificant and unloved then rats are the ultimate role model."⁷³ In this sense, the rat serves as a symbol for the underprivileged urban citizen. By juxtaposing the image of the rat with phrases such as *Welcome to Hell*, *Because I'm Worthless*, or the anarchy symbol, BANKSY presents these rats as being lawbreakers and

⁶⁸ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 148.

⁶⁹ Odd Future, *Pigions*, 2010 by Odd Future Records, MP3. See Appendix B: *Rejection of Higher Values* for additional lyrics of this nature.

⁷⁰ Carlo McCormick, "The Writing on the Wall," in *Art in the Streets*, ed. Brooklyn Museum, (New York City, New York: MOCA, 2011), 19.

⁷¹ See Appendix A, Figure 7.

⁷² Banksy, *Mona Lisa with Rocket Launcher*, Stencil Painting, Soho, New York City. In *Wall and Piece*, by Banksy. London: Century, 2006, page 27.

⁷³ Banksy, *Wall and Piece*, 95.

having negative attitudes.^{74,75,76} This reflects the devaluation of the urban citizen to the form of a rebellious street animal.

2. Tyler the Creator

The devaluation of life and property is also seen in the works of Tyler the Creator and Odd Future, primarily through violent imagery and the degradation of women. This is demonstrated through lyrics such as “While you niggas stacking bread, I can stack a couple dead/ Bodies, making red look less of a color, more of a hobby” or “Honey on that topping when I stuff you in my system/Rape a pregnant bitch and tell my friends I had a threesome”.⁷⁷ These are some of Tyler’s most controversial lyrics, and imagery similar to this is seen throughout his body of work.⁷⁸

C. A Loss of Hope in One’s Surroundings

1. BANKSY

In BANKSY’S work, the loss of hope in one’s surroundings is shown primarily through the juxtaposition of happy images with violent or tragic imagery. Often, he contrasts youthful figures—symbols of hope, innocence, and happiness—with weaponry or tragic circumstances. In one of his images, he depicts a young boy painting the words *I remember when this was all trees* on the wall of a derelict car factory in Detroit.⁷⁹ In another, two little boys are shown playing in the sand on the Israeli-Palestinian dividing wall, and in yet another, a girl is shown hugging a bomb like a teddy bear.⁸⁰ Page 96 in *Wall and Piece* features a similar girl clad in a gas mask.⁸¹ A comparable juxtaposition of images is seen in Figure 12, with the happy image of a picnic contrasted with the harsh concrete jungle of the urban landscape.⁸² Similarly, in *Wall and Piece*, the image of an army helicopter wrapped in a gift bow is shown next to the phrase “Have a nice day!”⁸³ These contradictory images suggest that negative aspects of society have corrupted traditional symbols of hope.

2. Tyler the Creator

A number of Tyler’s songs feature him talking to a therapist (all of his albums, *Bastard*, *Goblin*, and *Wolf* center around this theme), and he frequently entertains suicidal thoughts. These thoughts echo his loss of hope in life. One example of this is found in Tyler’s song “Bastard,” when he states, “I know you fucking feel me, I want to

⁷⁴ See Appendix A, Figure 8.

⁷⁵ Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, location unknown. In *Wall and Piece*, by Banksy. London: Century, 2006, page 94.

⁷⁶ See Appendix A, Figure 9.

⁷⁷ Tyler the Creator, *Tron Cat*, 2011 by XL, MP3.

⁷⁸ See Appendix B: *Devaluation of Life and Property* for additional lyrics of this nature.

⁷⁹ Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, Detroit. In *Banksy: The Man Behind the Wall*, by Will Ellsworth-Jones. London: Aurum Press, Ltd., 2012, Page 11 of insert.

⁸⁰ See Appendix A, Figures 10, 11.

⁸¹ Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, location unknown. In *Wall and Piece*, by Banksy. London: Century, 2006, page 96.

⁸² See Appendix A, Figure 12.

⁸³ Banksy, *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, Location Unknown,. In *Wall and Piece*, by Banksy. London: Century, 2006, page 40.

fucking kill me".⁸⁴ Similarly, in "Yonkers," Tyler speaks of the suicide of first his conscience and then himself: "(Fuck everything, man') That's what my conscience said/Then it bunny hopped off my shoulder, now my conscience dead/Now the only guidance that I had is splattered on cement/Actions speak louder than words, let me try this shit, dead."⁸⁵

"Laugh Now but One Day We Will Be In Charge": The Motivation

Nihilism, then, is clearly a prevalent theme in urban artistic expression; the question is: why? Why do these artists choose to include nihilistic themes within their work and do these motivations change from artist to artist?

Although the images analyzed certainly reflect nihilistic themes, a sector of BANKSY's artwork reflects a more revolutionary and hopeful strain of thought. For example, the BANKSY painting shown in Figure 13 features an ape, which, like the rat discussed earlier, is representative of the impoverished and oppressed urban citizens, juxtaposed with the statement "Laugh now but one day we will be in charge."⁸⁶ This is an image of hope, a call for future change. In this image lies the meaning and purpose of BANKSY's work: to highlight the issues with the current urban environment, and then to take this one step further and ignite a change. Thus, although nihilism is prevalent throughout BANKSY's artwork, it is present because it is a reflection of the urban environment. BANKSY, then, is not a nihilist—just an artist using nihilistic themes to highlight an issue and inspire a change.

Tyler the Creator, on the other hand, is a bundle of contradictions. He puts it beautifully in his song "Yonkers": "I'm a fucking walking paradox, no I'm not."⁸⁷ Within his music, Tyler recognizes his inconsistencies, creating various different personas for himself, including Tron Cat and Wolf Hayley, both bad-influence personas, Dr. TC, his conscience and therapist, and Ace Creator, Tyler's more emotional and personal side. As he says in his song *Nightmare*, "One ear I got kids screaming, 'O.F. is the best'/The other ear I got Tron Cat, asking where the bullets and the bombs at/So I can kill these levels of stress, shit."⁸⁸ This shows the contrast between the different sides of his multi-faceted personality.

Some propose that Tyler's music is satirical—an ironic representation of hip-hop culture, poking fun at the nihilistic themes often found in rap music by taking them to the extreme. They excuse his violent imagery with the fact that it is just that—imagery; he never lives out any of the fantasies he envisions. This is an interesting testament to the fact that Tyler is a rap artist raised in a middle-class neighborhood; unlike artists such as Tupac or The Notorious B.I.G, he fantasizes about violence and death without

⁸⁴ Tyler the Creator, *Bastard*, 2009 by Odd Future Records, MP3.

⁸⁵ Tyler the Creator, *Yonkers*. See Appendix B: *Loss of Hope in One's Surroundings* for additional lyrics of this nature.

⁸⁶ See Appendix A, Figure 13.

⁸⁷ Tyler the Creator, *Yonkers*.

⁸⁸ Tyler the Creator, *Nightmare*.

actually living it. Another interesting point to consider in relation to this aspect of Tyler is the concept that these fantasies are not just his own—the popularity of his music indicates that they are fantasies shared or at least enjoyed by a larger part of the population. In his biography, *Decoded*, rap artist Jay-Z discusses how businessmen often listen to his music as motivation before important presentations, and the point he makes through this is summarized nicely by Zach Baron in his article “On Odd Future, Rape and Murder and Why We Sometimes Like Things That Repel Us”:

...with art like this you never identify with the victim, the proverbial ‘you’; you identify with the person speaking, and that person is a bad motherfucker, and thus so is the listener. Through this type of identification, art allows us to explore the weird frisson between reality and fantasy, the gulf between who we are and who we'd like to be.⁸⁹

In this sense, the issues that are being raised by BANKSY and Tyler the Creator are issues that don't necessarily apply to just the state of the urban environment; they may speak to a larger question of the state of mind of the modern population—why do we idealize the nihilistic imagery in urban art? Why is it something we look up to and want to identify with? And what does this mean about us?

Others assert that Tyler is simply nihilistic and misogynistic, spouting lyrics about violent rape fantasies, and yet another interpretation is that Tyler is just a screwed up teenage boy, messing around with his friends and making songs without really thinking about their consequences. Seemingly supporting the latter, Tyler explained his graphic lyrics in an interview with *The Chicago Sun Times*, saying, “Sometimes it's us seeing who comes up with the sickest shit, the most disgusting thing they can throw in.”⁹⁰

The real Tyler is most likely a combination of the three—a creative teenage boy messing around with his friends, at times poking fun at everyone and everything around him, at other times completely serious. One can never really tell the difference between the latter two—it is difficult to decipher when Tyler is actually confessing the thoughts that go on inside his messed-up head or when he is just trying to mess with our heads. Is he, like BANKSY, trying to prove a point through the nihilism in his music? Or is he just blowing off steam; making the music for the “nigga that's in the mirror rapping,” as he asserts in his song “Goblin”?⁹¹ Again, it is most likely a combination of the two.

Writer, poet, and musician Dominic Fox recently wrote a book entitled *Cold World: The Aesthetics of Rejection and the Politics of Militant Dysphoria*, addressing this same issue. Fox, using analyses of poetry, black metal music, and radical militancy, examines the relationship between rejection and rebellion, ultimately coming to the

⁸⁹ Zach Baron, “On Odd Future, Rape and Murder, And Why We Sometimes Like the Things That Repel Us,” *The Village Voice* (blog), November 10, 2010, http://blogs.villagevoice.com/music/2010/11/on_odd_future_r.php.

⁹⁰ Conner, “To Odd Future rapper, ‘it's funny’ that rape, murder lyrics anger people.”

⁹¹ Tyler the Creator, *Goblin*, 2011 by XL, MP3.

conclusion that the “adolescent in revolt” (via his nihilism and rejection of higher values) is “a militant in prototype.”⁹² However, he also points out that “the world...provides many opportunities for cathexis, the connection of a drive-stimulus with some object that has the power to relieve it, to draw off its energies and dissipate them elsewhere.”⁹³ Art is one of these opportunities for cathexis, allowing artists, or in this case “adolescent[s] in revolt” to disseminate their internal conflicts via song and spray-paint. For Fox’s “militant prototype[s]” to become actual militants, they must first reject these means of cathexis.⁹⁴

In this sense, Tyler is using music as a form of cathexis, releasing his frustration and anger through his artwork. Through his graffiti, BANKSY is doing the same thing, although he makes it clearer that his release of frustration is a direct act of protest. This use of art as a means of cathexis is not unique to Tyler and BANKSY—it is part of what spawned the growth of hip-hop and graffiti culture in the first place. New York graffiti artist KENN describes this phenomenon in relation to graffiti, stating, “We could have been doing other things or we could have been robbing people, killing people, joining gangs, but we chose graffiti. Graffiti was an outlet for most of us born and raised in New York City.”⁹⁵ Similarly, in his book *No More Prisons*, former graffiti artist and social activist William Wimsatt states that, “Hip-hop grew out of the South Bronx gang culture of the early ’70s...as a reaction and an antidote to the drugs, violence and cynicism of the post-Black Power era.”⁹⁶ Today, graffiti and hip-hop are being utilized by a wider audience as a method of cathexis, and this yet again begs the question—why?

“Listen to the Story”: The Causes and Consequences of Nihilism in Urban Artistic Expression

Here, this paper turns from argument to speculation. It is impossible to determine the cause of a nihilistic mindset from a case study of two artists’ work, but it would be a disservice to skip over the reason behind the nihilistic mindset identified in this paper. Russell Simmons, co-founder of Def Jam, responded to a 1990 *Newsweek* article decrying the graphic themes in rap music by saying, “Surely the moral outrage in this piece would be better applied to contemporary American crises in health care, education, joblessness.”⁹⁷ But what if’s graphic themes and Simmons’s American crises are one and the same? Jeffrey Deitch points out that although most artistic movements

⁹² Dominic Fox, *Cold World: The Aesthetics of Dejection and the Politics of Militant Dysphoria* (Winchester, UK: O Books, 2009), 44.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 60.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 44.

⁹⁵ Murray, *Broken Windows: Graffiti NYC*, 106.

⁹⁶ William Upski Wimsatt, *No More Prisons: Urban Life, Homeschooling, Hip-hop Leadership, The Cool Rich Kids Movement, A Hitchhiker's Guide to Community Organizing, and Why Philanthropy is the Greatest Art Form of the 21st Century* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, Inc., 1999), 105.

⁹⁷ Hoby, “Rappers and Rape.”

occur during times of prosperity, both hip-hop and graffiti exploded in the 1970s during a time of economic hardship caused by the Vietnam war, a decline in the stock market, and the 1973 oil embargo.⁹⁸ Graffiti and rap music exploded as a direct result of these hardships, and they served as a form of artistic release and a way to voice dissent. Tyler's music and BANKSY's graffiti art are modern examples of this same concept. For Tyler, BANKSY, and urban artists like them, the themes present in their art are mirror images of larger societal issues. The devaluation of life and property, the loss of hope in one's surroundings, the rejection of higher values—these are just the details hovering in the reflection behind the artist "that's in the mirror rapping."⁹⁹

In a world where we often avoid casting our eyes on the more difficult aspects of life, the popularity of urban artists such as BANKSY and Tyler the Creator forces us to look more closely at these details. In the past, as Kubrin focuses on in her essay, the roots of nihilism in rap and graffiti stemmed from street code related to inner city gang violence. As the appeal of rap music and graffiti with nihilistic themes spreads to adolescents of all races and classes, one has to wonder why. Is this just a new method of expressing age-old feelings of adolescent rebellion, a replacement for punk, as suggested in music review website *The Versed's* review of Tyler's new album *Wolf*?¹⁰⁰ Todd Boyd suggests that anyone feeling oppressed is able to relate to the black-experience manifested in hip-hop—are more of us feeling oppressed by some greater authority? If so, what authority? The government? Society as a whole? These are questions with complicated answers, but having established that nihilism is a prevalent theme in this new wave of urban artistic expression is the first step towards finding a solution. In Tyler's words, "It's fucking art, listen to the fucking story."¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Deitch, "Art in the Streets," 10.

⁹⁹ Tyler the Creator, *Goblin*.

¹⁰⁰ Colton S., "Tyler, The Creator – Wolf Album Review." *The Versed*, (2012): URL: <http://theversed.com/2013/04/01/tyler-the-creator-wolf-album-review/>.

¹⁰¹ Hoby, "Rappers and Rape."

APPENDIX A: IMAGES

All photos included below are licensed under Creative Commons (either under their Attribution CC-BY, Attribution-ShareAlike CC BY-SA, or Attribution NoDerivs CC BY-ND license, or in the public domain). You can view the terms of the copyright on their website: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/>.



Figure 1: Wild-style graffiti art.

Morgaine (Flickr username). *Graffiti* [Image of painting], 2010. Antwerp, Belgium. Color photograph. Available from: Flickr Commons, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/morgaine/4937791648/> (accessed May 14, 2013). Courtesy of Flickr username Morgaine.



Figure 2: Graffiti tags.

Unknown. *Graffiti tags 2* [Image of painting], 2009. Helsinki, Finland. Color photograph. Available from: Wikipedia Commons: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Graffiti_tags_2.JPG. Courtesy of Wikipedia Commons.



Figure 3: Graffiti throw-up.

Erokism (Flickr username). *Ayre* [Image of painting], 2011. Color photograph. Available from: Flickr Commons, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/10295270@N05/6083903909/> (accessed May 14, 2013).



Figure 4: Graffiti piece.

Arden. *Piece HDR* [Image of painting], 2008. Amsterdam. Color photograph. Available from: Flickr Commons, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ardenswayoflife/2891925235/> (accessed May 14, 2013). Courtesy of Arden (Flickr username: ardenswayoflife).



Figure 5: Graffiti production.

A Syn. *UA Production?? Los Angeles Graffiti Art* [Image of painting]. Los Angeles, CA. Color photograph. Available from: Flickr Commons: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/24293932@N00/2418566365/> (accessed May 14, 2013). Courtesy of A Syn (Flickr username: anarchosyn).



Figure 6: Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, Shoreditch, London. Photographed by Stuart (silverfox09), 2005. Available from Flickr Commons: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/silverfox09/11951114/> (accessed May 14, 2013). Courtesy of Stuart (Flickr username: silverfox09).



Figure 7: Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, location unknown. Photographed by Count in Fives (Flickr username), 2008. Available from Flickr Commons: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/cat91/3068710278/> (accessed May 14, 2013). Courtesy of Flickr username: Count in Fives.



Figure 8: *Welcome to Hell* rat, also featuring a perfect example of how even Banksy's graffiti is written over.

Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, location unknown. Photographed by Stuart (silverfox09), 2005. Available from Flickr Commons: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/silverfox09/22425161/in/photostream/> (accessed May 14, 2013). Courtesy of Stuart (Flickr Username: silverfox09).



Figure 9: Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, Unknown Location. Photographed by John Erling Blad, 2007. Available from Wikimedia Commons: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Banksy-rat-crop.jpg> (accessed May 14, 2013). Courtesy of John Erling Blad (Wikimedia Username: jebblad).



Figure 10: Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, London. Photographed by Michael Reeve, 2004. Available from Wikimedia Commons: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Banksy.bomb.jpg> (accessed May 14, 2013). Courtesy of Michael Reeve.



Figure 11: Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, Bethlehem. Photographed by Markus Ortner, 2005. Available from Wikimedia Commons: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mauer-betlehem.jpg> (accessed May 14, 2013). Courtesy of Markus Ortner.



Figure 12: Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, unknown location. Photographed by eddiedangerous (Flickr username). Available from Flickr Commons: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/eddiedangerous/1856891861/> (accessed May 14, 2013). Courtesy of Flickr username: eddiedangerous.



Figure 13: Banksy. *Untitled*, Stencil Painting, London. Photographed by Gary Knight (Flickr username: garyknight). Available from Flickr Commons: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/garryknight/6898873822/in/photostream/> (accessed May 14, 2013). Courtesy of Gary Knight (Flickr username: garyknight).

Appendix B: Additional Tyler the Creator Lyrics

<i>Album/Year</i>	<i>Song</i>	<i>Devaluation of life and property</i>	<i>Loss of hope in one's surroundings</i>	<i>Rejection of higher values</i>
Bastard (2009)	AssMilk	<p>“Fuck rap, I’ll be a landlord so I can rape the tenant’s daughter”</p> <p>“I’ll beat the fuck out your bitch anonymous, Ike Turner”</p> <p>“Fuck her in a Hummer while I rape her then I put her in a slumber/It’s not a figure of speech when I tell you that I dumped her”</p>		
Bastard (2009)	Bastard		<p>“My father’s dead, well I don’t know, we’ll never fucking meet/ I cut my wrist and play piano cause I’m so depressed.”</p> <p>“I know you fucking feel me, I want to fucking kill me”</p> <p>“My wrist is all red from the cutter/Dripping cold blood like the winter, the summer”</p>	<p>“I’m doing Big Style Willie couldn’t touch 11/Seven, what’s religion nigga? I am legend”</p>

			<p>“My goal in life is a Grammy, hopefully momma will attend the/Ceremony with all my homies, I’m suicidal”</p>	
Bastard (2009)	Blow	<p>“A wealthy white girl without the facelift/Lure her with expensive dinners and a nice bracelet/Leave the bitch breathless, what the bitch don’t know is that/I’m a mothafuckin’ sellout and a rapist”</p> <p>“You call this shit kids, well I call these kids cum/And you call this shit rape but I think rape’s fun”</p>		
Bastard (2009)	French	<p>“Yo I’m fucking Goldilocks u in the forest/In the three bear house eating their mothafuckin’ porridge/I tell her it’s my house, give her a tour/In my basement, and keep that bitch locked up in my storage/Rape her and record it, then edit it with more shit”</p>		<p>“I’m opening a church to sell coke and Led Zeppelin/And fuck Mary in her ass”</p>
Bastard (2009)	Inglorious		<p>“My father died the day I</p>	

			<p>came out of my mother's hole/And left a burden on my soul until I was old enough/To understand that the fucking faggot didn't like me much"</p> <p>"Birthdays, Christmas my only fucking wishlist was CD's (and a father"</p> <p>"Now this counselor is trying to tell me that I'm emo, she don't give a fuck/D-low where's the trigger, I'll let this bullet play hero.. bang"</p>	
Bastard (2009)	Parade			<p>"Go to college, get a job, marry, have a kid/Watch them grow and then you die? No, nigga fuck the system"</p>
Bastard (2009)	Pigs Fly		<p>"Fatherless kids, orphans like me and Domo is/A fuck that we will never give is like our pops"</p>	
Bastard (2009)	Sarah	<p>"I want to tie her body up and throw her in my basement/Keep her there, so nobody can wonder where her face went"</p>		
Bastard (2009)	Session		<p>"Blind fucking hate inside my</p>	<p>"I'm a self-racist"</p>

			heart, guaranteed"	"Fuck the biz apparent, Odd Future errant"
Bastard (2009)	Seven	<p>"Fuck 'em all! I'm chanting..."</p> <p>"We go skate, rape sluts and eat donuts from Randy"</p> <p>"Hop off my dick and make a fucking sandwich"</p>		
Bastard (2009)	VCR	<p>"I don't want to play you, I just want to tape you undressing/And then I'll lay you down and record soft porn/If it's romance then it's hardcore, if it's horror/Pop the pop corn, the thoughts to rape you really turns me on"</p> <p>"You're my favorite show, any chance I get I try to watch/Die hard fan can't stop with the tapings/Sort of like a psycho when I can't stop with the rapings"</p>		
Goblin (2011)	Bitch Suck	"By the way, we do punch		

	Dick	<p>bitches”</p> <p>“Got the bops in the house, socking bitches in they mouth”</p> <p>“Gun to her head make your bitch massage my shoulders”</p> <p>“Swag, swag, punch a bitch”</p>		
Goblin (2011)	Fish	<p>“Tell her that I love her and by next week/You can hear her shriek from the gashes in her cheeks”</p> <p>“Now I get daughters and tie them and clink/Got my dick harder than iron and zinc/Now they just rot up, arms caught in the sink/Where they get cut up to fit my physique”</p> <p>“Ooh, hide your daughters, hide your sisters, hell hide grandmamma too/Cause the fisherman’s raping</p>		

		everybody in the pool, he on the loose, yeah”		
Goblin (2011)	Goblin	“Wow, life’s a cute bitch full of estrogen/And when she gives you lemons, nigga, throw ‘em at pedestrians”		“Therapy’s been sinning and niggas getting offended/They don’t want to fuck with me cause I do not fuck with religion” “The devil doesn’t wear Prada, I’m clearly in a fucking white tee”
Goblin (2011)	Golden		“Ending it is all I fucking think about, that’s the shit I think about/All alone, bawling ‘til my mothafuckin’ eyes bleed” “And I’m not even human, I’m a body shaped demon/With some semen in my sack and some problems in the back/And a life that’s filled with crap/and a finger filled with hate/And a gat that’s filled with love, now let opposites attract ”	
Goblin (2011)	Nightmare	“When mommy cusses out cousin, some knives get shown/Now she’s really fucking pissed, so the	“Life is a bitch and my cock’s soft, the Glock’s cocked/My hands trembled, my finger’s slipped, the wall’s red/Her	

		knives get thrown/And hit her in the fucking neck, now her throat's all gone/Looking like a fucking monster from the Twilight Zone"	life is fucked, she's sad now, her son is dead" "When I was younger, I would smile a lot/I'm getting older, getting older, but a wiser top/Now I'm drunk driving, lap's full of Budweiser tops" "Love? I don't get none, that's why I'm so hostile to the kids that get some/My father called me to tell me he loved me/I'd have a better chance of getting Taylor Swift to fuck me/Annoying and I'm ugly, most niggas wanna punch me/I'm surprised the fucking doctor even touched me/Feel like Humpty, you hoping that I'll fall? Fuck y'all"	
Goblin (2011)	Radicals	"Kill people, burn shit, fuck school/I'm fuckin; radical, nigga/I'm motherfuckin' radical"		
Goblin (2011)	Sandwiches	"Let's buy guns and kill those kids with dads and moms/With nice homes,		"Nigga had the fucking nerve to call me immature/Fuck you think I made Odd Future

		<p>41k's, and nice ass lawns"</p> <p>"I'll push this fucking pregnant clown into a hydrant stuck in the ground/step through the stomach, replace the baby with some fucking pounds"</p>		<p>for?/To wear fucking suits and make good decisions?/Fuck that nigga, Wolf Gang"</p> <p>"Come on kids, fuck that class and hit that bong"</p> <p>"The Golf Wang hooligans, is fucking up the school again/And showing you and yours that breaking rules is fucking cool again"</p> <p>"Then you smoke a J of weed, and take his kids to the churches/Uh, fuck church, they singing and the shit ain't even worth it/In the choir, whores and liars, scumbags and the dirt, bitch/You told me God was the answer/When I ask him for shit, I get no answer, so God is the cancer/I'm stuck in triangles, looking for my angel/Kill me with a chainsaw, and let my balls dangle/Triple six is my number, you can get it off my</p>
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				Tumblr"
Goblin (2011)	She	<p>"One, two, you're the girl that I want/Three, four, five, six, seven, shit/Eight is the bullets if you say no after all this/And I just couldn't take it, you're so motherfuckin' gorgeous/Gorgeous, baby you're gorgeous/I just wanna drag your lifeless body to the forest/And fornicate with it but that's because I'm in love with you, cunt"</p>		
Goblin (2011)	Transylvani a	<p>"I'm Dracula bitch/Don't got a problem smacking a bitch/Kidnapping, attacking, with axes and shit/'till I grab them throats and start smacking them shits"</p> <p>"Goddamn I love bitches/Especially when they only suck dick and wash dishes/And make me and the Wolf Gang sandwiches"</p>		

<p>Goblin (2011)</p>	<p>Tron Cat</p>	<p>“This is the type of shit that make a Chris Brown want to kick a whore/That make songs about the wet blockers when it rains and pours/(Umbrella)”</p> <p>“Game of duck-duck-duck tape with a dead goose/She running ‘round this motherfucking dungeon, her legs loose/Until I accidentally get the saw to her head, oops”</p> <p>“They asked me what it was, I told them fuckers it was ketchup”</p> <p>“Nutty like my Chex-Mix, she bleeding from her rectum”</p> <p>“Starve her ‘til I carve her then I shove her in the Rover/Where I cut her like a barber with a Parkinson’s disorder/Store her in a</p>		<p>“I’ll be the only wetback who ain’t really touched the water/Cause I’ll be too fucking busy tryna flirt with Jesus’ daughter/(Fuck Mary)”</p>
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		portable freezer with me to Portland”		
Goblin (2011)	Window		“And five minutes from suicide, I biked it to the park”	“You can hear it when that little fucka’s reciting my lyrics, yeah I’m rebel nigga/Cheer it, dead parents everywhere, it’s smelling like teen spirit”
Goblin (2011)	Yonkers	“I’ll crash that fucking airplane that that faggot nigga B.o.B. is in/And stab Bruno Mars in his goddamn esophagus/And won’t stop until the cops come in” “I’m Wolf, Tyler put this fucking knife in my hand I’m Wolf, Ace gon’ put that fucking hole in my head/And I’m Wolf, that was me who shoved the cock in your bitch”		“Jesus called, he said he’s sick of the disses I told him to quit bitching this isn’t a fucking hotline/For a fucking shrink”

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Discography

This is a list of the songs cited in this article, including the songs referenced in Appendix B. Written lyrics were obtained from <http://rapgenius.com/>.

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