

Breaking Laws and Burning Bridges

A DIY Contemporary Archaeology
of the East Side Railroad Tunnel and
Crook Point Bascule Bridge

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Undergraduate Honors Thesis
in Archaeology and the Ancient World

Submitted April 2022

Acknowledgments

It is impossible to overstate how much I have relied on the people around me in order to complete this thesis. Without the help of my mentors, friends, and loved ones, I would never have been able to write a single word that you will read within this work.

I would first like to thank Yannis Hamilakis for advising this thesis, for inspiring me to go into archaeology, and for supporting me throughout my undergraduate career. I would also like to thank Lauren Yapp for all her amazing feedback, reading recommendations, and kind words.

I would like to thank Ingrid Mader, Kaita Igarashi, Sergio Ruiz, and Micah Selengut for accompanying me to the Tunnel. Without them, I wouldn't have been able to go to the Tunnel nearly as often as I have.

I would like to thank Kelley Tackett for providing the amazing title for this thesis, for selflessly offering her guidance and encouragement, for joining me in my iconoclastic endeavors, and for being a wonderful friend. Footnote 37 is dedicated to her.

I would like to thank Allison Graham for her undying support. Without her, I don't know where I would be. I would certainly not have been able to complete this while maintaining my sanity 💖💖💖

I would like to thank Rose Weinbaum, Ava Schully, Rebecca Kirby, and Micah Selengut for being the best pod-mates I could ever ask for and for throwing the greatest 5-person parties I have ever been to.

I would like to thank everyone in Decolonization at Brown, who have shaped how I view the world, given me countless exciting opportunities, and become some of my closest friends.

I would like to thank Laurel Bestock for all of her advice and guidance, especially during the chaos of the pandemic. I would also like to thank her for letting me store my things at her house, and I definitely owe her a beer.

I would like to thank Sarah Sharpe, Felipe Rojas, and the rest of the Joukowsky Institute for providing me with an environment that encouraged experimentation, academic rigor, and personal growth.

I would like to thank my parents and Jesse, who have shaped my entire worldview, and who have supported me throughout this process. They have certainly heard me talk about this thesis enough to deserve a thank you.

Finally, I would like to give a shout out to all the graff writers of Providence, without whom this would not have been possible: GYER (RIP), DEAD ZEST, RESTO, SPEAK, DELUXE, MUSH, GRIME, ROTGUT, HYZE, ASSCAR, SLOE, TERNS, SEAZ, RIOT, GESER, REAK, HISTO, HORNY, APPLE, SHEN, SIEP, FATHER, POTION, to!, PIZA, NEZ, KOSMONAUT, BYSON, LOV, ICOE, TEMPL, the CLOUD 9 crew, the TLC crew, and many more.

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Introduction

Archaeology is in peril. It is no secret that it is a chronically underfunded discipline, at least in the US and UK. Austerity measures have cut funding for archaeology (and the liberal arts as a whole) at seemingly every economic recession. Even the few high-paying academic jobs that do exist are paid on a scale equivalent to entry-level STEM positions, and many people with master or doctorate degrees are forced to work for starvation wages, often less than \$15/hr. This exaggerates underlying inequalities, as only those with outside funds or few financial responsibilities are able to remain in the field.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this problem. Many, if not most, field schools and projects have been postponed or outright canceled.¹ Even after excavations resume, we will still be dealing with the effects of the pandemic for many years. According to UNESCO, 43% of museums faced closures in the first quarter of 2021, and many are in danger of permanent closure.² The pandemic has also been used as an excuse to further cut funding in the liberal arts, and some archaeology institutions have been completely abolished: the closure of the archaeology department at the University of Sheffield, for example.³

There is no end in sight for archaeologists. I remain optimistic that we can collectively transform the discipline to demand adequate pay for the

¹ There is an ongoing boom in CRM work, a result of construction resuming after projects were postponed due to the pandemic. This presents a unique opportunity for workers to exercise their collective bargaining power. However, it is unclear if this will happen, and it is likely that we will return to a similar situation within the next decade.

² "UNESCO Report: Museums around the World in the Face of COVID-19 - UNESCO Digital Library." n.d. Accessed March 9, 2022. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000376729_eng. See page 4.

³ Mattei, Shanti Escalante-De. 2021. "University of Sheffield to Close Archaeology Department Despite Protests." *ARTnews.Com* (blog). July 20, 2021. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/university-sheffield-archaeology-close-1234599254/>.

labor of archaeologists and community members, as well as tools and new technologies. But it is clear that we will have to operate under these conditions of austerity for the foreseeable future. If we believe that archaeology is worth doing (and I do),⁴ how can we ensure that it is being done regardless of institutional support? What does an archaeology outside or at the margins of the institution look like?

In the Summer of 2021, I was forced to answer these questions for myself. It had been over a year since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the second summer that field school had been canceled. I was entering my fourth year of studying archaeology, and I had still not gone through that rite of passage that is expected of all young archaeologists: excavation. This made me feel like a fraud; someone masquerading as an archaeologist, a glorified fan.

To fill this gap, I felt that I had to do archaeology myself. With no funding and no clear goal, but with the support of my friends and mentors, I began to look for a project to do. First, I needed a site. It was clear that travel was out of the question; I would have to explore a ruin that existed in my own life.

Every day, I walked around College Hill.⁵ Occasionally I would bike or scooter. I didn't have anywhere to go; instead, I let my curiosity carry me through the urban landscape. I first noticed the obvious things: monuments, memorials, historic buildings, and plaques. Providence is seemingly inundated with these things, with a "historic" house on nearly every street and dozens of memorials within walking distance of each other. Quickly, it

⁴ This is not a trivial claim. Archaeology certainly shouldn't be performed just for the sake of doing archaeology. However, it is clear that there have been many politically useful and culturally significant developments to come out of the field. This question deserves much more attention though, and is something that every archaeologist should ask themselves.

⁵ a neighborhood in Providence, RI surrounding Brown University

felt as if I had seen it all, that there wasn't anything left to learn from these official presentations of history.

So, my attention turned to the less obvious; I began to venture away from the main paths, and to take the time to look at graffiti. I had previously just lumped it all in together. If a trash can had graffiti on it, it was a trash can with graffiti on it, distinct from pristine trash cans but not from other graffiti-covered trash cans. Now, I was looking at the individual tags. Certain names popped up again and again. I vividly remember searching for the tag "GRIME" on every dumpster or traffic cone I passed, a sort of "Where's Waldo"⁶ in the urban landscape. As I became more and more familiar with the graffiti scene in Providence, I ventured further and further away from the well-defined paths. I eventually stumbled upon two sites, and became enamored: the Crook Point Bascule Bridge and the East Side Railroad Tunnel, both located on the East Side of Providence, Rhode Island

Both the Bridge and the Tunnel were constructed as part of the East Side Railroad project in 1908. They were used as part of the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad⁷ until 1976, although they saw comparatively little use after a large hurricane damaged buildings and rail lines in 1938. When the rail line was closed in 1976, the Bridge was "stuck up", about 100 meters straight into the air. It had originally been designed to do this in order to allow ships to pass underneath, and it is virtually impossible that it would ever spontaneously fall back down, owing to its

⁶ *Where's Waldo?* is a children's book series by Martin Handford, in which the readers are asked to find the titular Waldo amongst a sea of similar-looking characters and backgrounds. It is called *Where's Wally?* in the UK, where it was first published.

⁷ also referred to as the NY-NH-H Railroad or simply New Haven Railroad

design.⁸ So, it remains in this position, a highly visible landmark in the urban landscape of Providence. It is visible beyond its physical structure, however, and it is commonly seen on postcards, logos, and stickers, a way of symbolizing the post-industrial nature of Providence.

In addition to its status as a symbol, the Bridge has also become a central location for graffiti in Providence. It is particularly well suited to this type of art; it has many surfaces to write on, and is extremely visible. So far, the state of Rhode Island, who owns the bridge, has not shown an interest in buffing the graffiti (a term for removing graffiti through a variety of methods, including pressure washing, chemical treatments, and re-painting).

Beyond graffiti, the Bridge has also become a place for thrill-seekers and urban explorers. Until recently, there was a swing mounted at the very top, and it was a point of pride if you had climbed all the way and swung on it. It was a part of the urban mythos of Providence. This ended on June 29, 2021, when the bridge burst into flames.⁹ The fire was assumed to be arson, and a large chain link fence with barbed wire and security cameras was installed in order to deter people from venturing onto the bridge. However, it is still possible to evade detection and illicitly explore the landmark, and a select few people do. I am not one of them, which has unfortunately made my study of the Bridge much more limited than my study of the Tunnel.

⁸ This mechanism is what makes it a bascule bridge. Similar bridges have been decommissioned all around the country, each making a notable impact on their city's skyline. One notable example is Cleveland, Ohio, which has several of these decommissioned bridges. See Railroad Street. 2022. *Cleveland's Abandoned Railroad Bascule Bridges*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4yVpVcO1bc>.

⁹ "Fire Ignites Providence's Crook Point Bridge." 2021. *WPRI.Com* (blog). June 30, 2021. <https://www.wpri.com/news/local-news/providence/crews-battling-fire-on-providences-crook-point-bridge/>.

The Eastside Railroad Tunnel is located only a couple minute's walk from the Bridge, along the same rail line. Its story follows the same general trajectory. It was also closed in 1976 and has since become a place for urban explorers and graffiti artists, although it is considerably less popular than the Bridge. It was sealed shut following an incident on the night of May 1, 1993, when college students who were celebrating Beltane May Day in the Tunnel had a confrontation with police which turned violent. Afterwards, the police claimed that they had encountered "Satanic Rituals," and the Tunnel was sealed shut with large steel barriers at either end, although with access doors left open. Eventually, all entrances were welded shut in order to stop continued "trespassing" by graffiti artists, urban explorers, and punks.^{10,11} An entrance was later illicitly cut into the eastern steel barrier with an angle grinder in early 2011. The city has sporadically welded pieces of rebar to block this entrance, but they never remain in place for long. This is the only entrance to the tunnel that remains open to this day; the western steel barrier is now surrounded by a high-class parking lot and is therefore coincidentally guarded almost 24/7.

¹⁰ "East Side Train Tunnel." n.d. ArtInRuins. Accessed March 10, 2022.
<https://artinruins.com/property/east-side-train-tunnel/>.

¹¹ See "Riots and Arson" in chapter 3 for more information on this incident.



Crook Point Bascule Bridge



Eastern Tunnel Entrance



Fence Guarding the Crook Point Bridge

When I encountered these sites, they felt like a world apart, a place that only I knew about. When I entered the Tunnel, I felt a part of a group of people who did not conform to the expectations that society had laid out. It was a way to express my own dissatisfaction with my situation, with society, and myself. It was an act of rebellion. I quickly fell in love, and visited the sites at least once a week all summer long. This was archaeology on only a surface level. I felt more like a voyeur than an archaeologist, looking at the site only out of a shallow curiosity. This felt incomplete. I wanted to go deeper, to learn more about the sites. But, if I wanted to do this, I would have to DIY my own archaeology.

The DIY nature of this thesis is a product of its circumstances. The lack of funding and extremely aggressive timescale of the project (10 months) meant that I constantly had to make decisions as to what the most

important aspects to study were. It was a process of continuous reevaluation; I was unsure what the final product would even look like until halfway through. In every one of these decisions, I did the archaeology that I wanted to do, prioritizing the things that gave me joy, that energized me. I followed my own politics and curiosity throughout the project, for better or worse.

In this way, my DIY archaeology has inherited the fragmented, messy, and liberating aspects of punk archaeology. This is not by design. Instead, it is a result of its circumstances, a natural result of the limitations that I have faced. In other words, it has produced the type of DIY punk archaeology that Andrew Reinhard describes:

archaeology-on-a-shoestring (working on the cheap, crowd funding, self-funding to do the work that non-profits, charity organizations, and large foundations don't want to be bothered with) ... lack of funding and resources forces the Punk public archaeologist to be creative, to take advantage of free online tools, and to leverage print and social media at will".¹²

Doing archaeology without the support of institutions necessitates making compromises. There is so much still to learn at the Tunnel, and it is easy to imagine a long-term, formal, and well funded project. But this perfect archaeology is, at the moment, just a dream.

Then what is the point of this? Throughout my life, I (like many queer people) have planned for a future that may not exist, but one that is necessary to imagine. I conceptualize my DIY archaeology in a similar way. It has been necessary to dream beyond the limitations of the project, to

¹² personal communication by Andrew Reinhard via Richardson, Lorna-Jane. 2017. "I'll Give You 'Punk Archaeology', Sunshine." *World Archaeology* 49 (3): 306–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2017.1333036>. See page 308 for quote.

imagine that I will suddenly have a wealth of resources and time to finish all the side projects that I have started, or that some future researcher will find this paper and continue research on the Tunnel. This project should not be thought of as an unsatisfactory analysis of the Tunnel, but rather as the beginning of a holistic, engaged, and self-reflective project that may or may not ever occur.

This thesis has two goals: to do DIY archaeology, and to study the DIY archaeology that I am performing. These goals are reflected in the title: “Breaking Laws and Burning Bridges”. “Breaking Laws” alludes to my own breaking the ‘laws’ of academic archaeology, as well as the illicit nature of graffiti and other activities at the sites, especially the Tunnel. “Burning Bridges” refers to the alienation of this DIY archaeology from the standard structures of academic archaeology as well as to the Summer 2021 arson. The title refers both to the sites themselves and to the process of doing the project.

Chapter 1, “Under Providence”, is a photo-essay, titled after a piece of graffiti that is located in the Tunnel. It seeks to recreate the in-situ experience of being at the Tunnel, although with the limitations that come with its being a static, visual medium. Its goal is to foster the same intimacy with the site that I have gained over the course of this project, and to pique curiosity about the aspects of the Tunnel that I have not been able to cover throughout the rest of the thesis.

Chapter 2, “DIY Archaeology”, delves deeper into the idea of DIY archaeology. In particular, it explores the ways in which other people have done their own DIY archaeologies at the Tunnel. Often, this is called Urban

Exploration, but it is in fact a type of archaeology, a way of studying the ruins that exist in their everyday lives.

Chapter 3, “At the Margins”, explores the various ways I have attempted to understand the site, and the findings that it has produced. I argue that these sites are marginal, a part of the urban landscape yet cast to the periphery. “Riots and Arson” discusses several historical moments in which the broader community has become aware of the sites, and the response following the events. “Fuck nazis” is about the ways in which neo-nazis take advantage of the freedom that the Tunnel’s marginal status provides, and my response to their graffiti. “The Graff Life” discusses my attempts to understand the graffiti at the site by performing digital ethnography and experimental archaeology.

Chapter 4, “Follow Your Nose”, discusses the scent-scape at the Tunnel, as well as my semi-successful attempts to capture, transport, and preserve these smells.

The conclusion, “Fragments and Futures”, provides a list of project ideas and avenues for research that will hopefully be pursued in the future. This is a reflection of the inherent incompleteness of the project.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who has supported me, and to draw special attention to the Acknowledgments sections. I could not have done this without the help and support of my family, friends, and mentors.

Let’s do this.

Chapter 1: Under Providence



I clamor down the leaf-covered hillside. The sound of cars passing by on the nearby street begins to fade away. It's a warm August day, and a hot stench fills my nostrils; rotted wood and leaves, petrochemicals, mud, feces, and stagnant water. Every sense is telling me to leave. I approach the mouth of the Tunnel, and cautiously step on the fragile walkway. It's made of rotten doors, shipping palettes, and mattresses, the result of decades of gradual construction. At each step, they sink into the soft mud below; wood snaps, mud squelches. I carefully make my way to the entrance, in constant danger of my feet getting stuck in a muddy slurry, filled with industrial waste and freezing cold even in the summer.

The entrance to the Tunnel is much smaller than I expected. I remove my backpack, and turn on the cheap headlamp that I typically use for biking at night. I contort my body to fit through the entryway, and step onto the narrow railroad tie that was probably placed there before I was born. Tripping here means falling into three feet of polluted, murky water, something I'd like to avoid. I'd like to take a look around, but I'm too busy trying to get out of this precarious situation. I balance on the pathway, stepping on railway ties, plywood, doors, planks, cinder blocks, and overturned buckets. The path is partially submerged; my boots quickly fill with water. My eyes adjust to the new darkness, and I see a message, an introduction to the Tunnel.



It feels like I don't belong here. But I am used to that at this point.







I begin to notice that this Tunnel is far from abandoned. Of course, I see graffiti; that's why I bothered to come here in the first place. But there's also a lot of... stuff here; things that would have been very difficult to bring in: Broken tv's, DIY construction, beer bottles, paint cans.

Numbers start appearing. [14](#), [88](#), and [131](#) are hastily scrawled, sometimes on top of existing graffiti. I recognize these as racist dog whistles, numbers that are innocent on their own but embedded with racist meanings. They are deliberately vague, often confused with dates or area codes. Deeper in the Tunnel, the symbols become more and more explicit. By the end, swastikas and truly vile phrases become common. Later, I went back and covered these messages of hate.



As I begin to walk down the abandoned train tracks, I immediately come across a memorial. I didn't know it at the time, but [Gyer](#) (real name Max Bready) was extremely prolific, with notable tags all over the United States. He got his start in Providence, and his old pieces are found throughout the Tunnel. He passed away in 2019. Since then, the Tunnel has become a living memorial, a place where people come to honor his work and his friends come to remember him. This type of memorial graffiti is common in the Tunnel, not only to Gyer but also to other young people who have passed away, like [Alan Gottesman](#).







Near the ends of the Tunnel, sound reflects off of the metal barrier, making each and every sound echo. It distorts the sounds of my boots splashing in the water, crunching on gravel. It overwhelms me. It makes it difficult to think, and I forget to take the time to look around. As I walk further and further, the cacophony becomes muted.

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By this point, the air has become completely still. It feels as if I just walked into a fridge. The condensation from my breath blocks my vision. I hold my breath as I take photos.

Unfamiliar scents fill my nostrils. I recognize the smells of rust, dirt, smoke, petroleum. But there's also a sour smell to it. It's as if I'm swimming in it. It's hard to breathe.

Luckily, I have a mask with me. I put it on and continue down the tracks.

Curious, I turn off my lights, and look towards the entrance. It has become a small speck of light at the end of the Tunnel.

Thank god I have a headlamp.







Splashes of red appear out of the darkness. A clothesline perhaps, or maybe some old construction flags. As I get closer, I see the deflated balloons, accompanied by small LED lights. Someone clearly put a lot of effort into it. I turn off the headlamp again, and can see the faintest glimmers of light coming from the dying bulbs.



I feel a cold, wet drip on the back of my neck. I had been hearing the sound of trickling water for a while, but now I know where it's coming from. In only 50 years, these drips have formed stalagmites and other mineral accretions which wouldn't look out of place in a natural cave.





The remnants of parties. Blunt wrappers, smashed tvs, and fireworks are common.





This far in the Tunnel, there's a mix of the very oldest and very newest graffiti, the result of the Tunnel being closed off on the Western end. Deep scratches in the walls, some from the 1980s, remain from before the Tunnel had been sealed. New graffiti covers it, the result of artists going further and further into the Tunnel in search of empty spaces to fill.





About halfway through the Tunnel, I start to see tealights, lined up along the railway tracks. They are halfway burnt out.

This trail of tealights continues for well over a quarter of a mile. There are hundreds of them, all carefully placed. Very few have been disturbed.

One can imagine them being lit, parallel lines of flames stretching as far as the eye can see. The smoke would coalesce, hanging in the stagnant air for days if not weeks.

They are likely the remnants of one of the many art projects that have been installed in the Tunnel over the years



Towards the far end of the Tunnel I begin to see larger and larger pieces, with multiple colors and impressive linework. Facist graffiti has been hastily and crudely written over pieces that took hours, if not days, to complete. Despite passing hundreds of pieces of graffiti by this point, these racist tags feel like the first instance of vandalism in the Tunnel.



Eventually, I reach the other end. Just like the entrance, it is completely flooded, and extremely echoey. But, unlike the other end, there is no pathway for me to take. I'm tantalizingly close to the end, to the outside world again, but the water prevents me from going any further. Even if I didn't mind going for a swim, I would still be stuck behind a steel wall, welded shut.

-

So, I turn around and head back into the darkness. I see the entire Tunnel again; memorials, racist graffiti, trash, decaying railway equipment, beautiful art. My headlamp begins to die; I spent too much time looking at graffiti. I take out my phone and use it as a flashlight. I run back, breathing heavily and filled with terror that my phone will die before I get out.



I see the light at the end of the Tunnel, a metaphor that now has a much more visceral meaning. I'm filled with relief as I make my way through the stagnant water. As I emerge into the light, the sun feels blinding, the sounds of the nearby road feel deafening; a sharp contrast from the inside of the Tunnel. I breathe the fresh air, and I feel as though a weight is lifted from my body.

Chapter 2: DIY Archaeology

Every few years, a piece emerges in the Independent, BSR, or the Providence Journal with the message ‘Did you know there is a mile long, underground railway tunnel underneath College Hill?’

- *The Indy* via Emma Wohl¹³

The Eastside Railroad Tunnel is a magical place, if a little bit unpleasant. Countless explorers, artists, and partiers have visited it before me, each developing their own personal intimacy with the site. It’s my hope that the first chapter, “Under Providence,” provided a taste of this intimacy. Although I have not cultivated the same intimacy with the Crook Point Bascule Bridge, it has a similar if not stronger role in the urban exploration and graffiti communities of Providence.

It would be cheap to say that I am the first archaeologist at this site, the first to study it in a scholarly way. Although I am the first to write an academic text about it, I am far from the first to conduct archaeology. These archaeologists are not typically recognized as such by the academy or any other institution. Instead, they are called (and often call themselves) urban explorers or photographers. Pejoratively, they are said to produce “ruin porn”, images that supposedly aestheticize and romanticize ruins.¹⁴ But despite these characterizations, these people are archaeologists, studying

¹³ Wohl, Emma. 2013. “In the Dark: Art in the East Side Railroad Tunnel.” *The College Hill Independent*, May 3, 2013. <https://www.theindy.org/article/9>. See footnote 1 for quote, which is reprinted from a 2008 unarchived edition of *The Indy*

¹⁴ For further reading on “ruin porn”, and the issues with the term, see Piccini, Angela. 2014. “Profane Archaeologies: Erotic Ruins and a Case for Pornography.” *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 1 (1): 29–33. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jca.v1i1.29>.

the material traces of the past that remain in the contemporary urban landscape.¹⁵

Archaeology in and of the Present

It is no trivial fact that these are ruins of the recent past; these sites were abandoned only 45 years ago, in 1976. Thus, any study of the sites is inevitably a study of the contemporary. Of course, contemporary archaeology may seem like an oxymoron; *archaeo-* literally means “old”. However, beyond this literalist framework, the archaeology of the contemporary has successfully been defended as being a legitimate part of the field. And this is not just a recent phenomenon. Although it has been popularized in recent years, the study of contemporary material culture has been a component of archaeology since the beginning; one famous example is that of Pitt-Rivers’s 1890 lecture on the typologies and seriation of rifles.¹⁶

I recognize that not everyone will agree with this characterization, especially in places outside of the US and UK. But even among those who consider contemporary archaeology to be archaeology, there is a prevalent idea that contemporary archaeology is pointless, a way to discover what we already know. Archaeological institutions in Spain, for example, are hesitant to support a study of any material after the medieval period, not to mention

¹⁵ For further reading, see Pétursdóttir, Þóra, and Bjørnar Olsen. 2014. “Imaging Modern Decay: The Aesthetics of Ruin Photography.” *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 1 (1): 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jca.v1i1.7>.

Additionally, see the response articles in the same volume; particular highlights are the articles by Ryzewski, by Piccini, and by Pusca.

¹⁶ Pitt-Rivers, A. H. L. F. 2014. “On the Uses and Arrangement of Arts Museums: Illustrated by Series from the Pitt-Rivers Museums at Oxford and Farnham, Dorset.” *Museum History Journal* 7 (2): 135–54. <https://doi.org/10.1179/1936981614Z.00000000028>.

material from the present.¹⁷ This stems from the idea that anything with sufficient documentation does not necessitate an archaeological project. This is a misguided idea, and many historical and contemporary archaeological projects have demonstrated that the study of material culture can provide many new perspectives that are typically excluded from the historical record.¹⁸ Contemporary archaeology is archaeology, and it is useful.

There is no further need to relitigate the issue here. Contemporary Archaeology is a legitimate field of study, on par with other categories of archaeology like Classical or Egyptian archaeology (although with less institutional support). However, it is worth emphasizing the political and popular relevance of the discipline. As modern development has accelerated, many ruins have been incidentally created on an unprecedented scale. The corpses of abandoned industry surround us, a necessary product of the boom and bust cycles of capitalism.¹⁹

Although this has been most well explored in cases of extreme abandonment, such as in Detroit Michigan²⁰ or Fordlandia in Brazil²¹, they are almost certainly a part of your own life.²² Abandoned rail infrastructure, deserted businesses, or foreclosed houses will be familiar to most people.²³

¹⁷ See Gonzalez Ruibal's comments on page 165 in Harrison, Rodney. 2011. "Surface Assemblages. Towards an Archaeology *in* and *of* the Present." *Archaeological Dialogues* 18 (2): 141–96. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203811000195>.

¹⁸ See, for example, Hamilakis, Yannis, ed. 2018. *The New Nomadic Age: Archaeologies of Forced and Undocumented Migration*. Sheffield, UK ; Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing Ltd.

¹⁹ González-Ruibal, Alfredo. 2017. "Ruins of the South." In *Contemporary Archaeology and the City: Creativity, Ruination, and Political Action*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198803607.003.0016>.

²⁰ For examples, see Ryzewski, Krysta. 2019. "Detroit 139: Archaeology and the Future-Making of a Post-Industrial City." *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* 6 (1): 85–100. <https://doi.org/10.1558/jca.33835>.

²¹ See footnote 19 above

²² Although for those living in socialist economies, there will inevitably be differences in the scale, distribution, and typologies of these ruins.

²³ Except perhaps those who have only lived in highly gentrified areas

Even outside of urban areas, rotting barns and empty grain silos are common, not to mention the infamously neglected rural infrastructure like roads and bridges. These ruins are heavily integrated with daily life, a fundamental part of the modern built environment. They are rarely obvious, but are always present at the periphery. They are easy to ignore, yet simultaneously easy to see if you bother to look. They are at the margins, a concept that I explore more deeply in chapter 3.

It's no accident that the DIY archaeology I have encountered the most is focused on the material of the contemporary. The ubiquity of industrial ruins in the United States and elsewhere has led to a need to understand these new parts of the built environment, a curiosity built out of the increasingly common encounters with these ruins. One of the ways that this has taken form is the popularization of "ruin porn" and urban exploration. Although it may not be obvious at first, this is a form of DIY archaeology, the semi-formal study of the remains of the material past.

DIY Archaeology: It's here, get used to it

DIY archaeology is archaeology that is done with little or no support from institutions, built from the ground up by those performing it. DIY means "Do It Yourself". Although the phrase has widespread usage, I am borrowing most from legacies of DIY in Punk, especially in archaeology. As I stated in the introduction, Andrew Reinhardt provides the most succinct definition of Punk Archaeology:

[Punk Archaeology is] archaeology-on-a-shoestring (working on the cheap, crowd funding, self-funding to do the work that non-profits, charity organizations, and large foundations don't want to be bothered with) ... lack of funding and resources forces the Punk

public archaeologist to be creative, to take advantage of free online tools, and to leverage print and social media at will”.²⁴

DIY in this context, then, means using the few resources that are available to their fullest potential. It represents an attempt to construct something meaningful out of nothing, to construct an archaeology that serves the people doing it. Practitioners are able to act with a freedom that no institutional archaeology could ever rival, allowing them to build an archaeology that is uniquely intimate. This forces practitioners to interrogate their own motivations, to satisfy their own political and practical goals above the goals of any institutions. This is especially true given that those performing it are often the sole intended audience of a DIY archaeology; images are never published and stories are only told to close friends.

DIY archaeology, in my mind, is an absurdly capacious category, as is Classical Archaeology or any number of archaeological subfields. Some forms of DIY archaeologies are more subjectively similar to professional archaeology: arrowhead hunting, metal detecting, and many forms of collecting parallel how “real” archaeologists collect artifacts for museums. But DIY archaeology also includes less obvious methods of trying to understand material culture: occasional ponderings about how a pair of boxers ended up abandoned by the side of the road or cleaning out a loved one’s basement filled with old household goods, for example. But what is most relevant here is urban exploration: venturing into “abandoned” places,

²⁴ personal communication by Andrew Reinhard via Richardson, Lorna-Jane. 2017. “I’ll Give You ‘Punk Archaeology’, Sunshine.” *World Archaeology* 49 (3): 306–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2017.1333036>. See page 308 for quote.

asking questions about what it was like when it was in use, and how the artifacts that have accumulated got there.

DIY Contemporary Archaeology in Providence: Urban Exploration

Providence is a post-industrial city. Abandoned factories, train stations, and buildings are surprisingly prevalent in a city that has been otherwise heavily gentrified, largely by the presence of Brown University. Although there are ongoing attempts to reclaim this post industrial heritage to fuel a creative economy,²⁵ there will continue to be post-industrial ruins in Providence for the foreseeable future. Given the presence of these ruins, it's perhaps no surprise that urban exploration has become a niche phenomenon in the city.

One of the most detailed videos about this is an exploration of the Tunnel by Alex Brown IRL on YouTube: *Exploring the Abandoned East Side Railroad Tunnel, Providence, RI*.²⁶ It was posted on May 7, 2020 and documents three friends as they explore the Tunnel for the first time.

The video has an almost eerie similarity to my own inner monologue during my first journey.²⁷ Throughout, there are attempts to figure out the source of the artifacts on the ground (although they do not call them that). At 12:17, someone points to ashes on the ground and says: "Someone had a fire right here. I'm trying to figure out how old it is though". But perhaps

²⁵ Examples include The Steelyard, which is an artist collective that operates out of an old factory, the use of industrial ruins (large gears and steel ship pieces) at India Point Park, and the use of industrial sites like the Crook Point Bridge in postcards and other souvenirs. Note that there are many problems with this ideology; "creative economies" are rarely successful in improving the lives of those who live in the city. For more, see Wetherell, Sam. 2017. "Richard Florida Is Sorry." *Jacobin*, August 19, 2017. <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/08/new-urban-crisis-review-richard-florida>.

²⁶ Alex Brown IRL. 2020. *Exploring The Abandoned East Side Railroad Tunnel, Providence, RI*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u379xjt5128>.

²⁷ As an aside, their descriptions of the sensorial experience at the Tunnel are very similar to my own. Heavy breathing, echoes at the end of the Tunnel, and swearing as they accidentally fall into the water near the entrance are all very familiar feelings that appear in Chapter 1.

the most obvious piece of archaeological logic is at 14:54 in the video, in which the narrator (correctly) speculates as to how graffiti designs have been affected by the Tunnel's formation processes:

“As we proceeded further, the graffiti designs started to look older. We could tell that we were getting closer to the other end of the tunnel which had been sealed off for many years because of the designs of the graffiti”

Throughout the video, the goal is to connect the material remains to the processes that made them. This should be familiar to anyone trained in archaeology; an attempt to discover, through material culture, how people have interacted with a space. They are doing archaeology.

One of the most academically legible archaeological projects at the Tunnel is *Underground*, a book by Will Hunt.²⁸ It discusses underground spaces throughout the world, exploring the sensorial and material experiences therein. Although he has traveled throughout the world, it starts off in the Eastside Railroad Tunnel with him as a teenager, in Providence where he grew up. It was the starting point for his further exploration around the globe, an incomplete archaeological project that gave birth to many others.²⁹

Another YouTube video³⁰ discusses the legacy of the Bridge and the Tunnel, and their modern day impact on city life in Providence. It's by Jason Allard, whose YouTube channel explores abandoned sites throughout Providence. It has an extremely high production value, and is one of the best resources for explaining the history of the sites. It provides a view into

²⁸ Hunt, Will. 2019. *Underground*. Simon & Schuster UK.

²⁹ I similarly hope that my own project is the starting point for further exploration. See “Fragments” in the conclusion for more on this.

³⁰ Jason Allard. 2020. *Abandoned Crook Point Bascule Bridge & Train Tunnel | Providence, Rhode Island*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwkVdU2QPMU>.

what a final report might look like from a DIY contemporary archaeology. Rather than being a crude video, it is incredibly well researched, on par with any academic project I've seen. It has attractive animations and quality footage, and it's something that any public archaeologist should strive to emulate.

Beyond my own sites, but still in Providence, a project that has a striking resemblance to my own is a photo essay by Tuesday³¹ Mueller-Harder, titled "Tunnel Writing".³² It is about the Eastside Trolley Tunnel, which is far less derelict and far more accessible than the Railroad Tunnel. They were both built around the same time, and are nearly identical; the Railroad Tunnel in 1908, and the Trolley Tunnel in 1914. However, the Trolley Tunnel is very different because it is still actively used for buses and emergency responders. It is actively used for its original purpose, and is well maintained. However, it is also a popular spot for graffiti, and Mueller-Harder does a good job of documenting it.

These are just a few of the documented examples of DIY archaeologies, limited to only a couple selected sites. I didn't initially go looking for them, but in researching the sites, it was obvious that this was a fundamental component of how the Tunnel, Bridge, and other infrastructure are used. Just as much as these are places for graffiti and illicit gatherings, they are places for exploration, for archaeology. One can only imagine the huge number of people who have visited over the years without documenting their explorations, ponderings, and experiences. Comments

³¹ Published under the name "Timothy"

³² Mueller-Harder, Timothy. 2014. "Tunnel Writing." Exposure. December 26, 2014.
<https://timothymh.exposure.co/tunnel-writing>.

on various social media posts, videos, and websites certainly confirm this.³³ In virtually every online medium that I have seen, comments recount their own experiences exploring the Tunnel or Bridge, discussing theories on why the rusty car is there or who constructed the pathways. This leads me to conclude that DIY archaeology is a fairly common practice, especially concerning contemporary ruins.

I worry that by exploring the prevalence of DIY archaeology, I am valorizing it, or holding it to be an ideal archaeology that we should strive for. I would in fact argue the opposite; in many ways, DIY archaeology is ‘bad’ archaeology, or at least incomplete. By their very nature, DIY archaeologies exclude many of the aspects of the highly formalized and complex archaeology that is demanded by the theory of today. Some exclusions are more harmful than others; uncritically engaging with ruins and trash has very few ill effects, compared to the looting of archaeological sites by metal-detectorists.

This value judgment is highly dependent on context; very few people would care about someone collecting debris by the side of the road, but many more would care about someone excavating in the middle of a public park. Moreover, the age of the material has a big impact; people very rarely care about the fate of recent industrial ruins, which are seen as a blight, compared to the highly valorized ruins of old churches or historic mansions. In this way, contemporary archaeology is particularly accessible to amateur archaeologists.

But this is not to say that DIY archaeology of the contemporary is safe or easy. It’s dangerous; there’s no getting around that. There is the

³³ See, for example, the comments on the Art In Ruins page on the Tunnel: “East Side Train Tunnel.” n.d. ArtInRuins. Accessed March 10, 2022. <https://artinruins.com/property/east-side-train-tunnel/>.

actual danger of performing DIY contemporary archaeology: going into abandoned places is often illegal (although rarely enforced), and it can easily lead to unsafe situations³⁴. Caved in floors, unstable walking surfaces, harmful chemicals, and more are common. But it is also seemingly dangerous for archaeological institutions; it involves relinquishing a lot of control from the academy, and putting it into the hands of amateurs.

However, mainstream archaeologists don't really have a choice in the matter. The people who have explored the Tunnel and Bridge have very rarely done so with any academic or formal archaeological intent³⁵. Instead, they did so out of their own curiosity, trying to uncover the story behind the ruins that exist in their own environments. It is a very self-serving type of archaeology, something that I do not believe that academically trained archaeologists should emulate. However, this does not negate the fact that it is still archaeology; there are many archaeological projects that are similarly self-serving, and often with more drastic consequences. Take for example the many early archaeological expeditions that were devoted to stealing "treasure" from colonized countries. Although these archaeological projects were absolutely terrible from both an ethical and scientific standpoint, they were still archaeology.

As should be evident, I remain conflicted about DIY archaeology. The fact that some people will explore these ruins, even when it is difficult and illegal, shows that there is a deep desire to understand these spaces.

³⁴ This danger is actually one of the appeals of urban exploration for many people, a more raw and authentic experience, reminiscent of early archaeological campaigns into 'unknown lands', which emphasized the ruggedness and masculinity of archaeologists.

³⁵ A notable exception being Ömür Harmanşah's class, taught at Brown in 2007. See Harmanşah, Ömür. 2007. "Crook Point Project." Accessed April 27, 2022.
https://brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/urbanism/3903.html.

Imagine how many other people would explore abandoned factories if it was safer and more accessible, or even encouraged. Fostering a familiarity with these spaces could even go a long way in helping the public understand the hidden pasts of their own cities; government mismanagement, capitalist abandonment, and unnecessary waste would become much more obvious. It would become a form of civic engagement.

But these DIY archaeologies are not very good archaeology. They are reminiscent of antiquarian tendencies, fetishizing material culture and depriving it of its broader political and social context. I would posit that the most effective way forward is to help educate those who are practicing DIY archaeology as a form of harm reduction; giving practitioners access to tools, knowledge, and academic legibility will allow them to conduct archaeology in a more ethical manner. But regardless of the solution, it is safe to say that there is a need for the archaeological mainstream to make an effort to understand these ongoing DIY archaeologies. Simply ignoring them will not make them go away.

Chapter 3: At the Margins

Running for almost exactly one mile beneath the city's streets, the tunnel and nearby Crook Point Bridge were unsupervised autonomous zones where I tasted the possibilities of a world without surveillance. The tunnel was particularly important in my creative development because not only was it a marginal zone apart from monetized spaces of creative consumption, but it also had specific experiential properties.

- Gavilán Rayna Russom³⁶

Contemporary ruins, such as the Tunnel and Bridge, are often called abandoned. They are no longer used for their original purpose, devoid of the trains that once defined the space; abandoned by the railroad companies. However, these spaces are not fully abandoned, and have given rise to a new subculture that arguably has a stronger connection with the Tunnel than any past commuters or railway workers. They are places for graffiti, exploration, art, and community building. Calling these places “abandoned” silences this group of people, who have used the Tunnel for well over 30 years.

The word “abandoned” has taken on a pejorative connotation, a way of politely saying that a place is not relevant, and by extension the people who use them are irrelevant.³⁷ Thus, I reject the term, and prefer terminology that highlights the ongoing usage of spaces like the Tunnel and Bridge. In particular, I enjoy the framing of these spaces as parafunctional,

³⁶ Comery, Beth. 2020. “East Side Tunnel Inspires New Russom Album.” Providence Daily Dose. March 13, 2020. <https://providencedailydose.com/2020/03/13/east-side-tunnel-inspires-new-russom-album/>.

³⁷ I would like to thank Kelley Tackett for providing the basis of this idea in her own senior honor's thesis, concerning the so-called “abandoned” or “ancient” city of Petra. This footnote is dedicated to her. See Tackett, Kelley. 2020. “Constructed Pasts and the Contested Present in Petra Archaeological Park.” <https://doi.org/10.26300/9RJ0-KM69>.

a term coined by Nikos Papasteriadiis.³⁸ The term denotes that these spaces no longer serve their original function, but are still being actively used. I believe that this is a much more productive term that highlights the continual processes of reuse that occur when a site is “abandoned”.

Although I believe that Tunnel and Bridge are parafunctional spaces, I have found that thinking of these spaces instead as marginal is the most productive way of thinking. This is wholly related to my own marginal status as a queer person; it is no coincidence that I found myself drawn towards the Tunnel and Bridge at the time when I felt the most excluded from society, a marginal place for a marginal person.

Like myself, these places have not been fully excluded from normative society. They remain a visible part of the landscape of Providence, but they are cast to the peripheries in order to preserve the appearance of a unified, “clean” landscape and society. They are actively hidden from sight, protected by steel barriers and security cams; it’s okay to look, but not touch, to observe but not enter. The government has decided to push them to the very edge of society, yet is unable to destroy them.

This marginal status of these spaces also extends to the people who visit them, and the actions that take place therein. Going onto the Bridge or into the Tunnel is illegal, and so is doing graffiti in these places. It’s a law that is very rarely enforced, however. In all of my conversations and time spent at the sites, I have not heard of a single person getting arrested at the Tunnel in recent years, and only a few at the Bridge.

The few times when arrests have happened are very revealing. Two famous (or perhaps infamous) historical moments demonstrate that these

³⁸ Papastergiadiis, Nikos. 2010. *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place and the Everyday*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures. See page 77.

sites are allowed to exist peacefully as long as they remain at the margins; otherwise, they are vigorously policed. These are the Beltane May Day incident at the Tunnel in 1993 and the recent burning of the Crook Point Bridge. Although similar (and perhaps more materially damaging and dangerous) situations had occurred before, these two events elicited a uniquely strong response owing to their high visibility. These places, and the activities that take place therein, are typically allowed to remain at the margin, able to be ignored and thus not worth the trouble of law enforcement. But when they begin to be perceived by those who exist within the confines of “proper” society, they are met with a quick and violent response in order to reinstate their status as marginal.

Riots and Arson

On May 1, 1993, college students, mostly from Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), hosted a party inside the East Side Railroad Tunnel. 200-300 students attended. The party was a way to celebrate the coming of Spring, and incorporated masks, drums, and fire. Although Beltane May Day has Celtic origins, this event was a neo-pagan event.³⁹ It is unclear how seriously those who were in attendance took these rituals, and it is likely that a portion of attendees viewed it as a unique theme for a party.

Several parties with similar neo-pagan practices had been hosted at the Tunnel in the year prior, although at a smaller scale.⁴⁰ But this time, police were contacted by two RISD security guards, who had noticed the

³⁹ For further reading see <https://parade.com/1362932/jessicasager/beltane-may-day/>

⁴⁰ Rigberg, Howard. 1993. “Eyewitness to the Tunnel Riot.” *Providence Journal (RI)*, May 5, 1993. Access World News – Historical and Current.

noise coming from the Tunnel, and became concerned that the party was a fire hazard, given the large flames in such a small space.⁴¹

Although many of the party-goers were ready to leave, the arrival of police officers escalated the situation. Every on-duty police officer in Providence was called to the scene. The conflict escalated, and a brawl ensued. Police deployed pepper spray, three police vehicles were damaged, and seven police officers were injured⁴². Out of the more than 200 partygoers, only eight people were arrested. Countless more were injured by the recklessness of the police officers.

Following this incident, the police claimed that they encountered satanic rituals at the party, a perhaps unsurprising misrepresentation of the event. The general chaos surrounding the event led the city to seal off the Tunnel at both ends with large steel barriers. This event also led to the police acquiring riot shields and helmets.⁴³

The Tunnel had been used by partiers, punks, artists, and explorers for many years without issue. But when this subculture became obvious to the general public, it was sealed off. In other words, as people attempted to bring it into the mainstream urban landscape, it was again pushed aside to the margins. In the official view, unpleasantness must be hidden from the public to make the urban landscape more palatable. This is reminiscent of

⁴¹ This is a very legitimate concern; carbon monoxide, produced by virtually all forms of fire, quickly accumulates in enclosed areas like the Tunnel. This would be a concern even with both ends of the tunnel completely open, as they were in 1993. However, after the closing of both sides, there is even less ventilation. Thus, one of the biggest worries I have had throughout this project is the gradual accumulation of fumes and gasses, like carbon monoxide.

⁴² It is possible that the abandoned "car" in the Tunnel is one of the remnants of this conflict. I have thus far been unable to prove this, and in further research that would be one of the most useful applications of archaeological methods. At this point, I hesitate to make any conclusion on the subject.

⁴³ Kirk, Laura Meade. 1993. "Police Get Riot Gear to Provide Protection in Melees *The New Equipment Was Ordered after Officers Were Injured in an East Side Disturbance Last Spring." *Providence Journal (RI)*, September 15, 1993. Access World News – Historical and Current.

many processes that occur during gentrification, which removes people and communities that are deemed to not fit into the idealized and racialized version of society that capitalism deems the most productive.

A more recent and personally relevant incident occurred at the bridge in the summer of 2021, when the Crook Point Bridge burst into flames. As is often the case with extremely recent events, it is difficult to know all the details. There is still an ongoing arson investigation, but it is unclear if the bridge was purposely lit on fire, with evidence to suggest that it could have been the result of a lightning strike or stray firework.

The actual cause of the fire is important information that I hope is revealed in the future. However, what matters most to this analysis is the governmental response to the fire. They proceeded with the assumption that it had been an arson, and responded in accordance. Following the event, it was sealed off with a fence, motion sensing lights, and a 360 degree camera. A sign was posted promising a reward for any information leading to the arrest of the arsonist.

But, in both cases, these official efforts to prevent access didn't stop people entirely. At the Tunnel, there is a small vent that had been sealed up using welded rebar, but each time this is done, someone comes by shortly after and cuts through it using an angle grinder. At the Bridge, someone always cuts through the fence, and many people just climb around it.

This is a physical representation of the marginality of these spaces. They are officially closed, meant to be inaccessible. Yet, people access them anyway. Despite attempts to completely remove these spaces from the urban landscape, people always find a way to bring them back to the margins.



Entrance to the Tunnel, showing the rebar that has been cut away in order to create an entrance

Fuck nazis

The marginal nature of these sites provides a huge amount of freedom for creativity, curiosity, and the reshaping of the spaces. This freedom is not without difficulties, however. In particular, a neo-nazi group⁴⁴ has taken advantage of this freedom to promulgate their hateful ideology, painting hateful graffiti throughout the Tunnel (but notably not on the Bridge). Even in a sensorially very unpleasant place, this graffiti is the most

⁴⁴ I choose to print “nazi” with a lowercase letter, a way to diss them.

despicable, ugly, and regrettable aspect of the site. It is a recent addition, and not unique to the Tunnel. Neo-nazi graffiti has been appearing all over New England in the past couple years, the result of a newly-formed white nationalist group: NSC 131, also known as the National Socialist Club or just 131.⁴⁵

NSC-131, and fascists more broadly, have been emboldened in recent years, going so far as to openly hold signs along parade routes⁴⁶ and to attack a bookstore⁴⁷. However, these are just their most visible actions; many pieces of neo-nazi graffiti that are not immediately recognizable. They seem like random numbers, but are actually dog whistles⁴⁸, calling out to other fascists that they have allies nearby. Some of them are numerical abbreviations, with each number standing for the corresponding letter of the alphabet: 88 -> HH -> Heil H*tlar, and 131 -> ACA -> Anti-Communist Action. Some also say “Fuck 161,” meaning “Fuck Anti-Facist Action.”

One number is used in a different way, the number 14. It denotes the “14 words” slogan often used by white supremacists: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children”.⁴⁹ Many times, 14 and 88 are combined into a single “1488.” Because these numbers are not recognized as hate speech by the general public, they remain up for much

⁴⁵ “Nationalist Social Club (NSC).” n.d. Anti-Defamation League. Accessed April 27, 2022.

<https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/nationalist-social-club-nsc>.

⁴⁶ Lotan, Gal Tziperman. 2022. “Group Wearing Neo-Nazi Insignia Lined up at St. Patrick’s Day Parade, Drawing Outcry.” *Boston Globe (Online)*, March 22, 2022, sec. Massachusetts.

<http://www.proquest.com/docview/2641389075/citation/CAEE2A51EE89488BPQ/31>.

⁴⁷ Perry, Jack. 2022. “What Is NSC-131? Neo-Nazi Group Getting Bigger, More Active, Says Anti-Hate Group.” *The Providence Journal*. March 3, 2022.

<https://www.providencejournal.com/story/news/local/2022/03/03/anti-defamation-league-says-nsc-131-group-increase-size/9340149002/>.

⁴⁸ So-called because they are only perceptible to a select group, just as a dog whistle is only perceptible to dogs.

⁴⁹ “1488.” n.d. Anti-Defamation League. Accessed April 27, 2022.

<https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/1488>.

longer than a swastika, often only getting buffed (removed) along with the rest of the graffiti. Nazis are acutely aware of how they are perceived by the general public, and go to great lengths to hide their true intentions for as long as possible. This is why it is no surprise that they did so much graffiti in an inaccessible and marginal area like the Tunnel, where they knew their messages would remain for much longer than in a visible location like the Bridge.

Of course, there are also more direct and violent symbols in the Tunnel, just as there are elsewhere. Swastikas are common, as well as the iron cross and the SS symbol, common neo-nazi symbolism.⁵⁰ These often accompany longer phrases: “heil h*tlr”, “whites only”, racial slurs, charatactures, and others. All of these tags are done crudely, in white spray paint and a sloppy style. They often cover legitimate pieces that took many hours and an immense amount of skill to paint. Clearly, these racist messages were not created by anyone who is a part of the graffiti scene.

The tags were likely all done at once by NSC 131, given that their tag (also “NSC 131”) is found throughout the Tunnel. According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) the group is relatively new, and was formed near Worcester, Massachusetts, in late 2019 under the name “New England Nationalists Club.” It was renamed to “National Socialist Club” in early 2020, and quickly gained popularity following the May 2021 collapse of the Legion of St. Ambrose, a southern white nationalist group, which then rebranded to be called NSC Dixie.⁵¹ NSC has, at various times, had

⁵⁰ See the Anti-Defamation League's database of hate symbols for more information: “Hate on Display™ Hate Symbols Database.” n.d. Anti-Defamation League. Accessed April 27, 2022. <https://www.adl.org/hate-symbols>.

⁵¹ NSC Dixie collapsed in 2021. See “Legion of Saint Ambrose (LoSA).” n.d. Anti-Defamation League. Accessed April 27, 2022. <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/legion-of-saint-ambrose-losa>.

groups operating throughout the US and Europe, although in 2021 they distanced themselves from all groups outside of the New England area.⁵²

NSC encourages autonomous groups to form, to do graffiti on their own. But this was likely a more formal effort given that Providence, and the Tunnel, are so close to where the group is based. The graffiti at the Tunnel was done sometime between May 2020 and August 2021,⁵³ a fairly recent addition to the Tunnel. When I first visited the Tunnel, there had already been a few attempts to cover the graffiti; one of the earliest instances, a “131” written on the cart at the entrance to the Tunnel, has been defaced by “Cloud 9”, a graffiti crew that is active throughout Providence. Others were crudely covered or partially scratched out, although virtually all were still legible.

Early on, I decided that I would buff this graffiti, a term used in the graffiti community to refer to the removal or covering of graffiti. At first, I was on the fence about this. I was unsure if I should disturb the site or impose my will upon the other people who use the Tunnel. This is the academic distancing that is traditionally encouraged in anthropology. I do believe there are times when this distancing is necessary, particularly when doing work in communities which you are not a part of. But that is not what is happening in this situation.

The Tunnel is a public space, able to be accessed by anyone with the ability and inclination to do so. It is a marginal public space, an unofficial park or recreation area. As with all public spaces, guidelines and “regulations” have been developed throughout the course of its usage. One

⁵² “Nationalist Social Club (NSC).” n.d. Anti-Defamation League. Accessed April 27, 2022.
<https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/nationalist-social-club-nscl>.

⁵³ Between when the Alex Brown video was released and when I first arrived at the Tunnel. Alex Brown IRL. 2020. *Exploring The Abandoned East Side Railroad Tunnel, Providence, RI*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u379xjt5128>.

particularly important rule is that you should not paint over other graffiti with your own. Of course, this is not a legally enforced law. Rather, it is enforced through a mutually assured destruction; if you cover up someone's graffiti, they'll cover up yours. This is a common ethic of graffiti, especially in areas with a lot of wall space.⁵⁴ This covenant of non-violence is constantly being broken by those who are not graffiti artists and who are unaware of the rule; they often look like simple messages written on top of art pieces, often "XYZ was here" or the name of a group, such as university sports teams or home addresses. NSC did this same thing, covering up legitimate art pieces with disgusting messages of hate. Although people rarely go to the effort of buffing this type of graffiti, it is far from unheard of, and I believe it is in line with the ethics of the Tunnel. In covering up this hate speech, I am not imposing my authority as an academic, but rather participating in the fragmented community associated with the Tunnel.

But this is only a justification of why I feel that I am allowed to cover this graffiti. In reality, I would have covered this graffiti even if those at the Tunnel had asked for it to remain. This is for the simple fact that racism, facism, and white supremacy are evil. I challenge anyone to dispute this. I believe it should not be controversial to say "fuck nazis". There are times in which nuance is required, in which we must make concessions and reach across the political spectrum. But this is not one of them. There is no reason that this graffiti should be allowed to remain, and removing it has made the Tunnel a more pleasant place to be. By covering this graffiti, I am in fact imposing my own will upon the Tunnel for my own "political" reasons,

⁵⁴ Popular graffiti locations (usually owing to their lack of policing) which have limited wall space do not tend to abide by this principle. There is an understanding that graffiti writers will cover each other up, and many will write the tag of the writer that was covered up. This is the case outside the mouth of the Tunnel, which is a very popular graffiti spot but with very little space.

in some way. But, fuck nazis. They should not be allowed to use graffiti to terrorize marginalized people or to recruit new white supremacists to their organization.

Of course, I cannot speak as to how this will affect the Tunnel going forward, or how it will change how people interact with the space. Thus far, there has been no response from NSC or any other group. In its place, I can give my own experience with graffiti that actually targeted me, how it affected me, and what I did as a solution.

One of the great joys in my life is cycling. The East Bay Bike Path stretches 14.5 miles, connecting Providence to Bristol. Along the way, there is beautiful scenery, a very cute ice cream shop, a beach, a state park, and plenty of sea-side resting spots. By far the most memorable and joy-inducing stop on the ride for me, however, was a piece of graffiti that said “Protect Trans Kids.” Seeing this really gave me a lot of hope for the future; it is so great to think of all the generations that won’t have to go through the same traumas that I did, growing up as a closeted trans woman. As I lay in bed worrying about my own identity, I often thought about the effort it took to write the message, and that so many people were seeing this. It was one of the first times I felt like I was a part of the community, rather than an anomaly; I felt visible for one of the first times in my life.

A couple weeks later, as I was on my now almost weekly bike ride, I was looking forward to seeing my favorite affirmation. Horrifyingly, when I got there the word “trans” had been crossed out, and over it someone had written “fags.” Even writing this, 9 months later, I am filled with a deep feeling of hatred, anger, loathing, and sadness. I hopped off my bike and

tried to scrub it off. This didn't work, obviously. I tried to finish my ride, but I was hyperventilating too much and had to turn back early. When I got to my apartment, I immediately went to find some spray paint that I had seen laying on the ground in one of the common hallways.

The next day, I went back, and timidly wrote over it. It was the middle of the day, and I had to wait until there was a gap in the bike traffic. I felt so vulnerable, like some police officer or transphobe might jump out of the woods and attack me. That obviously didn't happen though, and I crossed it out without any trouble and rewrote the phrase "Protect Trans Kids" along with a transgender symbol.

This didn't last long. The next time I went back, they had written over it again with the word "fags". But this time I was lucky; they had left their can of black spray paint stashed by the side of the path, a can of black-colored Rust-Oleum (commonly called Rusto in the graffiti community). I used it to cover all of their work. As of the last time I went, this was the status of things, although it has been a while since I last visited.

I share this story in order to contextualize my interaction with the nazi graffiti, not to compare the two. When I saw the nazi graffiti, I did not have the same emotional response that I had when I saw the transphobic graffiti. This is a reflection of the fact that I am not the nominal target of the nazi graffiti. But, given the emotional distress that the transphobic graffiti had caused me, I wanted to stop the same thing from happening to others. I even used the very same can of spray paint that had been used to call me a fag to go cover up the nazi graffiti at the Tunnel.



The homophobic graffiti after I had covered it up (above)

The can used to write the homophobic graffiti, and to cover it. I also used it to cover some of the nazi graffiti at the Tunnel. (right)



The Graff Life

Graffiti is the most prevalent and obvious type of material culture at the Tunnel and at the Bridge. Many scholars have adequately covered graffiti from an outside perspective, i.e. the things that can be seen on the wall.⁵⁵ There have even been encouraging strides in understanding more about the production of graffiti, particularly Ursula Frederick's work with discarded graffiti cans in Australia.⁵⁶ However, a consistent gap in the existing archaeological literature is a failure to engage with the graffiti community itself, to use their language, and to understand the ways in which the production of graffiti affects the body.

Of course, there is still a need to discuss what types of graffiti are found at the Tunnel. In my mind, there are two main categories: graffiti as mark-making, and graffiti as art. These two categories have a lot of overlap, and distinguishing between the two is often impossible. This categorization schema inherits all the issues that come with applying rigid typologies to complex social phenomena; however, it does provide a basic structure through which to understand graffiti.

The first category of graffiti, mark-making, is designed to simply show the writer's presence. It is perhaps the most stereotypical graffiti in this regard. This type of graffiti is mostly in the form of tags, which can be done with spray paint or by simply scratching into the soft plaster of the Tunnel walls. In the urban landscape, these tags are often done with markers, but this is not usually possible on the rough surfaces of the Tunnel. Beyond this material difference, the Tunnel is fairly unique in that writers use both actual

⁵⁵ For a summary of the state of graffiti studies in archaeology, see Frederick, Ursula, and Anne Clarke. 2014. "Signs of the Times: Archaeological Approaches to Historical and Contemporary Graffiti" 78: 6.

⁵⁶ Frederick, Ursula. 2014. "Shake Well Midden: An Archaeology of Contemporary Graffiti Production in Perth, Western Australia." *Australian Archaeology* 78 (1): 93–99.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03122417.2014.11682004>.

names and graffiti names. Typically, when the actual name of a group or person is written, it is by someone who does not regularly perform graffiti outside the Tunnel. This is a result of the marginal nature of the site; those who do not regularly do graffiti out of ethical considerations or a fear of the law are able to practice graffiti at the Tunnel. They know they will not be punished, and that it will not upset any property owners.

The second category of graffiti at the Tunnel is art. This includes paintings of cartoon characters, as well as typical graffiti pieces. There are three basic categories of graffiti pieces that are commonly recognized by the graffiti community: hollows, throwups, and full pieces. Hollows are the simplest, giving only the outline of the letters, leaving their interiors hollow. Throwups are slightly more complicated, and are effectively a hollow but with a solid fill inside the outline.⁵⁷ Full pieces are the most complex, and include multiple colors, patterns, and extremely exaggerated letter forms, to the point that they may not even be readable. There are other sub-categories, including straight letters, which (as the name suggests) have straight letters, allowing them to be read easily. Another is roller graffiti, which is done with a paint roller instead of a spray can, and thus can reach tall areas; artists can use a paint roller on a long pole and paint on the ceiling, while never having to leave the ground.⁵⁸

All of these subcategories of graffiti as art, along with the aforementioned cartoon characters, are present in the Tunnel and at a massive scale. It is incomprehensible the number of hours that have been spent at the Tunnel doing this work, and to be perceived by only a select

⁵⁷ There are also stylistic peculiarities that are typically found in throwups. In particular, letters are homogenized to be the same height, and all “counters” (the holes in letters like O, A, E, R, and P) are closed so that they are able to be represented with only a single line.

⁵⁸ There is much more that could be said about the typology of graffiti, and it is something that I plan to do in future work.

few people. In this way, it can be conceptualized as an artists studio, a place for graffiti artists to practice their craft without fear of police intervention or municipal workers buffing their work, but also without a method of public display. There is also a sort of respect among graffiti artists that is garnered by doing art in this unpleasant place. However, this is not most writer's main motivation for doing art at the Tunnel; if it was, they would do their art in more visible spaces.

Beyond aesthetic classifications, there are several overarching themes in the messages that are written. The first is memorial graffiti. This graffiti is done to memorialize graffiti writers and other young people who have passed away. At the Tunnel, this includes large roller graffs recognizing Gyer and Alan Gottesman.⁵⁹ The Alan Gottesman piece is particularly impressive, and covers hundreds of feet on both sides of the Tunnel with letters that are about two meters tall. At the Bridge, the memorial graffiti is much smaller in scale, but still present. It often honors those who have committed suicide at the Bridge itself.

Graffiti also acts to honor events. There are of course the simple tags that attest to parties and exploration at the Tunnel, but this is not what I am referring to. Instead, I mean larger historical events like Covid-19, the HIV crisis, Clinton upholding abortion, and the Columbine High School shooting, all of which are memorialized through graffiti at the Tunnel. As of yet, I am unsure what to make of this phenomenon; it is not something that is prevalent in graffiti that is found outside of the Tunnel. However, I do know

⁵⁹ See "Alan Gottesman Obituary (2015) - Burlington, VT - The Burlington Free Press." n.d. Accessed April 28, 2022.
<https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/burlingtonfreepress/name/alan-gottesman-obituary?id=21624756>.

Unfortunately, I have been unable to determine what his graffiti tag was (if he was even a graffiti writer, which is something that I have also not confirmed)

that these are not always done at the time of the event. In particular, the graffiti discussing the Columbine shooting was done by Gyer in the past decade, well after the actual shooting which occurred in 1999. In contrast, graffiti like the one discussing the Clinton abortion executive action likely occurred at the time of the event.



*An old piece of graffiti, scratched into the wall. The text reads “1/24/93
CLINTON UPHOLDS ABORTION”*

Other than studying the graffiti at the Tunnel, the most effective form of research I have done is digital ethnography. This is an academic way of saying that I wasted a lot of time scrolling through graffiti pages on Instagram and TikTok.

Given that I have not actually interacted with any of the graffiti artists that I have learned from, I would classify my relationship with the graffiti “community”⁶⁰ as parasocial.⁶¹ Parasocial relations typically refer to the manufactured relationships that viewers of media feel they have with online personalities and influencers, while never having actually communicated with the person. In an environment where everyone is posting all their intimate and innermost thoughts and feelings in a constant stream of social media, this is an increasingly relevant concept. It is easy to feel as though you “know” an online personality, perhaps even better than you know your real world friends. But, it is inherently a one-sided relationship.

Similarly, I feel like I know so many graffiti artists; I recognize names like Speak, Grime, Gyer, Siep, Zest, and Histo more easily than I recognize the names of many classmates. This is the result of watching countless hours of graffiti tutorials, videos of people doing graffiti, and people analyzing the forms and materiality of the art. This has led to an intimacy with the artform, but it is an intimacy manufactured according to my own decisions about what media to interact with. Despite these flaws, this process has still been useful; it has taught me the skills and terminology to analyze graffiti more effectively than any academic paper I have read.⁶²

In addition to this digital ethnography, I performed a sort of experimental archaeology; attempts to do graffiti at the Tunnel itself. The first conclusion is that it is far, far harder than most would expect. Besides

⁶⁰ I am unsure if it should be classified as a community; it is extremely fragmented. It certainly is not homogenous if it is indeed a community, and should perhaps instead be viewed as a network in which some knowledge is shared, but in which most actors are operating individually.

⁶¹ “Parasocial Interaction.” n.d. Oxford Reference. Accessed April 28, 2022.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100305809>.

⁶² For anyone looking to learn more about graffiti, I recommend avoiding the library and instead listen to some hip-hop. Graffiti is one of the “four elements” of hip hop, along with DJing, B-Boying (break dancing), and rapping. I particularly recommend this playlist on Spotify, aptly called [“Graffiti Music”](#)

the years (and often decades) of experience required to do a complex piece of graffiti, the Tunnel presents particular difficulties that I only realized after attempting to do graffiti. The walls are wet, crumbly, and rough, a surface that is very difficult to paint on. This is why steel wool is sometimes found in the Tunnel; it is used to produce a smooth surface for painting.

But even after putting in the work to have a nice surface to paint on, artists must work in a dark, unventilated space. There is a constant pressure to work faster, to finish before your flashlight's battery runs out. It is also extremely difficult to transport supplies into and out of the Tunnel, especially heavy cans of paint. This is one of the many reasons why so much trash is left behind.

Given all these obstacles, the fact that artists can paint such complicated pieces is amazing. The fact that graffiti artists are willing to work in such a marginal and unpleasant space helps to demonstrate that popular misconceptions of graffiti as crude and attention-seeking are unfair. Make no mistake: quick and messy graffiti done in highly visible places is a part of the graffiti culture, and one that should not be vilified to the extent that it has been. But there is also a part of the culture that is solely focused on developing the art form further, people who are willing to go to a place as unpleasant as the Tunnel in order to practice and to experiment.

Unfortunately, I am unable to say much more about the graffiti at the tunnel. My learning process has taken a long time, and only now, at the very end of this project, do I feel like I could begin to talk about graffiti in a meaningful way. So, while this has been one of the most personally fulfilling aspects of the project, it is simultaneously the thing I feel I have covered least sufficiently. I do not view this as a failure, but rather as a success; I have primed myself for exciting future work. The primary goal of a senior

thesis is to stretch yourself, to learn on your own after you have exhausted the courses that are officially offered. I believe that I have accomplished this, even though I am unable to demonstrate it here.

Chapter 4: Follow Your Nose

Try it now. Describe the smell of your lover, your child, your parent. Or even one of the aromatic clichés most people, were they blindfolded, could recognize by smell alone: a shoe store, a bakery, a church, a butcher shop, a library. But can you describe the smell of your favorite chair, of your attic or your car?

- Diane Ackerman⁶³

Although graffiti is a critical aspect of the Tunnel, it is just one small component in constructing its unique sensory experience. Hopefully Chapter 1 did an adequate job of acquainting you with some of this sensory experience. However, working within a static visual medium has very strict limitations. The most obvious is perhaps the soundscape of the site, which is very echoey and distorted, as discussed in Chapter 1. Although I have recorded many audio clips at the site, I am unable to attach them here.⁶⁴ Luckily, there have been other attempts at recording the soundscape; one example is by Eric Gould.⁶⁵ Many videos of the Tunnel also coincidentally pick up the auditory experience, such as the ones discussed in chapter 2.

But all attempts to record the experiences of being at the Tunnel will inevitably fall short. There is no way to fully replicate the sensory experience at any site, especially one as complex as the Tunnel. Nothing is the same as being there. But pictures, videos, sound recordings, and text can give a partial view of what it's like. These strip specific sensorial experiences of their broader context, paralleling the processes by which

⁶³ Diane Ackerman. 1995. *A Natural History of the Senses*. Vol. Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage. Quote on page 8

⁶⁴ I hope to create a more holistic sensory exhibit at some point in the future

⁶⁵ Gould, Erik. 2015. "What's Underneath." ERIK GOULD PROJECTS. July 3, 2015. <https://www.erikgouldprojects.com/coldcoffee/2015/7/3/whats-underneath>.

archaeologists remove artifacts from broader assemblages. Putting a photo in a museum accomplishes many of the same things that putting an artifact in a museum does; it can never provide the full context, but it can evoke emotions and conjure imagination.

One thing that is often neglected is smell, however. Especially in places with unpleasant smells, there is usually no attempt to describe its nuances. This is partially due to a lack of relevance; does it matter that a field smells like pig shit instead of cow shit? Rarely. What usually matters more is that it is simply disgusting, a signifier that it is not a pleasant place to spend your time. There is also a hesitancy to recreate unpleasant smells, which are not very marketable.⁶⁶ However, there are times when we need to understand unpleasant smells; if we seek to study the Tunnel and the Bridge, we need to incorporate an analysis of scent, one of the most intense aspects of the sensory experience.

The Tunnel and Bridge smell gross. Let's get that out of the way. Particularly in the Summer, when the heat causes scent particles to more freely diffuse into the air, the smells are overwhelming. At the Bridge, rotten fish, stale salt water, and feces are common. At the Tunnel, the outside of the entrance smells musty and earthy, overwhelmingly humid and metallic; like a swamp. Inside, the scentscape becomes more complex: smells of mold, rust, paint fumes, gasoline, lighter fluid, urine, and stale smoke. These smells are so intense and unpleasant that they are a major factor

⁶⁶ For more on odor preservation projects, see Clevenger, Justin. 2018. "The Categorization of Odor Preservation Projects." Masters Thesis, Columbia University.
<https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8XW62MJ/download>.

I would like to note that I did not find this until a day before I turned in the thesis. This will certainly be a great resource in the future, and one that I would like to explore; I would particularly like to compare my project to the ones presented in the thesis, and grade it according to the "Clevenger Authenticity Scale". However, my project differs from those explored in Clevenger: I seek to record smells, rather than to recreate or recover them.

keeping people away from these sites; certainly more than any fence or barrier that has been erected.

Despite how fundamental these smells are in understanding the Tunnel, finding language to describe them is very difficult. How do you describe the smell of gasoline? It would take a considerable amount of poetic effort, and even then it would remain somewhat vague.⁶⁷ There are considerably fewer words to describe scents (and especially unpleasant scents) than to describe sensations of other senses in the western canon (touch, sight, taste, smell, sound). This has led to its being called the “mute sense” by Dianne Ackerman.⁶⁸ Although there is a need for additional language to describe smells, text will always have limitations; the equivalent of giving a description of an image, rather than an image itself.

It would be nice if we had a way of capturing and transporting smells in the same way that a photograph captures visuality. This technology could even go towards a more formal study of smells, allowing researchers to develop new terminologies and deeper ways of engaging with scent. In the past year, I have been doing some cursory experiments with this concept.

Because scent is an essential part of the experience at the Tunnel, I decided early on that I wanted to be able to share it with others.⁶⁹ I needed a way to absorb the smells that would be easy to transport, and would remain pungent even following storage. This is not an easy task, however. I considered textiles for a long time, and I still think they have promise. Something like a thick cotton blanket would do a great job at absorbing

⁶⁷ A fume fills your nose, sour and warm. Memories of gas stations, road trips, and garages come to mind. You hold your breath, hoping to breathe as little of the noxious vapors as possible..

⁶⁸ See Chapter 1: “Smell” in Diane Ackerman. 1995. *A Natural History of the Senses*. Vol. Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage.

⁶⁹ “Smell this, it’s really gross” doesn’t convince many people, however.

smell, getting trapped in the complex fiber structure of the fabric. But I needed something cheaper, easier, and more purpose-built.

Eventually, my search led me to activated charcoal air fresheners. Although marketed to get rid of unpleasant odors, they have been extremely effective at doing the opposite: preserving them. Physically, they are just small canvas bags filled with activated charcoal, a type of charcoal that is particularly porous and absorbent. They are designed to soak up unpleasant odors, “purifying” the air. They are also cheap, often less than a dollar a piece. I bought 24 of them, and immediately placed them into scent proof mylar bags, which I had also bought. This was essential in order to prevent cross contamination during storage and transport. When I wanted to deploy the bags, which I will call Scent Capture Devices (SCDs for short), I labeled them in permanent marker and placed them into their correspondingly labeled scent-proof mylar bags.

I placed the SCDs at various points along the Tunnel and outside the entrance. I did not place any at the base of the bridge, as I did not want to impede on any of the unhoused people who find shelter at the location. I left them there for months, monitoring them to make sure they were still there. I collected them at various times, placed them back into their mylar bags, and took them back to my apartment. Table 1 shows the exposure times and locations of each scent bag, as well as a subjective remark as to how well it captured the scent at the particular location.



Above: Preparing SCDs. Below: SCDs deployed in the field



Table 1: Summary

Identifier	Location	Exposure	Quality
T-001	Tunnel, halfway through, hanging on fishing line	109 days	Faint, unidentifiable odor. I believe this is because it was hanging in the air, rather than close to the ground. This made the heavy scent particles unable to reach where the bag was.
T-002	Tunnel, halfway through, hanging on fishing line	77 days	Almost no odor. Same issues as T-001, but with less exposure time.
T-003	Tunnel, near the far end. On ground	77 days	Very good, with an intense earthy smell and a slight smell of paint. This is very similar to the actual scentscape of the Tunnel, although it does not capture the smell of kerosene that is present in other areas of the Tunnel, nor does it capture the smell of firework smoke.
T-004	Tunnel, on a wooden cart near the entrance	77 days	Very faint. No identifiable smell.
M-001	Mouth of Tunnel, on ground near water	109 days	Very good, and captures the winter scentscape almost perfectly. There are smells of mud, stagnant water, and wet concrete. However, it would be more pungent if it was deployed in the Summer; no smells of rotting wood, carcasses, or feces are present, which are a fundamental part of the scentscape in the summer.
M-002	Mouth of Tunnel, on ground near water	58 days	Poor. Does not capture any smell very strongly, but has a faint odor of wet concrete. I am unsure why it is so much less effective than M-001; perhaps it just needed a longer exposure time
M-003	Mouth of Tunnel, on concrete near tree	58 days	Decent. Captures the smells of dirt and wet concrete very well, and has a faint odor of spray paint fumes. This result was very surprising, considering it was surrounded on three sides by solid surfaces (tree and concrete).

Overall, this experiment was successful as a preliminary study. The scentscapes were reasonably well captured, and the samples have remained useful even after months of storage. However, this method obviously has limitations. It cannot recreate “lost” smells, and it is limited in its applicability. It requires you to be able to leave them in a place with a very stable scentscape for a long time. I liken this to early photography, which required people to remain still for minutes at a time. If the scent scape changes rapidly, the result will be a “blurry” SCD, averaging out the scentscape over time, rather than giving a snapshot of it at a particular time. Also like photography, if the exposure time is too low, it will produce a very faint result, if at all, similar to the completely black and underexposed images produced by quick shutter speeds.

The Tunnel is uniquely suited to this pilot study, owing to its impressive preservation of scents. The Tunnel was built without ventilation shafts, and now that it has been sealed on both ends, there is no way for air to circulate. There is only a 2'x3' hole for which air to move through (and only one one side), completely insufficient for ventilating a mile long tunnel. In effect, it is almost hermetically sealed. This allows particles, including dust, smoke, aerosols, and fumes, to remain airborne for years. Being in the Tunnel, you are able to smell the smoke from fireworks and bonfires, fumes from lighter fluid and spray paint, and many “natural” smells like mold and dirt.

Unfortunately, the SCDs that I have deployed have not captured the full spectrum of scents at the Tunnel. Particularly, they have been very ineffective at capturing gaseous scents; fumes from lighter fluid and spray paint. I have therefore supplemented the SCDs with note-taking at the site, which captures not only these specific smells, but also the full bodily

experience of smelling at the site. Just as a picture flattens the visual experience, SCDs flatten the olfactory experience. They provide an incomplete representation of the scent scape, neglecting the interconnectedness of senses that lead to the emotions and bodily responses of being at the site: fear, disgust, and curiosity are not the results of any individual sense, but rather a combination of every sensory input of the body.

This is critical in understanding the role of smell at the Tunnel. Many of these scents, on their own, are not scary or unpleasant. In fact, I find the SCDs that I have collected to be relatively pleasant, reminiscent of the smell of rain. However, when in the Tunnel, an environment in which these smells attack you from every direction, they take on a more sinister connotation. After a while, you can even begin to taste the smells, a sort of sour taste in the back of the mouth. This, combined with the fact that the Tunnel is dark, wet, strange, and echoey, makes the sensory experience somewhat terrifying, or at the very least stressful. This is a critical way of understanding the site, and one that I do not wish to neglect. However, taking smells out of context has provided critical insights into the Tunnel and the activities that take place therein. This is reminiscent of the ways in which artifacts, deprived of most of their original context, can still provide insights into the people who constructed and used them.

For the most part, my study of smells has demonstrated what was already obvious from the material record; there were spray paint cans, old fire pits, and used fireworks on the ground at various points in the Tunnel. I did not have to smell them in order to perform an archaeological analysis; they were already there in a more tangible form. However, this did serve as a nice confirmation of what I had smelled; particularly, I was pleased to

know that I had recognized the smell of phosphorus prior to seeing the remnants of the fireworks that had produced them.

But there was one smell that was somewhat unexpected: the smell of fumes, coming from kerosene or some other similar petroleum product. It is a very potent smell at the Tunnel, burning your nostrils. Initially, I believed that this was a remnant of its past use, a spill produced by some railroad activity. But the volatility of smells made me very hesitant to accept this hypothesis, especially given the strength of the smell.

I abandoned this idea once I found a bottle of lighter fluid on the ground. I thus postulated that 1) I was indeed smelling lighter fluid or some other fire-starting liquid (kerosene, diesel, gasoline, etc) and 2) that it was a much more prominent aspect of the Tunnel than this one small bottle of lighter fluid. But I was left somewhat confused as to the actual usage of the lighter fluid, concluding that someone must have used an excess of lighter fluid to start a fire (these fires are evidenced by burnt fire pits throughout the Tunnel).

I finally discovered the source of the smell very late into my research process, when I found a video of the “ADE Stress Relief Party”.⁷⁰ The ADE (Abandoned Dreams Exploration) stress relief party is an annual event, started in 2017, in which a group of friends come to drink, smoke, break glass bottles, set off fireworks, do graffiti, and start fires. This last aspect is what is relevant here; they poured kerosene into the water canals at either side of the Tunnel and set them on fire, illuminating the graffiti in a very interesting way (see figure below). This confirmed what the scent scape had led me to conclude, that lighter fluid was used to a much larger extent than the material record would imply. But, it also clarified the specific

⁷⁰ Ryan PunkUE. 2018. *Stress Relief Party 2018*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wdwwaVoZenE>.

context of its usage, and provided irrefutable evidence for the processes that had produced so much of the material remains at the Tunnel. It explains the firepits, smashed glass, folding chairs, and beer cans that are so common in the Tunnel. Of course, other people and groups have likely done similar things, but this provides a uniquely intimate look into the process. The archaeology of scent, combined with traditional material based archaeology and digital ethnography, has given a glimpse into the activities that happen at the margin, something that is very rarely seen.⁷¹



Screenshot from “[Stress Relief Party 2018](#)”, showing the use of a flammable liquid to illuminate graffiti in the Tunnel

⁷¹ As a final note, please do not hesitate to contact me if you are interested in smelling or otherwise using these SCDs.

Conclusion: Fragments and Futures

This work should not be viewed as an exhaustive review of the Tunnel, and certainly not of the Bridge. There are dozens of potential research projects that could be performed at the Tunnel or Bridge which I have not been able to do. These are extremely complex, dense, and interesting sites, and they are worthy of a formal archaeological project. However, this is not that project. Instead, this paper should be viewed as a starting point, a collection of fragmented projects that can and should be continued by future researchers.

This project is necessarily incomplete, a product of working at the margins of what is acceptable in archaeology. I have mostly been working alone (although please see the acknowledgement section) with no funding and very little time. All of this during a pandemic, while trying to figure out what to do after college. Thus, I have a long list of topics that need further exploration, and potential projects for future researchers:

- A typology and formal survey of graffiti, especially the older tags.
- An analysis of the burnt car, located about halfway through the Tunnel. Urban legend says it is the remnants of one of the burnt police cruisers from the Beltane May Day incident, but I have thus far been unable to confirm this. The blue paint on the front right wheel would lead me to this conclusion, but it is also very possible that this was just the remnants of paint used by graffiti writers. Further analysis of the car itself is warranted.
- A surface survey of all the material at the Tunnel, especially with regards to dating. There are some very old beer bottles and empty cans of spray paint, and it would be nice to know how old these are.

There is also material remaining from when the railroad was operational that needs further exploration.

- An exploration of how the Bridge is perceived in Providence. Particularly interesting is its constant confusion with the “Red Bridge”, which was a smaller bridge located just north of the Crook Point Bridge, but has long since been demolished. Another topic of study is the ways in which it is used to represent a countercultural post-industrial Providence.
- A deeper analysis of the physicality of the Bridge. Owing to the recent installation of the fence and security camera, I have been unable to travel onto the Bridge throughout this entire project. I have instead had to rely on the work of others and my own memories in order to do any analysis of the Bridge.
- A more complete sensory exploration of the Tunnel, incorporating sound and touch. The acoustic properties of the Tunnel are very interesting, particularly in the way sound echoes at the ends but not in the middle.
- A geological study of the mineral accretions that have formed throughout the Tunnel. It is very interesting that they are only located in some sections of the Tunnel; I believe it is because the type of stone above the Tunnel’s roof varies, and that there is a limestone pocket halfway through the Tunnel which produces the most accretions.
- A scientific analysis of airborne particulates. I believe that this could add to the analysis of scent that I have done. These two aspects could combine to form an “archaeology of the air”.

- An excavation at the mouth of the Tunnel, where DIY pathways have been constructed. It would be amazing to see the layers of wooden palettes, milk crates, and old mattresses that form this walkway. It would also of course be interesting to see what material remains can be found, particularly those attesting to the period from the 1970s-90s, which so far has produced the least information.
- An art exhibition, incorporating the various creative projects that have occurred at the Tunnel over the years.
- Engagement with ongoing proposals to reuse the sites. Particularly, there is a need to understand the ways in which industrial heritage is incorporated into a so-called “creative economy”, a common practice in Providence. However, I believe that this will only serve to harm the sites, depriving them of their marginality and the unique sensory experiences that come with them. Any effort to gentrify or otherwise bring these spaces back into mainstream society will inevitably ruin what has made them unique.

This should not be seen as an exhaustive list, but rather a way to spark curiosity. My hope is that some day in the future, a researcher will become enamored with the sites in the way that I have, and choose to continue the analysis that I have done. I want you to finish what I started.