WE WERE HERE: GRADUATION STREET PAINTING IN LANDSCAPES OF MEMORY AND PLACE IN WINCHESTER, VIRGINIA

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of American Studies (Folklore).

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ABSTRACT

Danielle Riley: We Were Here: Graduation Street Painting in the Landscape of Memory and Place in Winchester, Virginia

This thesis explores graduation street painting, a practice of the graduates of John Handley High School in Winchester, Virginia, which has been referred to as graffiti in the city’s local newspaper. Although graffiti has been associated with vandalism and gang activity in Northern Virginia, I argue that the graduation street painting is unique because of its construction and placement. Graduation street painting also provides some Winchester residents with fond images in landscapes of place and memory while it complicates notions of heritage and legacy for other residents. The painting constitutes a public performance by Handley graduates that is intended to invite participation with members of their communities, but those communities do not encompass all of Winchester.

Graffiti frequently is perceived as an act against the community which local and regional newspapers often associate with gang activity, further perpetuating community concern. In Winchester, such perceptions have led authorities to attempt to stop and criminalize graffiti through local ordinance, while refraining from specifically addressing the graduation street painting in the language of the law. As a result, outlawing graffiti in the city code but permitting graduation street painting to continue results in the governing authorities of Winchester inadvertently reinforcing positions of privilege for graduates of John Handley High School and their communities.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest gratitude goes to my thesis committee for their patience, persistence and support. Without the encouragement of Bernard Herman, Glenn Hinson, and Patricia Sawin, I would have left assertions unchallenged and assumptions to run rampant. I thank you all for your encouragement and for your willingness to let me persist until I stopped finding what I set out to find and instead just learned to listen. From my heart, I thank my hometown consultants for entrusting me with your stories; this work would have been impossible without you.
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CHAPTER 1: GRADUATION STREET PAINTING IN WINCHESTER

Introduction

We had buckets of paint, and perhaps that was the most unusual thing. The night was warm and dry, with little threat of rain. It had to be dry, because we needed everything to look perfect and to last. We crept out of windows and previously unlocked back doors perhaps more out of respect for sleeping parents than for fear of being caught. After all, this was a legacy, an annual event that in the words of one participant, “I do remember the distinct adrenaline rush of fear and knowing we were doing something illicit but also something that was half expected of us.”\(^1\) Although it wasn’t very late, perhaps only just before midnight, we had little to worry about as our friends gathered in different spots around town. We were all sharing the same sort of experience in the landscape that night; we all were graduating from the same small high school in the same small town—John Handley High School (JHHS) in Winchester, Virginia. Our mission was the same as our older brothers and sisters, cousins and parents before us: with brush and bucket, paint the streets in front of your home, your friends’ homes. The painting was simple enough, and that was a good thing as most of us used a brush (the more adventurous only occasionally used spray cans or more often paint rollers)(Fig. 1).

\(^1\) Consultant_2, e-mail message to author, December 6, 2014.
We wrote our initials, and our graduation year, the school’s initials (JHHS) despite the fact it is the only high school in the town. Sometimes, we included a little message to our friends, but never intended harm. “It was sort of a tit-for-tat kind of thing wasn't it? Never malicious as I remember, full of inside jokes and innuendo.”² While there was seldom a real worry about being caught or in any way prosecuted for our painting, the night still had an edge. One person, often the driver, would act as a lookout while the other two painted. If lights came around a corner, we hid behind cars or trees until it was safe to resume, hoping, more than anything, than no tire tracks ran through our fresh paint -- white paint, always white. We took turns, finishing with contentment and giggles, quietly driving off to the next street, likely listening to the radio or cassette players softly playing songs by groups like U2, Bon Jovi, and Duran Duran. In 1988 it did not occur to me to consider the street painting a transgression of any sort; my friends and I were continuing a practice we simply “understood.” Like other Handley activities we knew – attending Handley football games on Saturday afternoons instead of Friday night (ostensibly so lights wouldn’t disturb surrounding homes), or taking the local Friday

² Consultant_2, e-mail, 2014
holiday to participate in the annual Apple Blossom Festival – it was just something many of us were a part of, something our community “understood,” and something our friends and families did. Many of us had attended the same elementary schools and nearly every one of us had come through the same middle school (there was, and remains, only one). We saw ourselves as a good, though motley, group, decked out in Member’s Only jackets, shoulder pads, and big hair. When we did graduate on a hot June 14\textsuperscript{th}, many of us prepared to leave our small town and each other for the first time since elementary school (Fig. 2.).

![Fig. 2. Libby Johnson Ross. Handley Processional. 1988.](image)

I moved to Winchester at age eight and grew up there. Although I didn’t realize it at the time, I was quite privileged to live in my neighborhood (referred to as voting ward 1) and to attend John Handley High School. My privilege meant many kinds of access, and specific to this paper is the fact that I had opportunities at my school that other students in surrounding counties did not have. A privately endowed public high school provided all the classes, materials, highly qualified faculty and sparkling facilities any student could want for an exceptional education. I left at the end of the summer for college, and with that departure left behind what I assumed would be traditions that would carry on as they had before.
After graduating from JHHS and upon graduating from college, I decided to become an English teacher, largely due to my experience at Handley. Only as I worked through 18 years of teaching English in urban schools did I begin to realize how entitled and unique my high school experience had been. I spent those teaching years working with students and families trying to understand the structural racism and constructs of privilege of the cities in which I taught. The majority of my students were from underserved communities, and their schools were nothing like JHHS. By learning from my students about their lives and experiences within and without the school and by talking with their families, I tried to gain some insight into those social constructs that were created and perpetuated by privileged people like me – white, middle class.

Until recently, I gave no thought to the graduation street painting in Winchester. A visit from my parents in July of 2014 changed all of that, as they told me about a recent article in our hometown newspaper. On the morning of Monday, June 3, 2014, eight students were identified as “culprits,” guilty of “graffiti” by *The Winchester Star.* Though no charges were brought and the police encouraged the students to simply paint over their graffiti, many citizens expressed confusion and surprise that there had been any concern about the activity at all. Overnight, the practice of commencement street painting became “graffiti” and the Handley graduates were “culprits.”

When I started this project, and as I began to reach out to graduates from my class, previous classes and subsequent classes, I found the graduation street painting was significant for many JHHS graduates. Handley alumni from different graduating classes shared fond memories and hoped to see the street painting continue. “It was a harmless, fun, slightly dangerous

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tradition that I’d hate to see given up.”

I approached the graduation street painting in Winchester with a focus on the *Winchester Star*’s article’s negative language, wondering what outside forces were making residents so concerned about a practice over 50 years old that they felt compelled to contact the police. My first thoughts were of community concerns about the street painting leading to graffiti. I wondered if they were worried that this could be somehow connected to an increased presence of gang graffiti and activity in the Northern Virginia area, well documented since 2000. Another possibility I considered was that perhaps some residents of Winchester were uncomfortable or even fearful of the fastest growing demographic in Northern Virginia: people identifying as Latino or Hispanic. I wondered if some folks were making a kind of equation: street painting + gang activity + growing Latino population = danger for Winchester. However, when I began examining the street painting and considered more carefully where it occurred, where it didn’t occur, and the conversations residents had about it, I began to understand a powerful aspect of the tradition rooted in landscape. The members of the Winchester community are proud of their high school and their graduates, and especially of the historic area surrounding the school. The talk around the street painting positions it in the landscape of my consultants’ memories as a performance of heritage that is passed from student to student and written primarily in the area immediately surrounding the school. The questions I had to explore needed not be about why a few people had complained about the graduation street painting; the questions needed to be about why, for over half a decade, so many people had never said a word.

A 2014 survey of Winchester citizens complicates the notion of graduation street painting – contrary to my own beliefs and assertions by many of my consultants – as something *all* the

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5 Consultant_3, e-mail message to author, December 6, 2014.
graduates of Handley do. The data collected from that two of the city’s four wards (wards 1 and 4) reveal that residents perceive these areas as well lit and safe to walk around in at night.⁶ These same wards encompass the town’s historic and most valuable real estate, and include the majority of respondents to the city’s survey: predominantly older, white, wealthy citizens (Figs. 3-5).⁷

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>POB address</td>
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<td>0.3 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ward 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ward 2</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>15.9 %</td>
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<td>Ward 3</td>
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<td>Ward 4</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>0.4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>914</td>
<td>100.0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missing Cases = 0
Response Percent = 100.0 %

Fig. 3. ETC Institute. Responses by Ward. 2014.

Q22. How would you describe your race/ethnicity? (without "not provided")

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q22. Your race/ethnicity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian/White</td>
<td>806</td>
<td>93.3 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American/Black</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3.4 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Eskimo</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>890</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of Cases = 864
Number of Responses = 890
Average Number Of Responses Per Case = 1.0
Number Of Cases With At Least One Response = 864
Response Percent = 100.0 %

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⁷ ECT Institute, 199-201, 204.
Q22. Other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q22. Other</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HISPANIC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29.4 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>AMERICAN</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ITALIAN</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LATIN AMERICAN</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POLISH</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUMAN RACE</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAJUN</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEW ZEALANDER</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASIAN INDIAN</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CANADIAN</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9 %</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPANISH</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100.0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missing Cases = 0  
Response Percent = 100.0 %

Fig. 4. ETC Institute. *Responses to Q22: How would you describe your race/ethnicity?* 2014.

Q21. What is your approximate annual household income?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q21. Your approximate annual household income</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under $20K</td>
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<td>9.0 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20K-$34,999</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>11.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35K-$49,999</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>14.1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50K-$74,999</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>18.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75K+</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>40.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>6.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>914</td>
<td>100.0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missing Cases = 0  
Response Percent = 100.0 %

Fig. 5. ETC Institute. “Responses to Q21: What is your approximate annual household income?” 2014.

It took me a while to see it, to understand my place in this data and on the ward maps. I suspect some of my fellow Winchester citizens may have missed this, too; when we are socialized in spaces of privilege, it is difficult to see that there are other people in other spaces right around us. I saw the street painting during graduation as an inclusive legacy, and it is if, as I was, you are part of the included group. Some students don’t attend JHHS (or at least, not all four years), some students don’t graduate from JHHS, and some students don’t live in the parts of Winchester where walking on the street at night – let alone painting on the street – is safe or “permitted.” The intrusion of other painting – graffiti – does not match this self-perception and,
understandably, causes anxiety. People pursued by police for doing other kinds of illegal painting on the streets or walls are acting in a way that makes them “other.” People who complain to police about graduation street painting are considered “other.” Enforcing the city’s graffiti ordinance by arresting some people who paint graffiti while keeping “off the books” an understood permission for Handley graduates to paint the streets creates a situation where Winchester citizens and government officials reinforce, likely unknowingly, the idea of “otherness” for some of Winchester and validate the entitlement of those who graduate from John Handley High School and who feel at ease painting the streets at night.

In the following chapters I discuss three qualities of John Handley High School graduation street painting that make the practice unique and important for some members of the Winchester community. National and local media frequently report graffiti as acts by people whose behavior is described as territorial, violent, or gang-related.\(^8\) In local articles, graffiti often is associated with members of gangs or squads (gang subgroups), and the images of graffiti and stories of gang activity suggest to some Winchester authorities a correlation between graffiti and an increase in the presence of serious criminal activity.\(^9\) In national articles about the Northern Virginia area, these gangs are frequently described as consisting of members of Latino communities. I argue that Winchester’s graduation street painting is unrelated to gangs and the presence of Latino residents and differs from territorial and aggressive graffiti in the landscape of place and memory. The graduation street painting evokes nostalgia for some citizens through


frequent inclusion of initials of the high school and of the graduates in the familiar imagery. I argue that these elements of graduation street painting differentiate it from the images and language about graffiti that are published in local newspapers and reify it as a practice found primarily in the landscape of Winchester’s historic and privileged neighborhoods. While the local media’s association of graffiti with gang activity is unlikely to be a threat to the continuation of graduation street painting, the unspoken permission given by local authorities to some (graduating seniors) to break the law while pursuing prosecution of others who do so (those writing graffiti on walls, parking decks, etc.) actually presents the greater challenge to the citizens who wish to permit the practice of graduation street painting to continue.

**Methods**

My ethnographic methodology includes multiple interviews conducted between 2013 and 2015, with individuals including members of my own graduating class, current and former government officials and residents of Winchester. The consultants range in age from 19 to 68, and all identify as white Americans, born in the United States. Socioeconomically, the consultants come from middle to upper class backgrounds. I form my interpretation of the qualities of the graduation street painting by drawing on interviews with six Handley graduates from different graduation years who painted the streets during commencement time, two former City Council members, and one current member of the City Planning Commission.

Interviews with current and former City government officials and a few residents were conducted in person. Many of my other interviews were conducted via phone or the Internet. Due to the nature of the subject matter – street painting – being illegal, several consultants were

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10 Stewart Masters, interview with author, September 2014.

11 Alex Alonso, "Urban Graffiti on the City Landscape" (paper presented at Western Geographic Graduate Conference, San Diego State University, February 14, 1998).
hesitant to meet in person or to have any exchange that created a “paper trail.” All but two of the consultants for this project asked not to be identified by name or any significant identifier. By offering multiple options for communication and by changing names in footnotes and bibliography to “Consultant” followed by a number assigned at random, I was able to reach more consultants for this project.

In addition to these interviews, I provide two maps to support my observations (Figs. 6-7).

![Map of Winchester, VA with graduation street paintings marked in red and green.](image)

**Fig. 6.** Danielle Riley. *Instances of graduation street painting in Winchester, VA. 2014.*

On the first map, I have plotted my observation of 46 instances of graduation street painting in Winchester during the fall of 2014. The map shows graduation street painting from 2014 graduates (red), from graduation years prior to 2014 (green), six instances of graduation
street painting reported as “graffiti” by the Winchester Star (orange circles), and three instances of graduation street painting painted over with black paint by 2014 graduates (black circles over orange). A second map of the same dimensions reveals the wards of Winchester, represented by color: yellow for ward 1, blue for ward 2, green for ward 3, and red for ward 4.

Fig. 7. Danielle Riley. Voting precincts, also called “wards” in Winchester, VA. 2014

The wards are divided as voting precincts, but they also connect to a 2014 citizen satisfaction survey and recent school rezoning discussions. The survey data by ward denote feelings of safety and satisfaction with quality of life in Winchester, while data regarding locations of the town’s elementary school zones suggest areas of wealth, poverty, and overcrowding. Taken together, the data create portraits of two wards in the city – primarily ward 1, followed closely by 4 – wherein the majority of wealth, safety, satisfaction, and agency allow graduation street painting to transpire. Wards 2 and 3 fare less well, with schools that have the highest free and reduced lunch rates, and survey respondents who indicate less satisfaction with
Winchester as a place to live and raise children than their ward 1 and 4 counterparts express.

I draw from scholarship on social transgression, graffiti, histories of annual events situated in local tradition, performance, landscape, and material culture. For reference and supporting text, I gathered information from the United States Census Bureau, Winchester City Council minutes, the city code and the Winchester City Strategic Plan. I also drew from relevant articles from Winchester’s local newspaper, The Winchester Star, and newspapers read by Winchester residents, including The Northern Virginia Daily, the New York Times and The Washington Post.

Theory

While there is no research available on the street painting event in Winchester, Virginia, there are scholarly works about perceptions of youth presence and activities, annual or recurring public traditions, perceptions of graffiti, and performance that challenges norms. Dorothy Noyes’ “Heritage, Legacy, Zombie: How to Bury the Undead Past” assists in framing my observations of the graduation street painting as perceived by a vocal and powerful contingent of Winchester to be a performance of heritage while considered by others to be legacy, and with the concept of those “others” as well as “others” who paint graffiti (not graduation street painting) as connected to Noyes’ notion of zombie. Sonya Salamon’s From Hometown to Nontown: Rural Community Effects of Suburbanization addresses the expectation of rebellion from small town youth. This work is helpful in examining the assumptions of Handley graduates and their families that the commencement street painting is an “acceptable” form of rebellion. Kenneth E.

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Foote and Maoz Azaryahu’s article, “Toward a Geography of Memory: Geographical Dimensions of Public Memory and Commemoration” offers scholarship about the role of nostalgia and placemaking, and supports the analysis of many Winchester residents’ remembrance of street painting as a heritage element of the city’s landscape – both physical and in memory. Similarly, Willow Lung-Amam’s “That ‘Monster House’ is My Home: The Social and Cultural Politics of Design Reviews and Regulations” provides important contemporary analysis of perceptions of suburban dwellers by “historic” home residents. Lung-Amam’s work acts to challenge the “it’s just what we do” sentiment expressed repeatedly by supporters of the graduation street painting.

For additional theory, I draw from Michel De Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau provides the framework by which I develop a theory of two Winchesters existing at once—a Winchester of memory where street painting is heritage and expected, and a second Winchester where graffiti indicates the presence or imminent threat of gang activity. His discussion of the importance of imagery in creating place is also a key element to the examination of street painting as legacy. By contrast, Alex Alonso’s “Urban Graffiti on the City Landscape” provides an analysis of gang graffiti and the ways in which the imagery is used to create sub-spaces within dominant cultural spaces. Such analysis supports the “otherness” evoked by graffiti, which connects to fears of threatening activity for some Winchester residents. Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin also address the role of tradition and its slippery nature in

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17 Alonso, Urban Graffiti.
their work, “Tradition, Genuine or Spurious.”\textsuperscript{18} These theories support my examination of Winchester’s challenge in determining what to do with a practice considered heritage by some and legacy by others and one that has met with recent resistance.

Raymond Williams’ work regarding the differences in residual, dominant and emergent elements of culture also informs my work, as I look closely at the differences in perception of the graduation painting as expected and tradition-reinforcing as opposed to graffiti as an emerging form of cultural performance that is tied to practices which may not be readily available for consumption by the viewer.\textsuperscript{19} To support a closer look at the importance of change within traditional practice, I will look to Deborah Kapchan for guidance in examining the complexity of the transformative process in performance.\textsuperscript{20} Her work will inform my analysis of the use of language in local media to shape the perception of graffiti as a performance by potentially threatening outsiders. Additionally, I will call upon Pauline Greenhill’s “Make the Night Hideous: Death at a Manitoba Charivari” to provide guidance as I examine the way in which varying reports of performance can reveal “greater truths about social relations and cultural interactions.”\textsuperscript{21}

Finally, though not inconsequentially, I look to the words of my consultants. The experience of participating in the graduation street painting and the impression it makes on the participants and observers is crucial to my suggestion that this performance is rooted in the


physical landscape and the landscape of memory.

To demonstrate effectively the importance of this practice and distinction from other forms of illegal painting, there are several occasions where I quote consultants’ stories in large part or whole. My hope is that in doing so, and in analyzing consultants’ descriptions of street painting experiences, I will support my assertion that the practice of graduation street painting reflects a portion of the Winchester community and provides an invitation to participate in the nostalgia it evokes. This, I believe, will distinguish it from the graffiti that creates for some residents a feeling of threat to their community by outsiders and, possibly, gangs.

For some, the legacy view of commencement street painting has become conflated with the invasion of graffiti, and thus there are two Winchesters trying to exist simultaneously—one of a traditional past confident in a performance of heritage and one of a fearful future, doubtful of the possibilities of containing a legacy of painting on the streets. This clash is further influenced by media coverage of gang activity and reports of instances of graffiti in Winchester and the surrounding Northern Virginia area. Painting the streets to celebrate graduation is not the same as graffiti, but there are good reasons for people in Winchester to have difficulty recognizing the difference. I argue that the commencement street painting is not graffiti, which is portrayed by local media as a harbinger threatening dangerous activity to come, but it is instead a familiar and unique heritage for some. If the knowledge of this practice were made more readily accessible to all residents, perhaps it could continue to foster a sense of pride for a broader segment of the Winchester community through participation and performance in the landscapes of Winchester citizens’ streets and memories.
CHAPTER 2: WE WERE HERE. YOU WERE THERE. WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

Street names in the landscape of Winchester are undeniably rooted in history and symbolic of the image the city wishes to project. As Kenneth Foot and Maoz Azaryahu explain in their article about geography and spaces of public memory, “When invested with commemorative functions, street names introduce an official version of history into everyday life in a way that seems totally detached from ideological contexts or community obligations; the ostensible ordinariness of street names that allows them to render a certain version of history not only familiar, but also self-evident.”22 Surrounding the city’s only and prized high school with streets such as Handley Avenue, Handley Boulevard, Valley Avenue and Jefferson Street situates the school and surrounding neighborhood in a magical-thinking history of a judicious and privileged Virginia, rich in tradition and benevolence. This naturalized notion of privilege, tradition and legacy are not confined to homes and street names.

Understandably, many Winchester residents are proud of the high school, which was built in the early 1920s with money from a private endowment from Judge John Handley, an Irish immigrant and appointee to President Buchanan’s administration.23 While Winchester remains stalwart in its decision to have only one high school, the growth of the surrounding county necessitated the creation of three additional high schools: James Wood High School in 1950, Sherando High School in 1993, and Millbrook High School in 2003. John Handley High School remains Winchester’s only high school and is the center of many of the town’s activities, including events during the annual Apple Blossom Festival. When considering a move to

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22 Foote and Azaryahu, “Toward a Geography,” 128-129.

Winchester, young families often inquire about the school, located in ward 1, when considering the purchase of a home (Figs. 8–9).

Fig. 8. ETC Institute. Q17a: Rating of Winchester as a Place to Live. 2014.

Fig. 9. ETC Institute. Q17c: Rating of Winchester as a Place to Raise Children. 2014.
These homes are highly prized, with many being sold via “whisper sales” or off-market real estate deals. This kind of transaction has created, over time, a “who’s who” reputation in the town for those residing in homes surrounding the high school. The area is desirable not only for the social cachet, but also for its deep, cool shade from old-growth deciduous trees, manicured lawns, and seemingly endless network of sidewalks. Some of the streets are even adorned with pink and green apple blossoms, indicators of the Apple Blossom parade route and yet another feather in the cap of homeowners who have scored the Winchester trifecta: an historic home that is near Handley and has a lawn for viewing “The Bloom” (as the festival is locally known) (Figs. 10-11).

![Fig. 10. Ginger Perry. Painting on the Bloom. 2013.](image)

![Fig. 11. Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival. 88th Shenandoah Apple Blossom Festival. 1988.](image)
It is annual practice for seniors graduating from Handley to paint the streets during an evening around the time of commencement. This legacy has existed since at least the early 1950s, and for many it is as expected an event as the town’s annual Apple Blossom Festival. Graduating seniors look forward to this privilege, and for decades local parental, civil, and legal authorities have looked the other way as young men and women have painted their initials alongside their matriculation year and the school’s name in the streets and occasional sidewalk in front of family homes and the homes of friends. These young men and women use white paint and brushes almost exclusively: seldom veering from the *modus operandi* of sneaking out long after dark, buckets and brushes in car trunks or truck beds, heading for the streets in front of friends’ homes. Lifelong residents, their children, and their grandchildren frequently refer to the commencement street painting as “something we just do” or “that just happens.” As Stewart Masters, graduate of the class of 1960, recalled:

No one was concerned. It was just something you did. It was reserved for seniors; if any underclassmen did it… I never saw that, but you just knew you don't mess around. That was allowed for the seniors. Actually, I don't think any one from the county participated at all. It was just a Handley tradition, city tradition, and reserved for seniors. That was it…and we would stay out, at least the groups that I remember, from about 10 o'clock until midnight or 2 o'clock. And then we would come home. Our parents weren’t worried about us because I guess it was something that had been done all the time.24

Former City Councilman and Handley teacher Charlie Gaynor recalled his experience as a recipient of some street painting:

I started at Handley in 1973. But it had been going on, obviously, before that. It was new to me that first year. I mean, I had seen it around and everything, but when you start sponsoring classes, that's when it's most prolific. I have never… Any painting related to the school has never been offensive. In fact, a couple of

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24 Masters, interview, 2014.
the ones from the classes I sponsored, you know, wrote like "we love you" and all that. It was neat.25

To make one’s paint visible and lasting was important to the consultants with whom I spoke. Indeed, some graduates went to extreme measures to try to ensure that their letters and numbers would last, as Stewart Masters explained:

Like I said, we wanted to paint so that people would see it, but also so that it wouldn't be worn away. One of the things that I can remember, from classes prior – my sister graduated six years before I did, so I had the 1954 paint that I could remember seeing fading away over the years. So, I knew that each year, as the traffic went back and forth, the paint would wear away and eventually you would go away into the unknown. No one would know that you were there. And so it was kind of special to make sure that your paint stayed longer than anyone else's. I knew that putting it on the street wasn't going to help me that much, but in front of my house there was a sidewalk. I went to the paint store and asked the man if I could get some paint like what the highway used for their striping. And they said that they did not have anything special for me for that. I remember just getting the regular paint, but I remember putting down several coats of paint before I put my date -- my ‘60, I didn't put 1960 – I just put ‘60. And I was thinking if it would last that long, if it was still there in 2060 they could use my paint! But it didn't last long. But it was a pride thing; you wanted to make sure that your paint lasted as long as possible.26

While painting with a bucket and brush was tedious and slow, it also meant graduates could lay the paint on thickly, though it was striking that none of the consultants expressed concern about being caught. As one graduate put it, “I always thought the adults shook their heads but never really cared.”27 This is important, especially when one considers where the majority of the graduation painting happens (Fig. 12).


26 Masters, interview, 2014.

27 Consultant_2, e-mail, 2014.
Fig. 12. Danielle Riley. Detail: *Instances of graduation street painting in Winchester, VA. 2014.*

As indicated in the 2014 Winchester resident satisfaction survey discussed earlier, and as my own experiences with consultants and as a former resident suggest, there is a section of Winchester – ward 1 – where graduates can feel safer painting than they can in other parts of the city. The frequency of graduation street painting instances in ward 1 is double that of ward 2, and more than *nine* times the number of instances of street painting found in wards 2 and 3 combined. Given that graduates most frequently paint in front of their own homes or the homes of close friends, this suggests that the location of the graduation street painting primarily in ward 1 is an indicative of a practice of heritage for those who reside there: the more prosperous, and predominantly white residents of Winchester.

If one considers Dorothy Noyes’ notions of *heritage* and *legacy* as they pertain to performance in traditional contexts, some of the complications surrounding the street painting become clearer. Noyes defines heritage as something that “cuts a practice or an environment
loose from its moorings in the world and fixes it in a dedicated frame deemed capable of containing it.”28 In the case of Winchester, those who participate and support it consider the annual street painting by graduates of John Handley High School to be part of the town’s heritage—a smaller but similar point of curiosity and pride to the Apple Blossom Festival. Noyes continues, defining the notion of legacy as something different:

[I]t is not the system that threatens the practice but the practice that threatens the system. So containment is not possible! Accommodations must be made, and in extreme cases a strategy must be found for reclassifying, repurposing, or otherwise recycling the difficult survival.29

Detractors of the street painting see it as problematic—a legacy difficult to contain. They may have a point. As Noyes notes, accommodations must be made, and so the authorities of Winchester has decided, for the most part, to turn a blind eye.

According to a few graduates from 1988 who asked to remain anonymous, the police did spot a couple of students who were reprimanded but never charged or prosecuted. In years that followed, however, as news articles about local graffiti and Northern Virginia gang activity began to pick up, students did encounter more trouble. One consultant confided the following story—never reported in The Winchester Star—from 2001:

I remember my parents were out of town, and because they were I was up much later than normal. All of a sudden there were all these lights and cop cars. So our neighbor who likes to know what's going on—she's like our neighborhood watch lady—she saw these kids getting arrested. She actually went down and talked to the police officer because he put these boys in cuffs. She knew them; her son was a year older than them. As she told it (to me later), earlier in the night some kids were painting in the street. The cops came and … they made a run for it. Now the police waited for


them to come back. I don't know if it was two or four, but they just sat up there on the hill and waited for these kids to come back. So the kids did come back and looked and didn't see anyone, and they finished their painting. Then the police just stormed them! So our neighbor was outside and she said to the police, “You should not have those boys in cuffs!” She even called the boy's parents, and I think before it even went to the police station the boy's parents got there. It was interesting to see this teacher in action because she was my parents’ age, she was significantly older than we were then, but even she realized how ridiculous it was to do this to kids.³⁰

Shortly before graduation in June of 2014, several soon-to-be-graduates set out to do their commencement painting among neighborhoods throughout the town. By 9 a.m. the next morning, local police began receiving phone calls about the painting there and in five other spots around town. As *Winchester Star* reporter Melissa Boughton recalled:

I check in every day with the public information officer with the Police Department… She told me that there had been quite a bit of graffiti, and they had gotten numerous calls. We had heard some of the calls come in on the scanner requesting police officers on certain streets. I think it was in well-off areas in the city that this happened, so people in those neighborhoods were just calling the Police Department. I think we were going to try to help, you know, to see if anybody had any for information. But she – the PD public information officer – was saying that it could be quite costly to remove this graffiti from the street. So we ended up doing the story. I remember at the time that the editors’ responses were, "Oh, they do this every year." I hadn't heard of it, and I'd been here for almost 3 years.³¹

Notably, four of the six graffiti reported were painted in roadways distinctly in front of homes in areas long-term residents would deem “new” Winchester: subdivisions developed with homes built after 1990 (Fig. 13). The other two locations were on generous avenues, where wide roads converged and no recipient of the graffiti could be readily discerned.

³⁰ Consultant_4, telephone interview with author, March 22, 2015.

³¹ Boughton, interview, 2014.
Eight students were identified from their initials and rumors being spread about the painting. Parents spoke with police and students were allowed to paint over their graffiti in exchange for no charges being brought (Fig. 14). One of the students involved offered to tell their version of the story:

So yes we went out one night and painted a few streets and after a couple days rumors started to circulate that the police were involved and that somehow they had figured out who painted the streets based off of the initials that were painted near the 2014's. *The Winchester Star* listened in on the call from neighborhood people complaining about the paint and decided to write a story about the "graffiti culprits" that dirtied the streets of Winchester. We were never contacted directly by anyone, but one of the girl's (sic) had her dad call the police who said they were just as annoyed as we were with the situation and that we should go ahead and cover it up. We made a point do to the covering up during broad daylight to make a statement and we deliberately went over the paint in black so you could still see what it said. We had numerous people stop their cars and apologize for what happened and tell us that they did it 50 years ago and that this was ridiculous. Only one car had the nerve to stop and thank us for cleaning up the streets because it was "graffiti and it's illegal." It took all of our strength to not physically harm him in some way (we're wondering if he's the one that called and complained).\(^\text{32}\)

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\(^{32}\) Consultant_1, e-mail, 2015.
I visited Winchester in September 2014 and interviewed people in person, by telephone, and Internet. Several of the citizens to whom I mentioned the incident were baffled by the negative response to the 2014 street painting, differentiating it from “everyday” (train, parking deck, alleyway) graffiti.

I do see it as different. I see "regular" graffiti as decorative, art, and as a way for an individual to leave their unique, though often anonymous, mark. I think the Winchester graffiti is typically not intending to be artistic (per se). Neither, it seems to me, is it intended to identify the artist as much as to be for a particular recipient, (although since it's often inside jokes and other things that people paint, I suppose this necessarily identifies the artist, at least to a few people). Where [everyday graffiti] is a day-to-day part of life, the street painting for graduation is linked to a specific event and is normally undertaken by graduating high school seniors and mostly directed at their friends. It is not a marker for gang territory, true graffiti expression, or the like.

I think the street painting is different from 'regular' tagging and train painting / graffiti in that it sends a super personal message from person to person -- usually with insider language -- there is some general street graffiti like class of '88 etc. but a lot if it trends toward personal.

I definitely see the street paint as different form everyday graffiti because it represents a tradition. Painters kept it to the street, not houses or cars or buses or

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33 Consultant_6, e-mail, 2015.
34 Consultant_5, e-mail, 2015.
35 Consultant_2, e-mail, 2015.
anything and it's always been plain white paint, which I think is rather classy! It makes the streets look better and makes our town incredibly unique.  

In addition to these assertions by residents that the street painting seems to be special, one consultant shared with me that a current city councilman’s sentiments, “He said as long as students paint in front of their houses, it should not be a problem and he believes most police officers do turn a blind eye.”  

Handley graduates recount graduation street painting with a tendency toward affection for the event. Their stories serve to position the tellers in a collectively constructed place in the landscape of memory: the good old days. “It’s something we’ve all always done,” resounded in my consultants’ comments over and over, but my survey of the city’s streets challenge the notion that all includes students living in every ward of Winchester. My friends and I lived primarily in wards 1 and 4—the areas in which the greatest number of street painting incidents still occur. Our memories of the street painting as something we all did were romanticized. This is not unusual, as Foote and Azaryahu note, “Memory is related to the objective notion of “history” but is often a selectively embellished or mythologized version of events, people, and places that serves social or political ends.” Commencement is a significant event in the small town and young people who were there and who participated experienced something meaningful happening in the moment. The actions were romanticized in the lush landscape of memory, but the intention behind the painting or, as Foote and Azaryahu might suggest, the social ends of the actions were to be remembered and to be noticed. It worked; painting the street captures the people’s attention.

36 Consultant_1, e-mail, 2015.
37 Consultant_4, e-mail, 2015.
38 Foote and Azaryahu, “Toward a Geography,” 126.
The *Winchester Star* article about the June 2014 graduation street painting incident included a noticeable shift in vocabulary: *students* who once *painted the streets* are now being called *culprits* who do *graffiti*. Greenhill notes a similar shift in the *Carberry News* account of a Manitoba charivari that ended with the shooting of a participant:

The newspaper rhetoric around the McLaughlin charivari showed some ambivalence. Descriptions like “party,” “fun,” “gay,” “celebration,” and even “escapade” suggested harmlessness, whereas “affair,” “ridiculous demonstration,” “custom out of step with modern civilization,” and “make the night hideous” were more negative.39

Language used in the newspaper’s reporting of the incidents is significant because it is – at least in this case – opinion that stretches throughout the town and possibly into the surrounding area. The words of *The Winchester Star* ostensibly reach into all corners of the city, and so redefining graduates as *culprits* who painted *graffiti* raised alarm for many long-term and lifelong residents who found the concern about the painting unnecessary. Concerns in June of 2014 about the commencement street painting were coming primarily from newer parts of Winchester – those established after 1990. From this, one might consider that the anti-graffiti outcry is actually a *pro*-community sentiment.

It seems reasonable to suppose that newcomers to the city are trying to establish their own traditions in their sections of town – primarily the planned subdivisions. It is possible that graduation sentiments painted in the streets by the high school seniors of the city and assumed to be heritage by long-time denizens, are considered unwanted legacy – not part of the landscape those citizens envisioned for their families when they moved to Winchester. Greenhill’s assertion about the reason for survival of the practice of charivari is similar to the reason for the survival of the street painting during graduation time because, “it not only addresses community

notions of appropriate behavior (unquestioning hospitality, willingness to deal with the unexpected with aplomb, being a good sport, and taking a joke) but because it addresses very real needs.”

In the case of the charivari, the public performance served as a welcome to remind newlyweds of their hometown responsibilities and duties to community. For residents in Winchester’s wards 1 and 4, graduation street painting serves as a public announcement of congratulations for four years of hard work from graduates to graduates and their supporters and acknowledges the contributions by teachers and classmates to the graduates’ successes. As an announcement of accomplishment and appreciation, street painting lodges itself in the landscape of memory; as public performance, it resides publically (albeit, temporarily) on the city’s streets. For those who perceive the street painting as an unwanted legacy, additional factors for not allowing students (perhaps their own children) to paint may stem from socioeconomic factors. A recent *Winchester Star* article outlining proposals for changes to elementary school attendance zones reveals features of the distribution of wealth and equitable access to education in Winchester’s four wards (Fig. 15).

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40 Greenhill, “Make the Night,” 15.

41 Ibid.

Fig. 15. Kevin Olmstead. *Current Attendance and Capacity, Current Attendance Zones*. 2015.

As the map shows, Winchester’s ward 1 has what many would consider a choice elementary school: John Kerr. Under capacity and with the lowest percentage of students taking part in the free and reduced price lunch plans, the elementary school lacks overcrowding and markers of poverty found in the other elementary schools. Additionally, John Kerr Elementary has had the highest test scores out of all four elementary schools for the past three years and is the only elementary school where all teachers meet federal guidelines to be ranked as “highly qualified.” My own experience attending John Kerr reinforces this data, as I recall ample space, low student-to-teacher ratios, and opportunities for enrichment classes during and after school hours. This information suggests that, yet again, ward 1 of Winchester is a great place to grow up. One consultant added that she believes the street painting “is more popular around the school

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and with children of the more privileged.”

When I spoke with additional consultants and heard the refrain that the graduation street painting is just a chance to “let kids be kids” and let them have their moment of rebellion, I began to see that perhaps not all of Winchester’s kids were included in that sentiment.

Sonya Salamon addresses youthful rebellion, unofficially condoned by the local authority, in the “Bunkertown” section of *From Hometown to Nontown: Rural Community Effects of Suburbanization*. In that section, Salamon notes, “not all youth are tolerated as ‘our children.’ No longer are youth equated with the future of the town. Youth behavior historically tolerated…was redefined as deviant.” This, Salamon determines, is the result of the suburbanization of the town. Suburbanization, Salamon writes, creates “priorities for appearances, property values, and the expectation that they [the youth] will leave.” Like Bunkertown, Winchester has undergone suburbanization and with that has come new residents or “outsiders.” Some of these citizens are struggling to determine if street painting poses a threat to the way in which they wish the town to be perceived. Many who move to Winchester don’t know about the street painting until they see it or experience it on the streets in their neighborhoods because there is no written record of the practice. Long-term residents I spoke to expressed a nonchalant approach to the act. Much like Pauline Greenhill’s description of early charivaris, the street painting legacy arose from “symbolic means and purposes”; they were intended to commemorate graduation and to provide a fun, semi-illicit activity in which the

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44 Consultant_4, e-mail, 2015.

45 Salamon, “From Hometown,” 17.

46 Ibid. 16.
town’s high school seniors could participate. However, the city’s unwillingness to document the street painting keeps it cloaked in secrecy. It is an act of legacy passed on by the personal choice of those who choose to be inclusive: from seniors to underclassmen and from resident to resident.

In Winchester, the practice of whisper dealing is not reserved for real estate; traditions or community practices also are shared with newcomers as community members see fit. In this way, upholding a practice such as the graduation street painting without naming the practice in writing anywhere in the city’s official documents is a way for existing residents of the town to maintain the status quo: this is something we’ve always done, and if you disagree with us you’re probably a newcomer or outsider. This sentiment was shared by several of my consultants. One noted:

Painting those streets certainly was a right of passage and also something that seems unique to Winchester. I know my parents, both from Illinois, were horrified. The first time someone painted in front of my house was our freshmen year -- my parents were really angry--but to me this was confirmation that I was accepted and maybe somewhat (just for a minute) cool.  

To consider more carefully the notion of outsider, let us return to Dorothy Noyes and her concept of zombie. Noyes states, “Zombie is represented as external to the system but invasive of it, damaging to it.”49 There are a couple of possibilities of zombie in Winchester. One could be defined as people who paint things other than graduation street painting illegally in the city. They represent a threat to the community – a place of tradition, a location of occasions of heritage. And then there are people who are simply newcomers to the town, unfamiliar with the

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47 Greenhill, “Make the Night,” 3.
48 Consultant_6, e-mail message to author, March 8, 2015.
graduation street painting, or who simply dislike it for reasons of personal taste. Indeed, according to one city council official, “There are people in Winchester who are bothered by the graduation street painting, who think it looks tacky, but those are predominantly newcomers.”

In conversations with consultants, the others, the newcomers reside predominantly in the city’s newer subdivisions.

Willow Lung-Amam states in her work on design reviews and regulations, “In suburban landscapes historically created by practices of racial and ethnic exclusion, such measures often help to sustain and naturalize the privileges of older, established, and most often white residents...” Winchester’s landscape was historically created by practices that reinforce the importance of access to insider knowledge. This conflict is typical of rural towns, as Pauline Greenhill points out, “Rural communities struggle with competing stereotypes; they’re either hotbeds of intrigue or idyllic Edens.”

Private calls between friends sell homes, share locations for prime views of the Apple Blossom Grand Feature Parade, and reveal opportunities to rehome old English boxwoods from departing homeowners to close friends. If you’re “in,” you’ll get a call or you’ll make a call. If you are a newcomer to the town, you are on your own until someone decides you are no longer a stranger. A current city official who is also a Handley graduate stated:

I think there are a lot of people who are new to the town, that probably weren’t from Winchester and don’t appreciate the idea of street painting. I live in one of the newer neighborhoods in Winchester and...I don’t know who called it in, but it would be interesting to find out who did. I just wonder if part of it is people who weren’t here when they were in high school... You just have an influx of people were from outside this area, you know, population growth.

50 Consultant_4, e-mail, 2015.


52 Greenhill, “Make the Night,” 3.

53 Consultant_4, telephone, 2015.
Opportunities to create ordinances to delineate street painting from graffiti in city council meetings have been largely avoided, though the topic has come up for discussion on occasion. As one consultant noted about her own feelings and with regard to comments made to her by a city councilman,

With the heightened race sensitivity that is sweeping closer to Winchester, especially with the recent demonstrations in Baltimore, I do think that any adjustment of code could be misinterpreted as favorable to white people, may give cause for some unrest. [A councilman] said the law cannot say it is okay to for one group of kids to paint the streets and not others. So, if they want to be able to prevent gangs from “tagging” streets, they cannot allow the high school students to do it. ⁵⁴

Yet it seems from stories shared by consultants and reports in the local paper that such inequitable application of the law does, in fact, happen. While high school students go largely untouched for breaking city code, other people who paint the streets find themselves pursued or in trouble with the law. In 2014, shortly after the article about the Handley students “ID’d” as culprits painting the streets – which resulted in no legal action – two additional instances of illegal painting were reported by The Winchester Star. One incident occurred just over two weeks after the report of the graduation street painting. According to the article from June 20, 2014, a local parking garage and the wall of a preschool – both located in the Historic Old Town section of the city – were spray-painted with graffiti.⁵⁵ The images reported varied from obscene words to smiley-faces and stick figure people.⁵⁶ While no one was apprehended immediately, residents were encouraged to contact the Crime Solvers hotline: something the community has

⁵⁴ Consultant_4, e-mail, 2015.


⁵⁶ Ibid.
never been asked to do regarding the graduation street painting. In another article, from November of the same year, graffiti was reported on the side of a restaurant in the recently redeveloped Taylor Hotel site, which is located in the historic Old Town area. There, graffiti in the form of “four swastikas and a strip of black were spray painted on the south side of the building.”57 Again, the individuals responsible were not apprehended, and again local residents were asked to contact Crime Solvers with information.

Street paintings done by graduates who leave their initials and paint in front of their own homes are welcome, or heritage, for some, while those uncomfortable with it mark them as legacy and put up or occasionally report with their problematic nature. Graffiti is strangemaking; the “otherness” of those painting on buildings and parking decks creates a call to action from authorities. Returning to Noyes, they are zombie: “external to the system but invasive of it, damaging to it.”58 This “otherness” becomes exacerbated by those who begin to see correlations between graffiti and gangs. Melissa Boughton, the The Winchester Star journalist who reported the 2014 graduation street painting incident shared how gang activity might have heightened local authorities’ awareness of all illegal painting:

The only thing I can imagine is that graffiti has been a little more prevalent recently. Not just on the streets. I've noticed that there's been a lot of graffiti in garages. Some of it's just initials and names. Some of it's just words that you're not sure if they mean anything. I think at least from the police perspective they're trying to get a handle on crime. Right before I got here a former colleague of mine wrote about gang activity. And there was some graffiti associated with that. You know, I think they're always trying to keep an eye out to see where this graffiti is coming from. If it's more serious than just Handley graduates. The gist that I got when it came to the Handley graduates was that I think they [the police] want to reiterate that they think that's a serious offense and they wanted to warn them.59

57 MelissaBoughton, "Recently opened Cajun Experience is hit by graffiti," The Winchester Star. 2014.
58 Noyes 2014, 83.
CHAPTER 3: SMALL WINCHESTER, BIG VIRGINIA

Nestled in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley between the Blue Ridge Mountains and Allegheny Mountains, Winchester is the seat of Frederick County and rests approximately 75 miles due west of Washington, D.C. Once a largely agrarian town, the city of Winchester has transformed over the centuries into a bedroom community for commuters working in D.C. and nearer, metropolitan northern Virginia cities such as Alexandria. The recently published Strategic Plan for the City of Winchester makes it clear: the governing authority of Winchester wants the town perceived as welcoming, rooted in history, and traditional in nature for young families and those seeking refuge from the hazards of big-city life found a short 90 minute drive away in Washington, DC. 60

This need for a distinction from the city by the town brings to mind Dolores Hayden's Building Suburbia and her chapter about borderlands. Hayden explains, "Borderland residents delighted in natural settings where they could look back at the city they had escaped, yet they savored being close enough to engage with urban life on a regular schedule." 61 The growth in and around Winchester has exerted an impact on the landscape in many ways similar to towns across the US. The heart of the historic town is undergoing extensive repair and renovation, while planned suburban communities have popped up on the periphery, punctuated in the furthermost corners by big box stores such as Target and Wal-Mart.


Frederick County has grown considerably since 1950, which is the time Winchester residents generally suggest the graduation street painting began. Between 1950 and 2014, Winchester’s population only increased from 13,841 to 27,543, while by contrast the surrounding Frederick county area grew from 17,537 to 82,377 residents. Reports about increases of Latino populations in the state and county surrounding Winchester became available in 2000, and shortly thereafter came the publication of articles in two prominent newspapers: Washington Post and New York Times. Published in 2004, both articles described increased gang activity, including graffiti – specifically of Latino or Hispanic gangs – in the Northern Virginia area around Winchester.

A Washington Post article from October of 2004 reported that the FBI had seen an increase in gang activity in the Winchester area: “The Shenandoah Valley and Winchester and Harrisonburg areas report the most Hispanic gang activity…Police reports indicate that Hispanic gang graffiti and gang members have moved into the Shenandoah Valley.”

As Winchester is located in the Shenandoah Valley and is a bedroom community of D.C., many residents take the Washington Post each week and undoubtedly came across that article. A New York Times article by Matthew Brzezinski grabbed readers with its southern Gothic headline: “Hillbangers” and its third paragraph, a single sentence: Her throat had been slashed so violently that her head was

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63 “FBI Update”; Brzezinski, “Hillbangers.”

64 “FBI Update.”
almost completely severed.\textsuperscript{65} The victim was Brenda Paz, a teenager who had been serving as an informant to the FBI and who was a member of the MS-13 gang.\textsuperscript{66}

MS-13, or Mara Salvatrucha, is a gang well known in El Salvador that made its way to Virginia in 2003 or thereabouts.\textsuperscript{67} While gangs find appeal in big cities, the smaller towns possess value, too. Rural police are often initially unfamiliar with gang symbols used in graffiti to communicate claims to territory, and the rural counties surrounding small towns are prime locations for obtaining meth for distribution through national networks.\textsuperscript{68} The problem doesn’t stop with drugs. MS-13 members are notorious for extreme violence, such as the death of Brenda Paz. Add to the drugs and violence the element of encoded images, and this is where graffiti becomes frightening. As Alex Alonso describes in his work on urban graffiti:

Hispanic gang graffiti or the placa, are sometimes extremely stylized, using an elaborate arrangement of letters and colors. The lettering style and iconography problematizes any attempts of interpretation by an outsider…the geographic nature of gang graffiti is also manifested through their writing… The name of the gang gives meaning to a place as an important part of gang identity.\textsuperscript{69} The graffiti for MS-13 features images that are meant to communicate among members of community within the gang while simultaneously announcing the presence of the gang. This presence has been highlighted by statements in the press such as this one from another Washington Post article:

At some point, the average Northern Virginia citizen is going to find it in their quality of life,” said Lt. Greg Smith of the Fairfax County Police Department's gang unit. "We haven't gotten to the point where the average guy can't walk

\textsuperscript{65} Brzezinski, “Hillbangers.”

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{69} Alonso, “Urban Graffiti,” 15.
down the street and feel safe. That's not going to be that way if things continue the way they are.  

The previous newspaper articles and others suggest a relationship between Latino populations and gang activity. Raymond Williams’ notion of emergent elements, suggests a consideration of graffiti as an attempt to create “new practices, new relationships, and kinds of relationships…that are substantially alternative or oppositional” to the normative culture of Winchester.  

As new people take their place in and around the Winchester, those who are affiliated with gangs may use alternative channels of communication that work for them but not for the existing residents of the city. As such, some residents may see their communication (in this case, graffiti) as connected to completely different forms of “otherness”: in this case, the presence of a growing Latino population. However, it is important to be clear that none of my consultants suggested any correlation between the presence of Latino residents living in Winchester and gang activity or graffiti. Many consultants described a general knowledge of the presence of Latino residents as distinct from gang activity, “I am not aware of any concerns about gangs as related to the Latino residents, though I am aware of the growth of the Latino population in NoVa.”  

One consultant described his consideration of the residents in terms of their agency within the town:

The Hispanic population keeps to itself and quiet. The biggest impact of their moving into the area has been on the school system, where ESOL is now some 30 percent. Also, they are mostly in the Quarles and VA Avenue [elementary school] districts, which are less economically vocal.  


71 Williams, “Marxism and Literature,” 123.  

72 Consultant_7, e-mail, 2015.  

73 Consultant_5, e-mail, 2015.
Graffiti brings to the surface De Certeau’s notion of a city that runs below the one we see, “spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life …they weave together places they spatialize.”74 Thus, accounts of gangs’ public performances of graffiti create the opportunity in the space of an “other” Winchester in opposition to the dominant culture in the town. A return to the statistics about growth in Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley as well as a review of Alonzo’s work, reminds us that graffiti is often the work of newcomers to the area. As Alonzo writes, “These claimed territories serve as an important component to the sense of identity for the subjects (Entrikin 1991, 302), and in this case the subject being the gang, the turf as territory serves as a critical place where identities and representations form.”75 My consultants were clear that they did not see any connection between the graffiti in Winchester and the commencement street painting:

“Regular" graffiti locates the artist in a particular place, but that location is fluid, changing. Winchester street painting, since it so often happens in front of someone's house, doesn't have the same nomadic quality, nor is it about claiming space (as I think regular graffiti is sometimes).76

I don’t think [graduation street painting] indicates a creep of gang violence, as the tradition was in place well before gangs were mentioned in Winchester. However, I do think some people who don’t understand it might interpret it as so.77

Many graffiti images are complex and they invite a curiosity and need to control through understanding, as Deborah Kapchan states in her chapter on performance, “Transforming a performance into text available for analysis involves its objectification. As objects,
performances can be studied, interpreted and, in an illusory sort of way, controlled.”\(^{78}\) When messages in graffiti are saturated with images purportedly indicative of gang presence – as the articles in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* reported – one can understand an attempt by authorities to regain a sense of order.

The rise in gang activity in the Shenandoah Valley and surrounding area in the early 2000s eventually led to the development of the Northwest Virginia Regional Gang Task Force. Developed and funded by the United States Justice Department in 2008, the project authorized $537,000 for use by the Frederick County Sherriff’s Office (in Winchester) “to focus on eradicating gang violence in the counties of Frederick, Warren…the City of Winchester, and the Town of Front Royal.”\(^{79}\) In the year following the development of the task force, reports of graffiti became more prevalent in articles in Winchester’s hometown paper, *The Winchester Star*. They started with a disturbing incident at the town’s only synagogue, Beth-El Congregation.

In the early hours of December 12, 2009, members of Winchester’s Beth El Congregation discovered swastikas and the phrase “Hail (sic) Hitler” painted on various places throughout their synagogue’s property.\(^{80}\) Shortly thereafter, on March 21, 2010, an article in *The Northern Virginia Daily* indicated that faith leaders and area activists would be joining together in March of 2010 to host “Community United Against Anti-Semitism and Racism,” an interfaith vigil and speaker series event at Shenandoah University in Winchester.\(^{81}\) The article reported Beth El’s rabbi as stating that he wanted the vigil to create opportunity for thoughts: “One is the awareness

\(^{78}\) Kapchan, “Performance,” 122.


these nasty things do happen here."\(^{82}\) While many lauded the positive approach to a potentially charged and dividing event taken by the Beth El Congregation and supporting community groups, some people felt the graffiti indicated the gang situation was getting far out of control, and the community was asked to call the Crime Solvers number with any information about the graffiti.

In January of 2012, *The Winchester Star* reported the presence of graffiti in connection to “gang-style street attacks."\(^{83}\) The article noted that in the final week of December 2011, there had been “19 reported incidences of tagging, or graffiti, in or near downtown Winchester that were in the traditional signature of The Bloods."\(^{84}\) This report also included interviews with representatives of the Northwest Virginia Regional Gang Task Force and the Winchester police department, both of who were unwilling to connect the graffiti to the attacks, but clearly made the suggestion that the possibility was there. Again, the community was asked to help via the Crime Solvers hotline, and again, though the police were actively looking for those involved, there were no arrests.

The origins of the graffiti on the synagogue and in various locations in downtown Winchester remain mysterious. While the concerns about possible hate groups or gangs have been raised, the consultants I spoke with seemed largely unconcerned about the presence of either in Winchester.

The Beth-El incident was woefully handled by authorities and not brought to the attention of the community enough (I think)-- it could have been used as a moment

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\(^{82}\) Bridges, “Congregation will fight,” 2010.


\(^{84}\) Ibid.
of education since the incident was blamed on kids just being 'mischievous' and not on anyone being willfully anti-Semitic.\textsuperscript{85}

I don't really think graffiti represents the creep of gang presence. I think they are likely isolated. I find some of the language around graffiti and the fear of it to be super racist.\textsuperscript{86}

I don't really think that graffiti in Winchester leads to any sort of gang related activity. It's Winchester, not New York City.\textsuperscript{87}

Nonetheless, during the same year as the formation of the Northwest Regional Gang Task Force, the City of Winchester decided it was time to address its graffiti problems through the city's code. A glance at select language in the Winchester City Code Section 11-1 about graffiti (passed in 2008, readopted in 2011) underscores the authorities’ notions about the practice:

The existence of graffiti within the city limits of the City, as defined within this chapter, is declared by Common Council to be obnoxious and a public and private nuisance and must be quickly abated to avoid the detrimental impact of such graffiti on the City and its residents, business owners, and visitors, and to prevent the further spread of such graffiti.\textsuperscript{88}

Scanning this paragraph, we quickly see words meant to impress upon the reader the danger of graffiti. Graffiti is obnoxious, a nuisance that has a detrimental impact. These call to mind terms used to describe the “McMansions” in Willow Lung-Amam’s article: tackiness and “the epitome of public rudeness” that “tend to diminish a neighborhood’s sense of character, identity, history, and community.”\textsuperscript{89} Shortly thereafter, the graffiti abatement was adopted, and

\textsuperscript{85} Consultant_2, e-mail, 2014.

\textsuperscript{86} Consultant_7, e-mail, 2015.

\textsuperscript{87} Consultant_1, e-mail, 2015.


\textsuperscript{89} Lung-Amam, “That Monster House,” 222.
one might suppose, for a moment, that Winchester was on top of its game. The graffiti abatement was in place, a task force was under development, and local officials were becoming aware of what to look out for in terms of gang imagery and behavior. Those same authorities searching to understand how to manage graffiti faced a dilemma about what to call the painting on familiar streets created by Winchester’s graduating teenagers.

Stewart Masters, one of the councilmen serving on city council during the time of a proposed graffiti ordinance in 2008, stated that he believed the ordinance would be too restrictive and would impact the commencement street painting. In minutes from that meeting, Masters is noted as expressing his concern to the council:

Councilor Masters stated he supports graffiti abatement but he thinks Council and the city need to be aware of what this means if we pass it. This ordinance states graffiti on public or private property. The end of a tradition is about to happen tonight because the kids who paint all over this town with their graduation paints is technically defacing the streets. What would have to be done tomorrow is to start painting over everyone’s signs. If this ordinance didn’t state that, it would not be the case. But, it says it is public property and we have to remove it in 5 days. It makes no distinction about “wink, wink, we will overlook this”. It says we are going to ask the private property owner to remove it in 5 days and he would expect the City of Winchester would do the same. He is going to support it but he wished there was someone in the private sector that would come forward with a large parking lot and allow youngsters to still practice a tradition that they have for a number of years. With the way this is stated, we will be bound to take care of that.  

Later, in the same notes from the 2008 City council meeting, the council president and another council member distinguished between two types of street painting in the city:

President Gaynor stated we also have the Apple Blossom Festival painting apple blossoms in the street and suggested an amendment for the exception of roadways. Councilor Coyne stated the difference is the blossoms are put on with the city’s consent. The city puts them on there. The 2008’s and other school years are put on necessarily without the City’s consent and that’s the definition of graffiti. He

90 “Minutes of the Common,” 10.
thinks the blooms are okay but other forms of graffiti might not be. It’s not done with the consent of the city. President Gaynor stated he understands what Councilor Masters is saying and there is a tradition there too. Hopefully, the people enforcing this will have enough common sense to respect some things.  

The ordinance passed, and regulations regarding graffiti now reside in Chapter 11 of Winchester’s municipal code. It is important to pay close attention to two key details of the ordinance: the council’s definition of graffiti and the responsibility assumed by the city for its removal. First, observe the definition:

Graffiti shall mean writings, drawings, inscriptions, figures or marks of paint, ink, chisel, chalk, dye and other similar substance, or flyers, bills and similar materials, which have been placed on public or private property without the permission of the owner, manager or occupant of the property.

If graffiti, as defined above, is observed in the city, the Zoning and Inspections Administrator is supposed to take the following steps:

The Zoning & Inspections Administrator shall give, or cause to be given, written notice to remove or effectively obscure such graffiti to the owner of the property… Such notice shall direct the recipient to remove or effectively obscure such graffiti within five (5) days of the date of the notice as provided in this chapter for occupied buildings, and within fifteen (15) days for unoccupied buildings.

Yet the city currently has a situation where authorities are being asked to enforce the ordinance and must do so in keeping with “the common sense to respect some things.” Some residents in Winchester consider graduation street painting a performance of heritage. As Noyes notes in her discussion about heritage, “Heritage creates an enclave. Heritage is framed and

91 “Minutes of the Council,” 11.
93 City of Winchester, “Chapter 11.1,” 2.
Masters expressed extreme concern about such an enclave:

That's where the law breaks down. It's a gray area, and if you happen to... I'm concerned about that remark. Either state it, put it in the rules or... Don't say, "Well, we know all the police. The police are going to know who you are."95

Charlie Gaynor observed legacy trouble with the proposed ordinance regarding the graduation street painting:

When I was on city Council you had people, oh, the innocent ones some people who were complaining, calling it “graffiti.” But they also had lived here and so you—and of course I got my history lesson quick—learned that it was kind of an acceptable thing. Nobody really complained about. So when it came up before Council, I didn't support it. They were willing to— to use a harsh word— "outlaw it."96

Gaynor continued, expressing concern that the ordinance was enforced without students being caught in the act:

You know I think it's one of those things we are trying to ignore. Don't let us see it-- I have an idea that's it. If I don't catch you doing it, and it's not offensive than I might look the other way. On the other hand, if I catch you doing it, I'm gonna have to do something.97

As Noyes wrote, “Legacy…has to be made to work but is marked as a problem.” To get around this problem, Winchester officials and citizens employ the “wink, wink, we will overlook this” approach. As we met for a coffee in Winchester in autumn of 2014, Masters described himself as

95 Masters, interview, 2014.
96 Gaynor, interview, 2014.
97 Ibid.
something of a “black sheep” on the council, stirring up trouble by asking for the language in the ordinance to be considered more carefully.

Upon reflection, Masters said that when he came to realize the language of the original graffiti ordinance was broad enough to encompass the graduation street painting, it caused him concern: “If you were going to say graffiti then everything is graffiti. If you’re going to say everything but what the kids write on the street, then put it in your ordinance, and make it that way.”

I posed the question to Masters if he thought such language could be put into the ordinance or an amendment to the ordinance. He replied, “Anything is possible. You have to have an obliging council and an obliging citizenry.”

Master’s additional concern is that the enforcement of the ordinance in regards to the street painting is that the students who were apprehended in June 2014 were singled out because their initials were used. As he pointed out, it would be simple to get another student in trouble just by painting his or her initials in the street. He does not feel this is the way to enforce this ordinance; he believes if it is to be enforced that students must be caught in the act. My 2014 graduate consultant felt similarly about the possibility of being entrapped by the language of the city’s code:

I can understand that technically this is illegal, but if we were getting in trouble for it then it would only have been fair if all the previous people that painted got in trouble as well. They also had zero proof that it actually was us. Yes, our initials were there but someone else could have painted them there. You could still see the initials of the 2011 graduates and the fact that we were being asked to cover up our paint and they weren't was incredibly unfair to me. I have encouraged this years graduating class to go ahead and paint. It's something anyone in Winchester looks forward to growing up and I would hate to see the tradition diminish. I was the senior class president so obviously we aren't a bunch of delinquents running around tagging the streets and causing trouble. I think it's

98 Masters, interview, 2014.

99 Ibid.
one of the things that make Handley special and I would love to be able to come back in 30 years and see street paint to show my kids and generations to come.\textsuperscript{100}

My consultant informed me that the students who participated in the 2014 painting preempted the police by having their parents contact authorities and negotiating what the students were willing to do in exchange for clemency: they painted over the letters as suggested but in black and in broad daylight for all to see. One might find a sense of wit in the students’ actions. Their painting was doubly present; their place in the landscape was reinforced rather than erased.

Winchester will continue to grow, new people (“outsiders”) will continue to arrive, and the town is reaching a point where rules about street painting can no longer simply be silently understood among insiders. The challenge for Winchester residents, should they choose to pursue these discussions, will be to determine how to find a solution without, as Lung-Amam puts it, “…putting in place design standards, guidelines, and review processes that reinforce dominant norms about the proper or desirable form and function of a home and neighborhood.”\textsuperscript{101} The government officials of Winchester are torn; they don’t want to become or appear biased toward any one group of citizens. They are unwilling to make an exception to a city ordinance to legalize the street painting for JHHS graduates. And yet, despite the events of last year and a few minor brushes with the law by graduates in years past, the discussion has settled unofficially on allowing the street painting to continue in a “wink-wink” sort of way. If the city doesn’t write it into the code that graduation street painting is legal, then the arrest of students is still possible, but 50+ years of the practice suggest it is unlikely that any serious

\textsuperscript{100} Consultant_1, e-mail, 2015.

\textsuperscript{101} Lung-Amam, “That Monster House,” 223.
repercussions or prosecution will occur. While refusing to legalize the graduation street painting prevents governing officials from appearing to favor one demographic group over another, declining to enforce the city’s graffiti ordinance when JHHS graduates paint the street actually highlights the notion that a group of people in Winchester is entitled to special treatment.
CHAPTER 3: ON THE STREET OR IN THE CAN?

In his chapter, “Walking in the City,” from *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau observed that, "The desire to see the city preceded the means of satisfying it. Medieval or Renaissance painters represented the city as seen in a perspective that I had yet enjoyed."¹⁰² Many small towns project a kind of tradition-steeped history that is inviting to some, but excludes others. A community allows newcomers in only so far as they are welcomed or can interpret the signifiers of the community’s traditions. Perhaps herein lies a key to this dilemma. If newcomers to Winchester see the street painting as legacy vandalism while established residents see it as a rite of heritage commemorated in the landscape until the next repaving or destruction by elements, then the problem is one of communication.

The graduation graffiti painted on the streets of Winchester has never been officially condoned, though it has been an understood (by a privileged group) practice for over half a century. Winchester’s Strategic Plan for years 2013-2028 declares, “engaging our community” to be a principal mission, including the first step: “maintaining an open and transparent City government.”¹⁰³ If commencement street painting were to be discussed openly, in a series of community town hall meetings for example, then perhaps that transparency could lead to compromise. As Don Mitchell points out in his discussion of George Henderson’s work on landscape and social justice, “beneath the dreamwork and groundwork of empire lies a very different relationship between people and their landscape, one that is never fully repressed: there

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¹⁰³ “Strategic Plan,” 5.
is a struggle for landscape, and it is at the same time the struggle for justice.”\textsuperscript{104} Mitchell continues later to note that landscape can be “a concretization and maker of memory.”\textsuperscript{105} For some residents, commencement street painting perhaps calls to mind outside threats to their city, disagrees with their vision of how their streets should look, or challenges how they want folks in other cities to perceive life in Winchester. If people moving into Winchester want to create unique expressions of heritage or to challenge existing legacies different from the graduation street painting, then a truly “open and transparent City government” should convene to find a way to address these concerns while also meeting the needs of existing residents. As Lung-Amam writes, “Instead of obliging new residents to adopt the dominant design and practices, norms, and values of established suburban development, more equitable planning and design might instead search out better ways to allow diverse spatial values, meanings and forms to coexist.”\textsuperscript{106}

When an expressive practice that is locally understood, undocumented, and simply taken for granted by long-time locals as an event in the town’s landscape is challenged by disapproval and rejection from “other” citizens, a town is tested. The passage of time in Winchester has become strange making; citizens are unfamiliar to one another, no longer the same we of “it’s just something we do.” Meanwhile, local police are still officially tasked with telling teenagers they cannot paint in the streets to declare through brushes and buckets, “Don’t forget us!” while providing a welcoming environment for those who would rather keep the paint in the can.

\textsuperscript{104} Don Mitchell, "Cultural landscapes: just landscapes or landscapes of justice?" \textit{Progress in Human Geography} 27, no. 3 (2003): 788.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid. 790.

\textsuperscript{106} Lung-Amam, “That Monster House,” 239.
APPENDIX


5. ETC Institute. 2014. *Responses to Q21: What is your approximate annual household income?*

6. Riley, Danielle. 2014. *Instances of graduation street painting in Winchester, VA*.

7. Riley, Danielle. 2014. *Voting precincts, also called “wards” in Winchester, VA*.

8. ETC Institute. 2014. *Q17a: Rating of Winchester as a Place to Live*.

9. ETC Institute. 2014. *Q17c: Rating of Winchester as a Place to Raise Children*.


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