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Freak Out the Squares: The Semiotic Production of American Biker Identities and the Preservation of an Abject Sign

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines the political dimensions of linguistic and semiotic preservation of biker subculture as it relates to race, gender, and class among contemporary bikers in the United States. Propelled by the biker colloquialism "freak out the squares" – which is used to draw boundaries of ideological and behavioral difference between bikers and the non-biker mainstream – I investigate the embodiment of this prominent attitude within the aesthetic, material, and language practices of a subcultural group of bikers who preserve a style of choppers (custom motorcycles) that originated in the post-WW2 and countercultural eras. This style historically has influenced mainstay American biker ideologies and its authentication has become evident through the working-class cultural production of motorcycles, magazines, dress, and language that reproduce sexist, racist, and xenophobic fields of signification. While this style paints bikers as stereotypically White, male, libertarian, and violent, the current communities who preserve these cultural forms aren't always necessarily so. Faced with this tension, I investigate the biker drive to shock and scare within the terms of what Julia Kristeva calls *abjection*. I use ethnographic material to discuss what role abjection holds within the sexist, racist, and xenophobic linguistic and semiotic practices of this cultural style. I explicate how abjection is motivated by ideologies of class, nation, and liberty. In theorizing abjection as belonging to what I call the outlaw biker register, I document how violent semiotic usage in this register is mediated by an individual's pragmatic and metapragmatic relationship to the perceived figure of the "square."

This thesis contains images that might be offensive to the reader.

Introduction

I remember how excited I was to crawl out of my tent to get closer to the warmth of the rising sun. Perched atop a mountain crest in the Santa Ynez Mountains of Santa Barbara, California, I zipped open the mesh door to further embrace the sun's rays that stripped away the chilling cold I experienced the night prior. Granted, if I had customized my vintage Harley-Davidson chopper for long-distance riding and camping rather than drag racing down the street with my friends, then I probably wouldn't have suffered from not being able to carry warmer camping gear. I knew I wasn't alone though. As I surveyed the distant ocean obscured by the marine layer, I saw acquaintances and friends sleeping in the dirt who, instead of relying on camping gear to keep them warm during sleep, presupposed that all the beer they drank the night before would do the job – which actually turned out to be a rather successful strategy for them.

This being the first night of the 2020 Crab Crawl, a three-day run up and down the coast from Los Angeles to Cayucos, it was imperative that we sort any problems with our thirty to eighty-year-old motorcycles now before we headed north from Santa Barbara. My friend Jack, a White professional photographer in his late 20's, had popped the tube on the rear tire of his 1960's style Harley-Davidson pan-shovel chopper and needed to repair it before we hit the road.[1] Luckily, I lived in Santa Barbara for a year and had developed and kept strong relationships with young "chopper dudes" and "old-timers" (as they are called within this subcultural community) who make choppers. Although being above the age of sixty-five prompts these old-timers to not camp the way we did, and as they used to in their youth, these

[1] The term pan-shovel refers to the type of engine featured in the bike. Similarly, the terms flathead, knucklehead, panhead, shovelhead, and ironhead all describe the way the rocker boxes look on each engine and have come to classify certain bikes Harley-Davidson produced.

older bikers have experienced what it is like to be in Jack's position before – notably, one even wrote a famous song about it.[2]

We loaded up Jack's bike into the back of the chase truck (a vehicle used to haul broken bikes, which is required of any vintage chopper run) and headed down to Mason St. Cycles to get help from the old-timers Phil, Danny, and Jimmy. I had just wrapped up my 1962 Harley-Davidson pan-shovel chopper and this was the first long run that I was taking it on. It was also the first time these guys had seen my bike since they coached and helped me along in the process of building it.

Mason St. Cycles is less than a mile walk from the Pacific Ocean. However picturesque this may sound, it also is adjacent to the city dump and several homeless encampments – which disrupts the typical serene quality of the more visible tourist environment for which Santa Barbara is known. The smell hits me every time I step out of my car or take off my helmet. Nevertheless, the noxious smells are often forgotten after the habit of going to the shop and hanging out for hours takes precedence. Along with being greeted by the smell, I'm always greeted by Buddy, Phil's stout Australian cattle dog first, who trots up to bark at the loud machine and demand scratches.

We parked our bikes in front of the building that houses Mason St. Cycles, a metal fabrication shop, and an automotive repair service. Phil and Jimmy are sitting down in the usual frayed and broken chairs outside and in typical fashion they both yell out a joke or a comedic greeting of sorts. "Oh God, the *bikers* are here! Better hide!" Acknowledging that this joke

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[2] While playing in the band Canned Heat, Jimmy wrote the *Harley Davidson Blues*. The song has become a biker anthem of sorts – emblematic of the way of life concomitant with owning old Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Canned Heat. *Harley Davidson Blues,* "The New Age." United Artists. 1973. Track 2.

Mason St. Cycles - Photo by Author, 2020

makes fun of a typical Santa Barbara "square's" response to dirty vintage choppers, I laugh and shout "what's up guys! How ya doin'?" Normally we exchange small talk about how things are but this time we were captured by the gleaming paint and chrome on my bike and Jack's shiny chopper with painted blue-flames towed on the back of the chase truck.

It was a sight to see – half a dozen, disheveled, and greasy young men with vintage Harley-Davidson choppers parked outside of a concrete building where sparks are seen flying as sheet metal is shaved and pneumatic power tools are heard buzzing away as cars are worked upon. Jack's bike was brought to the center of the concrete parking lot in front of the building and was sort of put on display. Jack went with Jimmy to get a new tube put into his tire as his bike sat with the rear end lifted-up and the wheel off. Even though Mason St. Cycles is located

away from the more populous State Street and the Funk Zone of Santa Barbara, many people still drive by the shop and stare at the dirty "bikers" who hang out next to the city dump.[3]

Inside the Shop at Mason St. Cycles - Photo by Author, 2020

The actual and imagined interplay between us at Mason St. Cycles and the on-looking passersby is humorously not rejected by the Mason St. "bikers", but is rather embraced and valued for its cultural and individual importance. Rather, these men – an intergenerational subcultural group of men who embody defiance through their craft of making and riding vintage Harley-Davidson choppers – actively embody and promote this imagined uptake of *horror* through their bodies (the smells, disheveled appearance, and dirty clothing) the bikes, and the

[3] State Street is colloquially known as the main drag in Santa Barbara and it houses small boutiques and large corporate stores. The Funk Zone is an art and food district adjacent to the State Street and the beach that features wineries, microbreweries, and expensive casual dining.

shop. These constitute a lived and preserved paradox which is emblematic of this subculture, as realized in the 1960's colloquialism *freak out the squares*.

An Example of a Chopper: Purple Harley-Davidson Knucklehead Chopper Built by Dean Lanza in the 1960s - Photo by Author, 2015, Born Free Motorcycle Show, California.

An Example of a Chopper: Red Harley-Davidson Panhead Chopper Made in 1960s Style, Modeled After a Painting by Chopper Artist David Mann – Built by Arie Vee in 2015 – Photo by Author, 2015, Born Free Motorcycle Show, California.

Freak Out the Squares

Freak out the squares has become an American biker cultural practice whereby participants subvert perceived normative morals of the "squares" by way of embodying an abject state of horror as perceived vis-à-vis the square's morals. Julia Kristeva investigates abjection as a psychoanalytic process whereby an indexical sign produces a state of horror by breaking down the subject's symbolic order (Kristeva 1982). Abjection, in this sense, is a communicative event between the subject, object, and the abject, whereby the subject interacting with the object is confronted with some abject *thing* that disrupts socially and culturally shaped notions of being and desire. The incessant noise of vintage Harley-Davidsons, foul smells from the nearby waste treatment facility, and disheveled and greasy appearance of my interlocutors in Santa Barbara, for example, disrupted the perceived order of cleanliness and safety associated with the tourists and richer residents of Santa Barbara. In this sense, biker semiotics embody the abject in that they disrupt the symbolic order associated with the square. The abject for the biker is a commodity, an aesthetic, and linguistic practice. It includes the qualities of the bike, the body, dress, art, film, music, space, and the written and spoken language practices that are pragmatically used to freak out the "square."

Where horrifying the square is accomplished in part by embodying uncleanliness (for example, "wearing" oil stained clothing), abjection in the vintage chopper subculture is also commonly displayed with the help of the semiotic repertoire of explicitly *political* abjections. Swastikas and iron crosses, confederate flags, brandishing guns on hips, Donald J. Trump "MAGA" hats, and pornography in magazines are commonly adopted as the signs of political abjection. The square who is interpellated in biker imagination through such practices is often construed as the asinine denizen of the state, and embodies the perceived normative morals that

are irreconcilable with the biker ideology and its way of life. The perlocutionary phrase *freak out the squares* was developed in the 1960s to describe the practices of bikers, hippies, and freaks of various countercultural movements who embodied such a transgressive state of being through dress and lifestyle.

Jimmy, who is one of my Santa Barbara interlocutors, provided me with a contextualized example of the phrase. Jimmy's illustrious musical career of writing the famous Canned Heat song *Harley-Davidson Blues*, playing gigs at Hells Angels' clubhouses, and playing bass for Dick Dale and John Lee Hooker has always fascinated me. At the age of eighty-six, Jimmy still plays music – for himself mainly. He still rides and he still kick starts his vintage choppers. Some six years ago when I first showed up at the shop on my 1951 Harley-Davidson chopper to meet Jimmy, he disregarded the newer twin-cam Harley-Davidson Softtail he was riding and was eager to talk about the knucklehead chopper he was building. Our shared love for music and old motorcycles fostered a close relationship and led me to interview Jimmy about his musical life, growing up on the Southside of Chicago, playing in "mixed-race" blues bands in the 1950s throughout the Chicago and St. Louis circuits, and his immersion in the 1960s-countercultural music scene when he became close friends with the members of Canned Heat, War, and Janis Joplin. In one interview with Jimmy, he told me that the phrase *freak out the squares* was used to describe the performance by hippies and other weirdos for the people (squares) of San Francisco, who would come down to Haight and Ashbury to ogle at the hippies and other weirdos. These degenerates would intentionally spook the interested onlookers, that is, "freak them out." *Freak out the squares*, for Jimmy in the 1960s, took the form of him riding his Harley-Davidson panhead chopper in Southern California while wearing knee-high moccasin boots, a giant fur coat, and a Nazi helmet. *Freak out the squares* thus describes the perlocutionary effect (Austin

1975) on a stereotyped direct object (the squares) by a set of practices (through, as I describe below, an enregistered repertoire of semiotic forms) enacted by its implied subject (the biker, the weirdo, the hippy, and the freak). In this sense, it citationally recalls *other* (illocutionary) performative acts enacted by that subject to/for the square (as an addressee for the performed act) in an imagined chronotope (or socio-time-space; Bakhtin 1981) – in Jimmy's example, the Haight and Ashbury, or, as we discussed above at Mason St. Cycles, or simply on the open road. And further, that this perlocutionary effect has a second-order perlocution, as it were: to frame the performative subject who freaks out the square as *abjected* from the Social.

Freak out the squares is often not spoken or written in everyday parlance; like its original performative function, the ideology is repetitiously *performed* – which is why I treat *freak out the squares* as a citational performative act (Butler 1993; 1997; Nakassis 2016; Silverstein 1997). As I will explicate later in this thesis, the abject is meant to successfully cause a reaction from the square. Due to the fact that the perlocutionary effect of *freak out the squares* depends on a performative act of transgressing a normative boundary which itself is historically changing, what counts as the abject is also continually changing over historical time and space (Austin 1975; Butler 1997). Thus, the abject is some *thing* that is always changing in correlation with the changing face of the square (Heidegger 1971).

Freaking out the squares has thus become enacted through what Michael Silverstein (2003) calls indexical orders, whereby the usage of particular (*n*-th order) indexical signs in a given context (e.g., to freak out the squares) simultaneously works to relay (or "index") schematized macro-level ideological meanings (e.g., of biker and square identities). These *n*+1-th order indexicals, or higher order indexicals, explain how subcultural participants use choppers and other signs of abjection to convey the ideology of rugged individualism integral to the

subculture through signs associated with explicitly violent ideologies. Silverstein states that through increasing degrees of intensity of a sign and through repetitious engagement, higher order indexicals are always mediated by ideologies of various sorts, which they can thus serve to index in interaction (Silverstein 2003). As Asif Agha (2007) has further developed Silverstein's discussion, we can understand different orders of indexical signs to cohere together into registers of various kinds. In thinking of abjection as crucial to the enregisterment of biker cultural forms, I turn to Agha's explication of how registers come to be articulated and changed over time. In his article "Voice, Footing, Enregisterment*,"* Agha expands upon his notion of enregisterment, which documents the "processes whereby distinct forms of speech come to be socially recognized (or enregistered) as indexical of speaker attributes by a population of language users" (Agha 2005; 38). He argues that an individual's pragmatic use of role alignment functions to metapragmatically shape the social personae that comes to be indexed through the process of enregisterment. Each register has a social domain which denotes the interlocutors who establish belonging with one another through recognizing that which is semiotically indexed. Through the pragmatics of role alignment, users of the register establish belonging to an enregistered social domain, as well as augment the macro-level stereotypes semiotically associated with a register (Agha 2005).

The desire to *freak out the squares* remains a priority among chopper dudes; however, chopper dudes throughout the decades have reflexively altered their semiotic and ideological approaches to collective self making. This is evident in terms of the chopper dude and is seen by the abject changing given its spatio-temporal context. Through role alignment, individuals within the social domain can alter the macro-level semiotics associated with a given register through repetitious and copious pragmatic work. This process helps explain the decrease in sexually

objectifying comics and language and racist advertisements that were frequently featured in older magazines to which I will soon explicate. These changes as such make it difficult to determine what the outlaw biker register *resembles* across the board. Nonetheless, through my ethnographic involvement and examination of cultural artifacts, I have come to understand the outlaw biker register as an embodiment of the concepts of rugged individualism, working-class attitudes surrounding craftwork, and abjection.

This thesis concerns how indexical signs are pragmatically deployed to convey ideologies about what it means to be an American (of a particular sort, to be sure) in the early twenty-first century. Although being an American is expressed differently in the panoply of biker subcultures throughout the United States and the world, for the participants in this biker subculture, being American has everything to do with preserving a way of life that is in direct conversation with Whiteness, masculinity, socio-economic class, rugged individualism, and identity politics. In what follows, I examine how enregistered aesthetic signifiers and linguistic forms associated – or more technically, as I discuss below, *enregistered* (Agha 2007) – with the metapragmatic phrase *freak out the squares* produce discursive notions of countercultural American biker identity (McBee 2015). I explore how subcultural participants reflexively engage with hegemonic liberal discourses of equality and civility concomitant with the square that, in combination with the economic devastation of wide swaths of the United States, have elicited widespread White middle and lower class discontent and rage that has fueled the rise of the alt-right in recent decades (Anderson 2016; Crothers 2019; Hochschild 2016; Jardina 2019). While the alt- and far-right have been the object of much scholarly and public debate, various subcultures of the larger American biker culture share such strong libertarian sensibilities, yet present a different vantage point and open up into a differently diverse social world partially distinct from these right-wing

movements. Far from being an organized and normative political movement, the vintage chopper subculture is an embodied engagement with contemporary realities of diversity and difference that simultaneously maintain a strong sense of nostalgia for the open road of another era.

Historically, traditional outlaw biker ideologies have developed through the internalization of self-circulating aesthetic discourse and through the mobilization of an ethos by American public media and political pundits (most notably Ronald Reagan (McBee 2015) and Donald J. Trump) to realize political agendas. The justification for investigating the violent semiotics of a subculture historically linked to racist and sexist violence during a time of extreme racist and sexist injustice in the United States stems from my desire to understand what sustaining symbols of Whiteness and sexism offers for biker subcultures (Hochschild 2016); Dyer 1997; Hartigan Jr. 1999; Lott 1993; McBee 2015). This has led to my turn towards examining the pragmatic effects of violent semiotics and their perplexing relation to identity politics. I argue that investigating how differing cultures are shaped by identity politics as accusatory discourse might elucidate why dialogue *feels* impoverished among seemingly vying political camps in the United States (Anderson 2016; Fukuyama 2018; Hodges 2016).

I understand identity politics in this thesis as an epistemological and methodological approach aimed to achieve reparations for marginalized communities (historically African-Americans and women) that has become adopted by mainstream left media (Nicholson 2008). This thesis then additionally aims to address the fractured imagined publics shaped by the practice of identity politics (Anderson 2006; Fukuyama 2018; Warner and Berlant 2002). The uptake of identity politics, scrutinized by my interlocutors as an accusatory dialectic practice that espouses strident moral relativism, becomes evident in my examination of *freak out the squares* as one driving force behind violent semiotic usage. With this in mind, I aim to show how

individuals use higher order indexicals and their ideological positioning to differentiate themselves from those squares who engage in identity politics through offensive signs.

Methodological Approach Towards Understanding *Freak Out the Squares*

While bikers are stereotypically cast as White, male, patriotic, lower-class, and violent, the chopper dudes I personally engaged with in Southern California didn't entirely fit that script (McBee 2016; Miyake 2018; Wolf 1991). Although most of the chopper dudes with whom I've interacted in the Southern California subculture were White heterosexual cis-males, they were neither entirely politically right nor left leaning. Women and Latino, Asian-American, and Black men were minorities in the Southern California chopper subculture – however, these gendered and racial differences didn't create visible social divides.[4] The friend groups I saw throughout my involvement with the subculture at swap-meets, chopper shows, and rides were integrated and heterogeneous.

The nostalgic thrust of biker identity is especially strong for those chopper dudes within the American chopper (custom motorcycle) subculture who preserve, restore, and rebuild post-WW2 vintage styled American choppers. Historically, those who adhere to this style have authenticated the ideologies and images of American biker identity that advocate for libertarian sensibilities (McBee 2016; Wolf 1991). Over my seven-year involvement with the subculture, I've noticed how concerns for preserving chopper artifacts, aesthetic practices, styles, history, ideologies, and ethics were voiced by individuals from different generations, races, and locales. The preservation of identity centered upon self-sufficiency and using one's hands was shared by

[4] There are growing numbers of women visible within chopper and biker subcultures as evident with the international group of womxn riders known as *The Litas*.

way of older generations sharing technical, aesthetic, ideological, and historical knowledge with younger ones. These realities are reflected in self-circulating cultural media in the form of younger generation's chopper magazines that have grown over the course of the past 15 years. Such magazines preserve the aesthetics associated with rugged individualism, yet actively exclude *overtly* racist, sexist, and xenophobic semiotic practices that were commonplace in earlier biker aesthetic and media forms. This puzzle formed the leading question undergirding a significant portion of this thesis: how are reflexive responses to current identity politics reconciled with the drive to preserve artifacts and cultural practices concomitant with *freak out the squares*?

Situating my work within linguistic anthropology, I methodologically approached answering this question by interviewing chopper builders, photographers, writers, editors, and chopper show organizers who enstructure self-organized cultural texts.[5] By examining the pragmatics of violent sign usage among those who are invested in the vintage chopper scene, I was able to understand the metapragmatic commentary generated from engaging with violent semiotics. I define violent semiotics as those signs whose perlocutionary effect (Austin 1975) is aimed to incite actual or imagined damage upon the being of an intended subject (e.g., swastikas, the overt display of weapons such as guns and knives, and cartoons in magazines that depict women as dumb and sex-crazed animals). While I wish I was able to provide more ethnographic material beyond the personal memories provided in the opening vignette, due to the 2020 global

[5] My interlocutors included: Editors in Chief: Cary Brobeck (*Choppers Magazine*), Dean Micetich (*Dice Magazine*), Tim O'Keefe (*Stag Magazine*); photographers: Michael Lichter (*Easyriders*), Ken Nagahara (*Ripper, Roller,* and *Stag*); chopper show organizer: Grant Peterson (*Born Free Motorcycle Show*); and bike builders: Sam Baker, Al Korff, Max Schaaf, Jimmy*, Phil*, and Nando*. Those interlocutors with the * desired to remain anonymous.

pandemic, it was imperative that I turn towards remote interviewing of interlocutors. My decision to reach out and interview the bikers I selected was based upon their active contribution to the production of choppers and the reproduction of outlaw biker ideologies.

Although the chopper subculture is similar in some ways to the subcultural style of interest to the Birmingham Schools of the 1970s, I do not approach style with the same class-based sociological lens (Hall and Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979; Willis 1981 and 2014). Where style in the works of the Birmingham School scholars is used to explain how youth subcultures create diverse aesthetic styles and cultural practices that respond to broad issues of class conflict, I turn to the localized performative event to understand how *style* is a reflexive engagement whereby individuals engage with aesthetics in their own way to address ideological and ethical differences. My methodological approach to understanding how ideologies are reproduced through cultural artifacts within the chopper subculture thus follows the methodology that Constantine Nakassis employs in *Doing Style: Youth and Mass Mediation in South India*. Unlike the Birmingham scholars who studied style in the 1970s, Nakassis' approaches *style* (in the italicized sense) not as an analytic to describe the aesthetics and social practices derivative from unified class-based subcultural groups; but rather as ethnographic datum to procure understandings about its pragmatic and individualized function (Nakassis 2016). [6]

In arguing that embodying abjection is a reflexive and semiotic practice, which is fundamental to what I call the outlaw biker register, I examine how these interlocutors

[6] Although Nakassis' treatment of the italicized style also describes a context-specific semiotic practice in Tamil Nadu, India, I use the italicized version of *style* while referring to the pragmatic and metapragmatic effects engaging in this citational practice does for interlocutors.

differentiate themselves from the square through an *abject*.[7] Cultural ideologies are embodied in nearly every facet of the chopper and while the engagement with violent semiotics performs the bigoted and discriminatory beliefs of some individuals in the subculture, the displaying of violent signs also serves a transgressive function that is integral to the American outlaw biker register. Examining the individual styling of a chopper and chopper magazines illuminates the other metapragmatic discourse beneath the surface of these violent signs through which subcultural members transgress perceived boundaries that they feel limit their liberty. I discuss these violent semiotics not to apologize for the sexist and racist actions that perpetuate hate, and bigotry; rather, my aim is to illuminate ulterior reasons as to why such discriminatory semiotic practices perdure for sects of the American public (Dyer 1997).

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What follows is organized into three parts. The first titled *The Process of Enregisterment of the Outlaw Biker* examines how the baptismal historical events that spurred the semiotic associations between biker, outlaw, and abject came to represent the outlaw biker register through journalism, film, and magazines. The second section, titled *Freaks Maintain Difference* is an ethnographic exploration of the pragmatic and metapragmatic work surrounding my interlocutor's commitment to differentiation that is involved in *freak out the squares.* I examine how magazine editors and chopper builders use magazines and choppers as a nexus of personal ideologies to differentiate themselves from the square. I catalogue how these differentiations surrounding identity politics and working with one's hands shape the aesthetics and ethics associated with the outlaw biker register and are thus used to establish subcultural belonging.

[7] I prefer the indefinite article of "an" as opposed to the definite article "the" prior to abject to describe the flexibility of abject signs used within the subculture.

The final section, *Establishing Difference Through Abjection* examines how chopper builders and magazine editors pragmatically engage with abjection to convey personal ideologies and establish identity. I locate what engaging with naked women in magazines, embodying a "dirty" lifestyle, and swastikas on choppers does for my interlocutors.

The Process of Enregisterment of the Outlaw Biker

The performative concept and practice, *freak out the squares*, historically indexes the conception of a biker as a tramp and outlaw. American motorcycle historian Randy McBee locates the AMA (American Motorcyclist Association) sponsored gypsy tour (a weekend-long organized motorcycle event that includes riding) that took place in July of 1947 in Hollister, California as the baptismal event that planted the seed of the violent outlaw in the imaginations of American publics (McBee 2015). Cyclists, who were individual enthusiasts, part of riding clubs, or were WW2 veterans, began to arrive on Thursday and each day the number of motorcyclists swelled. McBee states that by Saturday there were an estimated 4,000-5,000 riders in the small town of Hollister whose population was fewer than 3,000 residents. About 500 riders had crowded the main-drag in Hollister where excessive amounts of alcohol were consumed and some began to perform stunts on the street. Overwhelmed, the Hollister police had to formally call for back-up to wrangle the cyclists. There were beer bottles littered in the street, belligerently drunk riders engaged in unlawful drag racing, and alleged fights. The call for reinforcement police led reporters to describe this event as a riot, whereby motorcyclists aimed to take over a town for their own perverse pleasures (McBee 2015). The empirical basis of these claims remains rather

unimportant; for this sensationalized story made the American headlines and thus started to castigate the activity of motorcycling and identify motorcyclists as outlaws.[8]

Okay, we understand the biker as an *outlaw*, but how do you recognize an *outlaw biker*?

McBee demonstrates that the sensationalized press coverage at the Hollister rally in 1947 blurred the lines between fact and fiction which thus spurred the semiotic orientation of "the biker" as a kind of social figure who was recognizable across a wider social domain than before. This discourse was evinced, and further disseminated in stereotyped form, in 1953 with the seminal biker film *The Wild One* wherein Marlon Brando, playing the protagonist biker tramp, and Lee Marvin, in the role of the antagonist biker tramp, raid a small town, take over their bar, race down the streets, and steal the young women of the town. *The Wild One* was successful in establishing a verisimilitude that blurred the lines of fact and fiction and solidified the figure of the biker in the public imagination. What came from the movie was the visual portrayal of stereotypes and archetypes that fueled the imaginations of bikers to come, as well as circulated a repertoire of signs taken as indexical *of* that social figure (e.g., the leather jacket, the bike, specified speech forms and embodied modes of personal presentation, etc.). For example, when talking about what initially drove Sonny Barger, an infamous president of the Oakland Hell's Angels, to buy a Harley-Davidson and embody a particular biker style, he stated that it was Lee Marvin's dirty, unruly, and uncivil character in *The Wild One* that inspired him (Barger and Zimmerman 2000). The biker identity portrayed in *The Wild One* that inspired one of the most

[8] The AMA would later denounce such outlaws as belonging to 1% of the entire motorcycling community – hence the emergence of the association of "1%er" with outlaw motorcyclists (McBee 2015).

iconic outlaw bikers was objectively not concerned about the factuality of events that established the biker as tramp stereotype; rather, this biker identity, and those who later embodied it, is more concerned with the ideological associations made through semiotic interplay.

As the customization of motorcycles and cars by youth and WW2 veterans who formed clubs during the 1950s grew, the chopper and hot-rod became youthful emblems of rebellion (Levingston 2003; McBee 2015; Wolf 1991). Different styles of custom bikes, such as bobbers and choppers, were popularized and distinguished from stock Harley-Davidsons by way of their slimmed down, excessively chromed and shiny, colorful or blacked-out, and outrageously ornate appearance. Choppers were seen side-by-side at annual custom car shows throughout the United States such as the Grand National Roadster Show in Oakland, California and the Kansas City Auto Show in Missouri. Besides seeing these choppers at custom shows, on the road, or at biker clubhouses, one could gain access into this custom culture through the widespread media coverage evident in the 1960s (Thompson 1967; Wood 2003). The outlaw groups who made the news media in the early 1960s, such as the Hells Angels who rode choppers, were also generically cast in a light reminiscent of the 1947 Hollister rally and in *The Wild One.* News accounts of Hells Angels visiting small towns in California such as Hollister and Bass Lake and being charged with rape, theft, assault, and narcotics trafficking were spurred on by lawmaking such as the Lynch Report of 1965 – a piece of legislation drawn together by California Attorney General Thomas C. Lynch aimed at curbing the violence associated with the Hells Angels Motorcycle Club.

Where news coverage in such moral panics seemed to focus more on the individual biker as abject, the chopper itself as an abject object was made visible through film and magazines. Biker flicks such as *The Wild Angels, Easy Rider, Hells Angels 69, The Born Losers, Rebel*

Rousers, and the like also functioned for their mass publics, like *The Wild One*, as quasi-documentary texts affording insight into an imagined (and increasingly real) biker subculture. These texts, in a sense, *realized* bike subculture as they were taken up, by bikers and non-bikers alike, as resources for social action and meaning. These movies drew from news accounts of outlaw biker clubs and embellished the more nefarious activities to depict the biker and their chopper as violent. Although these films portrayed actual choppers made by renowned bike builders, they didn't showcase the chopper as such and its craftwork, which were explored in self-circulating cultural media that magazines – such as *Choppers Magazine, Street Chopper Magazine, Big Bike Magazine, Custom Chopper,* and *Easyriders* (all of which with a smaller, relatively more in-group circulation than the mainstream films listed above) – purveyed.[9]

Easyriders has had a lasting impact upon decades of biker subcultures via its financial success through subsidiary magazines, clothing, and motorcycle events.[10] Established in 1970, *Easyriders* magazine is an American magazine that features customized motorcycles, mainly Harley-Davidsons, and the precarious outlaw biker lifestyle surrounding these custom bikes. By contrast to the mainstream films noted above, *Easyriders'* multifarious content was specifically catered to the adult biker majority – White, lower-class, American, heterosexual, cisgender males – and featured custom motorcycles, naked women, history, news, stories, artwork, and submissions (travel photos, comments about the magazine, letters from incarcerated bikers, and classified advertisements). Regardless of the content within each given section, humor and

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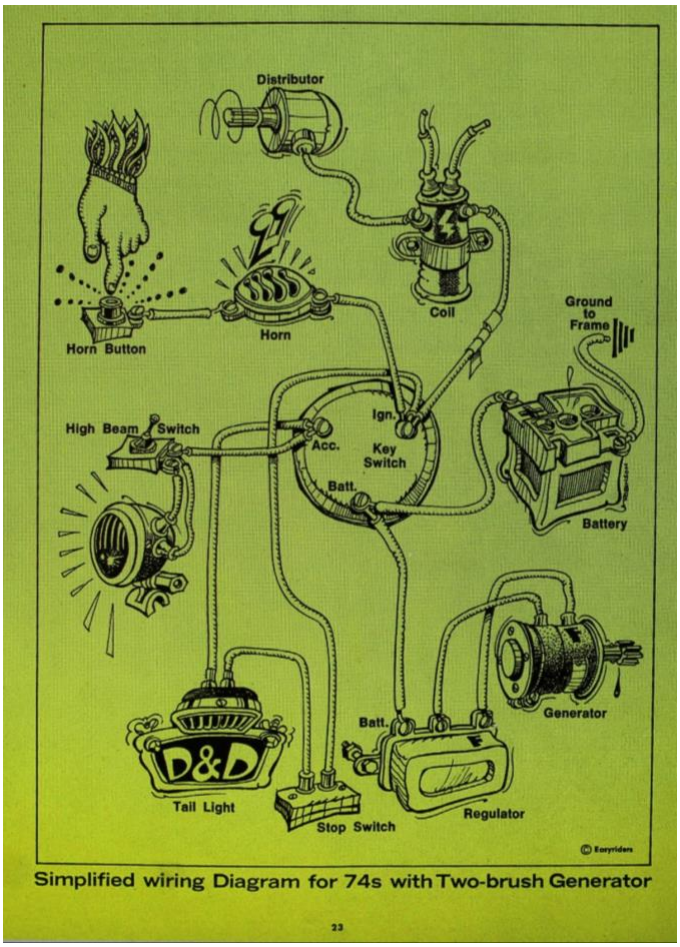
[9] Most notably, the bike builder Dean Lanza built choppers for the movie *The Wild Angels* and Clifford Vaughs and Ben Hardy (both Black men) built the choppers featured in *Easy Rider.*

[10] *Easyriders* was produced under the Paisano Publications corporate umbrella who also published the magazines *In The Wind*, *Iron Horse,* and *Tattoo*. Paisano Publications also created *Easyriders Products* that sold a variety of clothing and biker accessories such as beer mugs.



How to Wire Your Chopper - Easyriders - December 1972, Issue 10

rugged individualism were semiotically interwoven throughout the magazine – instilling a coherent sense of what a biker outlook is. Rugged individualism is cited through handcrafted choppers in *Easyriders* and "how to guides" that encouraged readers to get out to their garage and wire their chopper or rake the neck of their motorcycle frame. Arguably, these act as identity forming tools where the magazine itself functions as an etiquette guide that becomes desirable for the male biker.

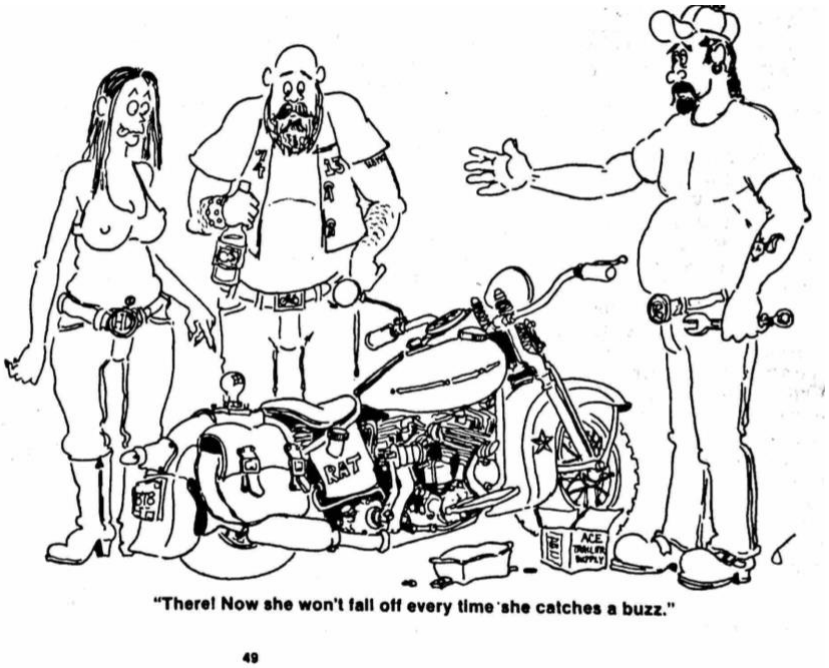
Through cultural media such as magazines, once undesirable semiotic signifiers – as initially circulated through news reportage and later film – came to be repurposed as valorized in-group emblems of biker identity, though – as we will see – these valorized second-order indexes did not *efface* or replace their stigmatized, abject first-order indexical values that engaged them in a continual dialogic relation. This process is akin to those discussed by Miyako Inoue in her work on the formation of Japanese middle-class women's language practices. In *Vicarious Language: Gender and Linguistic Modernity in Japan*, Inoue argues that language ideologies which regiment schoolgirl speech were constructed through demarcations made by the other, which in her case study is the subject position of male intellectuals who held hegemonic sway over schoolgirl speech. Schoolgirl speech, Inoue writes, became the basis for a

meaningful community of language practitioners when such so-typified nonsense, as heard by and publicly circulated by the male intelligentsia, gave new valence to an utterance (Inoue 2006). Inoue documents how this process, that occurred through the continuous citation of schoolgirl speech in magazines and commodities of various kinds, worked to undermine the original and undesirable political meaning attributed by the other and instead reified so-called schoolgirl speech into a complex semiotic practice desired to be replicated by the modern Japanese woman (Inoue 2006).

Schoolgirl speech being labeled as nonsense and vulgar was done so because it disturbed the symbolic order of the male intelligentsia via what the expected social role a woman was supposed to inhabit (i.e. teyo-dawa indexed the geisha and lacked the usage of honorifics). This follows an arc similar to that of the biker. While the act of motorcycling was, at a time, not indexical as transgressive of the social order, after the mediatized moral panic at Hollister the act of motorcycling started to become enregistered *as* a disruption of the normative boundaries surrounding family and income (McBee 2015). And by becoming indexical *as* transgressive of mainstream morality, it itself became increasingly citable, with inverted in-group social value, in and through the consumption of magazines, clothing, bikes, and language. Through this process, the vulgar became something to desire – which was shared among the emerging countercultural subcultures of the time whose attitudes also became deeply commoditized (Frank 1997).

Where swastikas on clothing or bikes, misogynist cartoons, and the destruction of Japanese motorcycles as a symbolic act of violence against Japanese economic influence in American markets were commonplace in magazines between the 1960s–1990s, the presence of such offensive and transgressive acts aren't as apparent now. For example, the objectification of women present in this cartoon from the 1983 July issue of *Easyriders* are not to be found in

current chopper magazines. The text that reads, “There! Now she won’t fall off every time she catches a buzz” is accompanied by a cartoon of a busty women with her tongue sticking out of her mouth pointing at a phallic object to sit upon while the couple goes for rides. This comic that casts women as bike accessories aims to humorously gratify the male biker. Abjection in these cartoons inculcates a masculinity and sexual deviancy in the outlaw biker register that works to differentiate the tough and outlandish bikers who will continue to read *Easyriders* from the emasculated individuals too “prudish” to engage in this linguistic practice. Similarly, one could open an issue of *Easyriders* and find a sea of women “dumping ‘em out” – flashing their breasts to the camera that is – in sections such as the “Ol’ Lady Contest” (later called the “Fox Hunt”) where male readership selects the “hottest” girlfriend or wife submitted to the magazine to win a title and small cash prize. Another example regarding shifts in the usage of violent semiotics would be the lack of biker paraphernalia for sale in chopper magazines that features swastikas. Although cast belt buckles with swastikas seen in the 1970s and 1980s became less commonplace in *Easyriders* advertisements in the 1990s and beyond, other Anti-



Cartoon from Easyriders, July 1983, Issue 121

Defamation League registered hate symbols such as iron crosses are still to be found on casted motorcycle parts and painted on gas tanks (Anti-Defamation League 2021). In the case of some parts that are current replicas of discontinued chopper parts from the 1960s – such as this foot-clutch pedal – featuring an iron cross comes to function as a second-order indexical, where the symbol works beyond initially shocking the square – it cites the lifestyle and aesthetic choices associated with those bikers in the 1960s.

Although some practices remain evident in biker media such as the objectification of women through pornography and Schutzstaffel symbols (SS bolts), overtly sexist cartoons and Japanese bike bashing competitions aren't visible in the few independent chopper magazines still in print. In fact, such magazines that are run by small groups of die-hard artists who care about preserving the aesthetics and cultural practices that were featured in the more chopper oriented and less pornographic magazines of the 1970s (such as *Choppers Magazine* and *Street Chopper*) disdain these artistic choices made by *Easyriders* post the 1980s. Like the chopper magazines before them, current publications such as the American produced *Dice Magazine, Choppers Magazine,* and *Stag Magazine,* British produced *Greasy Kulture*, and Japanese produced *Roller Magazine* and *Ripper Magazine*, hold professionalizing potential for bike builders. Even though Instagram is now a premier place

Dayten Reproduction "Lee" Clutch Pedal with Iron Cross – Photo Taken from Choppers Magazine, April 2019, Issue 1

to share builds and legitimize a builder's, photographer's, and company's work; the magazine remains a valued medium among those in the subculture.

Freaks Maintain Difference

I begin this section by examining how Tim O'Keefe (editor-in-chief of *Stag Magazine*) uses his magazine and choppers to differentiate himself and the subcultural readership from the perceived square. I knew of Tim's bikes before I heard of *Stag Magazine.* Tim's 1967 Harley-Davidson shovelhead chopper influenced my choice in parts when I was building a 1951 Harley-Davidson pan-shovel chopper around six years ago. The '67 looked like it came from the mid-to-late 1960s – it was what chopper dudes would call "period correct." A stock rake neck, stock length front end, solo-seat and passenger pad, short sissy-bar, megaphone upsweep exhaust pipes, and a ton of chrome parts accentuating a gleaming baby-blue paint job cite popular styles evident in the early 1960s. It invites one to imagine with the bike – simultaneously fantasizing about what future and past the bike could have as one rides down the road in 2021 or in the 1960s-time period from which this style emerged. One look at the highly-curated parts on Tim's bike demonstrates how deliberate he is with *style*. It becomes evident in what follows that Tim

Tim O'Keefe's 1967 Harley-Davidson Chopper - Photo by Tim O'Keefe

performs *style* through his choppers and *Stag Magazine* by referencing a way of life concomitant with the aesthetics he chooses to cite. For Tim, communicating through the visual semiotics of vintage chopper aesthetics differentiates both bikers from squares and "in-group" bikers from square "out-group" bikers.

Although *Stag Magazine* draws from the canon of biker rags in that he features choppers, women posing with choppers, nude women, and men on their bikes, the magazine differs from previous publications in that it offers no text. Text in other magazines is used to convey the technical aspects of choppers, chopper stories, jokes, advertisements, and news for the subcultural readership. Tim relayed to me that he values mysticism and the work that comes along with participating in a subculture. He stated that the lack of text works to create a mystique around the images of *Stag Magazine* and it allows the reader to subjectively connect with the images in a heteroglossic manner where the images engender multiple types of meanings (Bakhtin 1981; Interview with author March 2021). Tim called this practice of deducing meaning from images engaging with a *covert language*. By using photographic and editing techniques, such as focusing in on specific parts of the bike or employing specific colors in the background of a page, Tim gets at what he believes is "an encoded language that people are sensitive to" (Interview with author March 2021). Expanding on this, Tim stated, "so I really started to understand that there is a language that exists in these visual presentations" (Interview with author March 2021). Tim's *covert language*, as evident through featuring what he finds valuable on a bike, is also a citational practice that references other indexicals associated with the vintage chopper subculture ranging from what is aesthetically sublime or beautiful (Burke 1803), the work ethic of the person or people who built the chopper, as well as the social facts that shape how abjection is embodied through *freak out the squares*.

Tim's engagement with *covert language* in *Stag Magazine* is an act of *style.* Nakassis's notion of *style* as a highly citational performative act that is rendered meaningful in the local context of its use is particularly applicable to understanding how Tim uses the citationality of *style* to reproduce the subcultural ideologies that authenticate *Stag Magazine* and the ethos he values (Nakassis 2016). *Style* in this sense is a functional tool that through a series of citational actions, works to convey the subcultural ethics that influence an object's value. Tim's *covert language* is an act of *style* in the localized sense in that Tim engages with his subcultural readership through a visual language that is only ascertained by riding vintage choppers and being immersed in the subculture. Instead of only featuring the conventional A-Side (cam-chest side) and B-Side (primary drive side) pictures of the bike, *style* in *Stag Magazine* is conveyed by Tim choosing to print full-page pictures of small details only those who build choppers would appreciate. *Style* in this sense produces perlocutionary effects upon a targeted readership who will interpret a bike and the builder according to Tim's wishes. For example, by featuring a full-page aerial view of a seat and an oil tank, which might look rather banal to the individual who has not built their own chopper or spent countless hours staring at these bikes, Tim aims to produce feelings of inclusion and respect for those who "get it".

Full-Page Aerial View of an Oil Tank with an Unconventional Repurposed Nut – Taken from Stag Magazine, February 2021, Issue 13

Tim elaborated on why he viewed omitting text as rebellious by saying:

> "I think that is, oh, real rebellion. I, you know, I think rebellion happens in this, you know, secretive, covert language. Maybe some visual imagery, or, you know… not in your… I'm not a big, like… it's funny because it can be in your face" (Interview with author March 2021).

Tim appreciates how *covert language*, that can function as an inside jokes of sorts, simultaneously taunts those who might not understand what is being said as well as empowers those who can laugh at what signs are being presented. Alongside the use of a rebellious covert language in *Stag Magazine*, Tim hopes that the omission of text promotes conversations between individuals in real life where they can ask the questions that came to their mind while viewing *Stag Magazine*. Tim aims to inculcate the ethic of being rewarded for one's work, that is joining a subculture by creating friendships, through the design of the magazine. The caveat though is that for an individual to reap the socio-cultural benefits Tim aims for, their knowledge must be derived from the ontogenetic practice and experience of working on a chopper with their hands (Ingold 2013). Differentiation between the biker and the square is thus demonstrated through speaking a covert language embedded within the visual semiotics present in *Stag Magazine.*

> "For me, what I hope is, is that like, if somebody's bike is in the magazine, that you look at it, you're like, 'yeah, I dig this.' I try to make sure that with it, if I'm doing the photography, that like I'm really getting you the details. Like, I'll give you an overall view and then I'll go in on the details. Just like I feel like you would if you were in person looking at the bike. But what I really hope is that it, like that… what I really hope is that like, people then have conversations with somebody. You know, when they see him, like, that's where I'm hoping, like, the real conversation begins – between people" (Interview with author March 2021).

Showing class and *freaking out the squares*

In a way similar to the Japanese magazines Inoue described regimenting teyo-dawa speech as a middle-class female register, the chopper magazine's aesthetics come to represent ideologies associated with the macro-level categories of socio-economic class (Inoue 2006). Socio-

economic class as an aesthetic and citational tool used to differentiate "in-group" bikers from square "out-group" bikers came to the fore in my interview with Dean Micetich, the editor in chief of *Dice Magazine*.

I first met Dean on a weekend breakfast ride that he partially organized in Los Angeles, California. His tall stature, cool demeanor, and British accent makes him stand out from the rest of the California chopper crowd. Even more captivating though was Dean's black panhead with red flames. I've seen it in different iterations over the years and every form visually conveys an appreciation for the DIY customization times of the 1960s. There are no intricate or flashy parts on Dean's bikes and no visible mass-produced CNC machined billet parts – just a tasteful mix of vintage and handmade parts that can go unnoticed if one isn't familiar with vintage choppers. Where engaging in a *covert language* for Tim relayed the ethos of earning the benefits coinciding with hard work, Dean's *style* realized another key aspect of the outlaw biker register – the importance of class. In our conversation about why he and his business partner Matt Davis decided to create a vintage chopper magazine in 2004, he stated that their desire was grounded in providing an outlet for featuring post-WW2 working-class cultures that seem to be forgotten.

> "A lot of people didn't understand it first. What is this shit? You know, it's like, it was shot really different. And it was not like, there wasn't some like studio shot, big fat tire bike with some ugly model on it. It was just a photoshoot with a cheap camera of some, you know, Triumph chopper, knucklehead chopper – you know. There's just a bit more punk rock than *Easyriders* at the time because there were no other publications, except for *Easyriders*, and obviously, it had been going to shit since the 70s. So, you know, the only other thing that we were competing against, which we were kind of a backlash against, was the whole fucking reality TV bullshit, you know, West Coast Choppers. This was before OCC and all the big West Coast choppers, Jesse James, and like building bikes for fucking Shaq O'Neil for a quarter million dollars. Just horrible shit, you know, we were like fuck that. You can build this bike for three grand in a garage and it's way cooler than this shit" (Interview with author May 2021).

Dice Magazine is yet another medium through which Dean could inscribe his ideologies about choppers and class. In theorizing inscription as it relates to how Tim and Dean use the

magazine as a medium to convey their beliefs, I borrow from Keith M. Murphy's book, *Swedish Design: An Ethnography*, where he characterizes the inscription of belief systems into objects more broadly – arguing that a commodity's shape, size, materiality, color, texture, sheen, and use-function are all aspects of inscription. Expanding on how this conception relates to objects in culture, Murphy writes, "inscriptions operate as sociotechnical instruments not simply because they preserve traces of action and knowledge, but because they at the same time incite further action and generate further knowledge" (Murphy 2015: 146). Inscription then becomes a communicative practice between producer and consumer that involves more than simply reading a word or symbol etched into an object. It is a reflexive act whereby both producer and consumer are interlocutors that speak through cultural semiotics to produce and reproduce cultural values. Dean and Tim both use their magazine as a space to configure aesthetics in their respective manner and thus inscribe their positionality. Dean's explicit differentiation of the less-expensive choppers featured in *Dice* from the expensive choppers featured on mainstream television shows advocates for a DIY approach to the meaning making activity of creating choppers (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). For Dean, this DIY ethos functions as a second-order indexical of working-class positionality precisely because the aesthetics and methods of building the vintage style of bikes featured in *Dice* cite the working-class status of those bike builders in the 1960s. It encourages a lifestyle where meaning and agency are effects of a creative impulse resulting from working with one's hands – not from engaging with expensive computer-machined parts or pricey tools in lavish, televised workspaces (Crawford 2009; Ingold 2013; Tallis 2003; Pirsig 1974). The parts on Dean's bike reify his ideologies about the importance that class difference plays in authenticating an aesthetic – it would be apropos to say Dean is using aesthetics as a political practice through *showing class* (Rancière 2004; Vihalem 2018). *Showing class* is a

phrase within the subculture used to refer to an act or an aesthetic object (like a chopper) as a performance of positive social value and impressive merit. In Dean's case, *showing class* also refers to the aestheticization of working-class ethics through crafted objects. Dean's acts of *showing class* expand upon the meritocratic approach Tim vied for by including a working-class dimension. *Showing class* through these aesthetics and methods works to differentiate those who build vintage choppers from those "biker" squares who buy the expensive choppers Dean spoke of. It is through this visual semiotic differentiation that bikers can infer the ideologies and class-positioning of others by way of *style*.

What is important to note in both of these interviews with magazine editors is that they engage with *style* in the pragmatic sense that Nakassis writes of. Both rebel against a group of people they feel don't align with their ideologies; for Tim, it is a group of individuals who do not put in the effort to receive group recognition and belonging and for Dean, it is a whole culture and class of people who do not work with their hands and instead purchase their cultural involvement. The square for both of these individuals was the person who owned the object but didn't inscribe their belief systems into the chopper through craftwork. Here, a person might technically own a chopper but they might not be welcomed into a subcultural group depending upon how their bike and themselves engage in *style.* The crafted object is treated as an extension of the individual in a way that shapes sociality. It is through engaging with a specific *style* that individuals are able to semiotically engage with each other through the object.

Embodying *freaking out the squares* – you can't *freak out the square* if you don't have soul

When talking about *style* and consumerism in my interview with bike builder Max Schaaf, he used the term *soul* to differentiate those who inscribe themselves into some portion of

the chopper and those square "out-group" bikers who simply purchase choppers. Max Schaaf is probably one of the most well-known vintage chopper builders. He, along with Jason Jessee, has created a living for himself by building vintage-styled choppers while being a professional skateboarder. When I was eighteen I skated religiously and purchased a Harley-Davidson with the intention of making it into a vintage-styled chopper. Max's 1960s and 1970s Frisco-style builds contrasted the big-wheel choppers Dean referenced and his *style* did so in a way that seemed to extend the enthusiastic, amateur, and DIY ethos I appreciated in skateboarding to old Harley-Davidson choppers. But I'm not the only one to be inspired by Max's lifestyle – for it is not alarming to attend a chopper show and see an abundance of people wearing his shirts. When it comes to creativity, embodiment, and DIY ethos, skateboard and chopper lifestyles have many parallels – probably the most notable is the role of showing one's *soul* or individual character (often called *style* in skateboarding).

To Max, *soul* was the quality that gave reified objects their mysticism and cultural meaning. *Soul* was attributed with the economic, personal, and cultural value attached to objects that is conveyed through *style*. When we spoke about the business of buying and selling choppers and the recent trend of raffling off survivor choppers (bikes that were customized back in the day and were left to age in that incarnation), Max stated that he felt the profiteering from such capitalist practices worked to erase the *soul* inscribed in these objects. Max specified:

> **MS:** If you're raffling a bike every week, and it's this crazy old chopper and it's got some crazy history, and some kid out in Colorado – that is just a snowboarder that knows nothing about bikes – like I said, and he was into jet skis the last three years – he wins that bike and he won it for 100 bucks. It gets delivered to his door. He doesn't really know nothing about it, or the *soul* of it, or how fucking special that thing is. And I think that's removing this huge step. And it's, it's removing this, like, the most important part of the experience like that guy needs. That guy should just have a 1200 [Harley-Davidson Sportster] with a button and like a wacky painted tank on it. You know, and then figure out if he even likes to ride motorcycles. This is me. This is just how I feel about, like, what's happening. And what's changing? Because, I mean, dude, you talk to an old guy

about his panhead he rolls up his shirt sleeve, and he's got his VIN number tattooed on his arm.

CB: You've seen that?

MS: Oh yeah dude, my friend Jessee has the number of his generator [shovelhead], several tattooed on him…. I feel like the more important thing than stealing a knucklehead from an old man for pennies on the dollar is putting together your bike and like having that spiritual experience. Yeah, even if I know people that ride bikes that like don't turn a wrench very well or don't weld very well or whatever. But they still were a part of it. You know, like on my buddy made this tank and so and so painted it this guy welded up my pipes for me, man, we were up for like three days trying to figure out these stupid pipes. Like they still had the experience" (Interview with author March 2021).

Soul within Max's sense means working with one's hands. It is also being able to see the human labor in the objects as well. This ethic of seeing the individual in the object becomes what Heather Paxson terms an *unfinished commodity.* Heather Paxson's concept of the unfinished commodity, as discussed in her book *The Life of Cheese: Crafting Food and Value in America*, is used to understand how the visibility of labor within commodities affects the relationship between creativity, authorship, and cultural and economic value. Unfinished commodities contrast Karl Marx's concept of alienation which understands capitalist labor processes as those that objectify laborers by making invisible the worker and their labor (Marx 1961). Paxson argues that for artisanal cheese makers to make a living, they must sell an *unfinished* commodity (artisanal cheese) that itself embodies and shows the labor that goes into the product. Along with the cheese itself embodying the labor of the cheese maker and its environment, what sells an unfinished product is the story that coincides within the cheese (Paxson 2012). Unlike Marx's concept of alienation, Paxson determined that being able to see the total ecological work of the human, animal, and environment adds economic value to the cheese. Akin to Paxson's work on artisanal cheese makers, seeing the work in a chopper is highly valued by Max and those within the vintage chopper subculture as something that gives *soul* and cultural value to an object. *Soul*, as visually inscribed into an object through seeing individual craftwork, works to further

differentiate the biker from the square. In Max's view – even if one owns a vintage chopper – if a person does not invest their *soul* into the bike, then they are a square "out-group" biker.

Freak out the squares **through political abstinence**

I conclude this section by discussing the metapragmatics surrounding *freak out the squares* and the individual choice of abstaining from politics. In my interview with bike builder Al Korff he spoke of how he advocated for a rather existentialist approach to society by way of abstaining from political involvement in the spoken sense. Al doesn't really care about what other people think is necessarily logical – and that's his *style.* Al's bikes are crusty – a lot of them look like they were dug out of the grave of an old outlaw club member from the 1960s. Usually every piece on his bikes are pitted with rust or covered in grime. They also usually flaunt large iron crosses or weapons that were commonly featured on bikes in the 1960s. Biker history is important to Al, so when I had the chance to interview him I was curious as to what the term biker meant to him. Al provided a laconic answer to my question that surprisingly also explained the extra metapragmatic work behind abstaining from politics in general.

> "My whole life is just sort of like FTW [fuck the world], you know, which is like the biker like, mantra, you know, like, like, I'm just not into like the idea of living the nine to five super square life. Then again, I do have three kids. We have a house and a mortgage and all that shit too. But I still just feel like I've never voted, I really don't give a shit about anything else other than trying to have fun. And I think that's kind of like what being a biker is all about. You know?" (Interview with author April 2021).

Abstaining from politics in general is a metapragmatic engagement with a perceived biker ethos revolving around what Al terms FTW. Choosing fun over politics is one way subcultural individuals realize their ideologies and in effect *freak out the square* who cares deeply about politics. FTW differentiates the in-group biker from the out-group square biker and the biker

from the square by way of justifying and authenticating the apathetic attitude for everything in life that doesn't revolve around making and riding choppers.

Establishing Difference Through Abjection

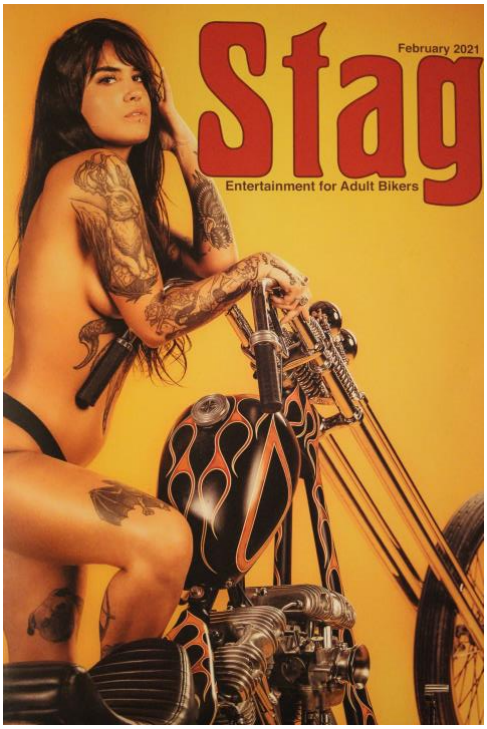
In the previous section, I engaged with examples from my interviews to explain how prominent chopper magazine editors and chopper builders differentiate the biker from the square by way of ethical contrast. As will become evident in this section with the naked women in *Stag Magazine*, the vintage choppers of Santa Barbara, and a swastika on a gas tank, ideologies inscribed through *freak out the squares* is a reflexive and context-dependent deployment of signs. As Sue Gal and Judith Irvine state, ideologies are not floating miasma that exist out of the context from which they are used. Rather, ideologies are productive parts of people's active making of social life (Gal and Irvine 2019). The sign identification associated with ideologizing differences that which Gal and Irvine investigate is executed through a series of processes whereby indexes become associated with their depictions around *axes of differentiation* – that is, a "schema of qualitative contrast both for indexical signs and for what they are taken to represent" (Gal and Irvine 2019: 19). *Freak out the squares* is thus a performative semiotic process of *rhematization* in Gal and Irvine's sense. *Rhematization*, where a "contrast of indexes is interpreted as a contrast in depictions," works to realize the vintage chopper as an instantiation of say working-class pride for the Santa Barbara interlocutors, but not for the gentrifying socio-economic elite of Santa Barbara given that the associated indexes of dirtiness and violence concomitant with the vintage chopper undermine the cleanliness and safety of the wealthy (Gal and Irvine 2019: 19). The vintage chopper and other violent semiotics acting as axes of

differentiation between abjection for the square and empowerment for the chopper dude, depends upon how it engages with other indexes.

The metapragmatics of naked women and *freak out the squares*

Like the various chopper magazines that feature naked women, such as *Easyriders* and *The Horse*, Tim also features naked women in *Stag Magazine*. Surprisingly, Tim elaborates on this ethic of putting in the work to be part of a culture when he speaks about the naked women featured in his magazine. Although *Stag Magazine* includes naked women in their issues, the treatment of the female body and the male gaze is slightly different than the typical "in your face" pornographic focus on female body parts in previous chopper magazines such as *Easyriders* (Joans 2001). Not necessarily empowering, yet not entirely denigrating, the photos of a naked woman in the February 2021 issue for example expose her body in a sublime-like fashion rather than a hardcore pornographic like way. Contrary to the seemingly less-agentive model on the cover of the magazine who is portrayed through her fragile one-legged and one-handed stance, the fully nude woman casually standing in full frame has no bike to lean on (Goffman 1979). Her relaxed body and stoic facial expression seem to mimic the desolate environment where the photos were taken. In our interview, Tim mentioned that he approaches nude women in the manner that American photographer Jock Sturges approaches naked bodies. When speaking about an

Naked Women in Stag Magazine - Taken from Stag Magazine, February 2021, Issue 13



Model on the Cover of Stag Magazine - Taken from Stag Magazine, February 2021, Issue 13

experience he had with Sturges, Tim relayed something that struck him about how Sturges views the photograph as a transcendent medium.

"Basically, he spent a lot of time talking about this photo of this little girl on a beach building a sand castle or something like that. And his whole point was that in that moment, like, the photograph is, you know, the photograph is what it is. But in that moment, that girl like she ceases to exist and becomes one with the creation" (Interview with author March 2021).

Tim aims to capture this enveloping character of the photographic medium itself espouses in *Stag Magazine* through the pictures of women and choppers. The approach taken in *Stag Magazine* encourages multiple types of gaze that go beyond the typical somatic response generated by a heterosexual male audience consuming pornography (Paasonen 2007). It does not aim to emancipate the female body from the male gaze, but offers an artistic view of choppers and women that is absent from the typical subjugation of the female body in previous chopper magazines. Tim relates this back to the magazine being substantiated by a *covert language*:

> "For, the magazine is a secret language. There is a secret aspect to every issue of *Stag Magazine*… if you're looking for it. If you're not, it's choppers and titties, right? At the very least, you're going to get your $14.75 worth I feel. And if… if you're if you're like interested, you can go back through and can find a lot more. A lot more" (Interview with author March 2021).

Tim's use of the magazine as a medium to inscribe his ideologies provides a basis for readers to engage with aesthetics in a manner that conveys specific value systems. Deploying this *covert language* as realized through naked women in the magazine is one way Tim creates a mystique associated with the way of life that outlaw bikers before him created. He relayed to me

that communicating in this aesthetic language requires meticulous attention to minor details. Learning which minor details are important, such as using a specific bolt with an appealing head, conveys the time, dedication, and hard work spent studying photos of old choppers, watching old chopper flicks, and building one's own bike. Naked women in *Stag Magazine* then functions a second-order indexical in that they function as abjection for politically-correct (PC) squares *and* they allude to the ethics of rugged individualism embedded in the mystique of this *covert language*. *Freak out the squares* in this sense explains how naked women, organized through the poetic arrangement of *Stag Magazine*, creates subcultural belonging by playing into historical and ideological differences between the biker and the square.

Freak out the squares **as a pragmatic response to gentrification**

The working-class dimension of inscribing ethics through craftwork, which through higher-order indexicals aimed to *freak out the square*, became strikingly evident in my group interview with my interlocutors in Santa Barbara. In their case, the associated class dimension of the ethic of working with one's hands worked to pragmatically *freak out the square* in Santa Barbara. The subcultural participants who I interviewed in Santa Barbara, CA saw the square as the gentrifier. The gentrifier extends the class-based and ideological categories that defined the square decades prior, but in this case, the modern-day gentrifier embodies a different set of signifiers. The Santa Barbara gentrifier is viewed as physically clean, counter-intuitively politically-correct, consumeristic, and un-patriotic. These squares, I observed and was told, are visibly identifiable through the Tesla they drive, the Patagonia jacket they wear, the million-dollar house they live in, and the farm-to-table restaurant they dine in.

This relational play between biker and square evinces the co-construction of identity elucidated in the work of Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall. They argue that identity is a constitutive product of the pragmatic and metapragmatic interplay between self and the other (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Similarly, identities index macro-level demographic categories through pragmatics. Bucholtz and Hall also demonstrate that identities are constructed by attending to cultural similarities and differences. Notably, it is through visible, felt, and imagined boundaries of similarity and difference between the chopper dude and square publics that the abject is formed. How the chopper dude imagines the square in relation to the boundaries they construct shapes what abjection resembles. From my ethnographic data, when this presupposition is true then the abject remains in use, but when the indexical entailment encompassing the abject proves to not to freak out the supposed square, then the abject changes (Anderson 2006; Silverstein 1976; 2014). The next two ethnographic vignettes document how felicitous and infelicitous responses to abjection engender a reflexive response by my interlocutors (Austin 1975; Butler 1997).

The individuals in the opening vignette are the Santa Barbara interlocutors who I interviewed. I have known these intergenerational, working-class, White and Latino straight cis-males for close to six years now. On paper, Phil and Danny are Mason St. Cycles, but anyone who frequents the building knows that Jimmy always has a hand in different builds. Bike building is a group effort at Mason St. Cycles. Phil welds parts and builds the engines, Danny orders all the parts, sells the bikes, and helps with the aesthetics, and Jimmy often does small intricate work on the bikes like custom LED taillights. Phil, Danny, and Jimmy each have their own *style* and it becomes visible through their work. For example, Phil (whose nickname is "the claw" due to an accident that left him with three fingers on one hand) is an expert at building Harley-Davidson race bikes so he aims to make bikes faster by porting his own heads or by

shaving off weight by making parts out of light-weight aluminum instead of heavier steel. Older and younger men who are into vintage bikes often frequent the shop. Nando, an older Latino man, and Sam, a White male bike builder in his early thirties, were there the day I conducted a group interview with Phil and Jimmy. Unfortunately, Danny, who runs the auto-repair shop that houses Mason St. Cycles, was too busy working on cars to sit in on the interview. I asked these men who ride old Harley-Davidsons made between the years of 1936–1984 a series of questions about *freak out the squares*, their thoughts and experience on choppers, and why they choose to ride old Harley-Davidsons.

Old Harley-Davidsons can be annoyingly loud; they often reek of gasoline and leave trails of sometimes eye-burning smoke; they commonly leak oil and leave visible marks on the ground when parked; and, in many cases, they are constantly falling apart – losing nuts and bolts as they cruise down the highway. Also, keeping these vintage Harleys running requires that one work with their hands. These men contested the consumerism and cleanliness associated with the upper-class gentrifiers of Santa Barbara by embodying abjection through riding these dirty old Harleys. Moreover, they saw a division between the square and the biker as one that focuses on the act of making something with one's hands. This sentiment came to the fore when I jointly asked three of the Santa Barbara bikers ages sixty-five to eighty-five what they think about younger generations joining the chopper subculture.

> ***Jimmy*** – "It's up to you guys to keep it going."
> ***Phil*** – "If I lived a hundred years from now I'd like to see some of our history and what's going on still with the young guys doing it. The traditional. Because it is a big part of our American heritage – it's being proud of building stuff. That's part of the industrial time where it put a lot of people to work and they built a fine fuckin product."
> ***Nando*** – "You know, to be honest with you, when I see young studs like yourself doing it, that are riding bikes and building 'em – it gives us hope… that… that it is still being carried on."
> ***Phil*** – "Cuz it seems like the new generation – the only thing they are interested in is what's on your fucking lap [cellphone]." (Interview with author March 2021)

This conversation demonstrates the belief that preserving such objects and practices has strong ties to the preservation of a vaguely patriotic working-class way of life and necessary manual competency concomitant with the post-WW2 era. The cellphone to which Phil was referring signified his belief that as American society becomes more involved with digital apparatuses, we will lose sight of American history, American industrial strength, and the sense of pride that follows building and maintaining products that involve manual competency. As previously mentioned, using their hands through maintaining and preserving vintage Harley-Davidsons was one way they transgressed the square's boundaries. Manual competence is demonstrated by how these men keep motorcycles in motion (Crawford 2009; Pirsig 1974). Old bikes being ridden differs from those sitting in a garage in that the meaning garnered from working on them and riding them in various contexts conveys the desire to preserve the application of technical knowledge necessary to keep these old bikes running. Here, keeping these vintage bikes in motion equates to keeping a set of cultural ethics in motion. Moreover, being seen as someone who keeps these bikes moving in gentrified Santa Barbara works to disrupt the social power of the gentrifying class who aims to "clean up the city." In this case, class is *seen* as a cultural category (Cowie 2004). Inoue and Judith Butler note that the acts of seeing and being seen through citational practices are more than just cultural markers; they are effects of the processes that establish social power (Butler 1993; Inoue 2006). The reality of Mason St. Cycles being adjacent to a city dump, inhabiting the portion of Santa Barbara where the population's homeless reside, and working-class people like Phil who have not had a steady salaried job throughout their life being pushed out of the city due to a rising cost of living demonstrates that riding these old bikes affirms previous studies on subcultural acts of *style* that reflect the destructive effects of social power concomitant with socio-economic class differences

(Hebdige 1979; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Willis 1981 and 2014). *Style*, as expressed through these men riding their dirty vintage Harley-Davidson choppers that *freak out the squares* of Santa Barbara, is an act of ornery defiance aimed to differentiate the biker from the square through embodying abjection.

Racist semiotics and *freak out the squares*

Crafting choppers with one's hands allows for the bikes to have an improvisatory dimension whereby people can tailor their bikes to suit their beliefs. In the context of *freak out the squares*, the bike is a malleable ideological canvas that allows the individual to customize their chopper in such a manner to pragmatically freak out whoever they deem square. Cary is the editor in chief of *Choppers Magazine* – an independent magazine that highlights the current vintage chopper subculture – and this improvisatory nature of choppers came to the fore in our interview. I had only known of Cary through the images of his Harley-Davidson panhead chopper that he posts on his Instagram account. By looking at the extended wide-glide front end, Wassell gas tank, and tall sissy bar on his bike, it was clear to me that Cary had an intimate affinity with vintage choppers. This made itself even more apparent during our interview where he informed me that when he wrote for *Easyriders* he became the person who would bring vintage choppers into the sea of ludicrously expensive big-wheel choppers that dominated the magazine. Soon after leaving *Easyriders*, Cary sought to start his own magazine that solely focuses on vintage choppers. When Cary was looking for a name for his magazine, he discovered that the name *Choppers Magazine*, the first ever chopper magazine, was not under copyright. Cary decided to reach out to the family of Ed Roth, the custom car and motorcycle builder who

started *Choppers Magazine*, to receive their blessing before he purchased the copyright and revamped the original chopper magazine.

During my interview with Cary I asked him questions as to why vintage choppers are so important to him and he spoke of the creative possibilities and friendships that vintage bikes promote. When speaking about the role of White supremacist signs in the subculture, Cary relayed to me a time when he was building a chopper with his friends and his buddies painted a giant swastika on the gas tank as a joke. Cary, a working-class Latino in his late 40s living in Los Angeles, CA, iterated that none of the people in his friend group were "racist" and that they were aiming to inscribe what Cary said was the "60's Hells Angels, 'freak out the squares' mentality" (Interview with author March 2021).

Although Cary thought having a swastika painted on his tank was funny in the shop, once he rode around outside he had a different experience.

> "I went two miles before I turned around and went back. It took one family to pull up next to me. It was an African American family pulled up next to me and just looked at it - didn't saying anything. Looked at that thing and I was like, I felt like the biggest piece of shit ever. Ever. Like I was just like, I can't believe I'm riding this fucking thing. Like it was funny in the shop. Right? We're all like, you drew a swastika I think that's funny. I'm gonna ride it. Yeah, I'll show you guys. I'll ride it. Nope. Turned around, went back painted over it" (Interview with author March 2021).

Despite Cary not relaying to me who the square was that he was trying to shock, this African-American family was clearly not the square that Cary had in mind. Nevertheless, Cary's use of the swastika to cite the 1960's Hells Angels who used swastikas to freak out the well-to-do salaryman clearly gives insight into Cary's intentions of wanting to bewilder the rule-following and politically-correct square. Cary's reflexivity led him to go back and change the paint on his gas tank. This interaction in which an African-American family looked Cary up and down without saying a word caused Cary's reaction to re-inscribe his bike. Invested in shocking the

square through the abject swastika, Cary was met with an infelicitous response where the display of racist insignia did not fulfill his cultural desire of instilling horror upon the square.

To better theorize how White supremacist semiotics can be used by Latino bikers to induce abjection, I consider Jonathon Rosa and Nelson Flore's conceptualization of raciolinguistics. Raciolinguistics understands Whiteness as a hegemonic position that emerged from the historical convergence of race, language, and power, and continues to be characterized through semiosis and intertwining colonial structures (Alim 2016; Rosa and Flores 2017). Although a non-White body might be socially marked as belonging to a non-White race, by engaging in role alignment, non-White individuals can use dominant White linguistic registers to achieve a desired effect from listening subjects (Rosa and Flores 2017).

Abjection, conceived as a biker linguistic and semiotic practice, depends upon Whiteness – specifically White privilege. What this means in terms of the outlaw biker register and abjection is that those Americans who initially engaged in the practice could do so on a widespread level because they would not receive the worst of its alienating effects – physical violence and possibly murder. Once abjection is recognized as a register belonging to the White outlaw biker, non-White bikers can engage in the practice of abjection to achieve the desired effect of the biker. This was evident in the late 1960s with the Ching-A-Ling motorcycle club from New York City who started out as a group of Puerto Rican male riders that displayed swastikas and iron crosses on their vests (One Percenter Bikers 2017). Unlike the Ching-A-Ling motorcycle club, Cary's unsuccessful use of the swastika functioned as a higher-order indexical in that it aimed to disrupt the square's symbolic boundaries of order *and* cite a historical link to the Hells Angels of the 1960s. However, the use of this imagined chronotope (Bakhtin 1981) in a different spatio-temporal context elicited a different response from those Cary interacted with

and thus altered the indexical meanings Cary associated with the swastika. Despite the swastika functioning as a violent indexical that cities the *freak out the squares* practices accompanied with the Hells Angels of the 1960s, its inability to transgress the square in a different pragmatic contextualization enlisted a response of racist guilt that disrupted the historical valuation linked with the swastika.

Conclusion: An Approach to Violent Semiotics

Throughout this thesis, I drew from interviews with members of the vintage chopper subculture who produce self-circulating cultural objects to document how *freak out the squares*, an embodied semiotic practice of abjection, comes to perform the personal and cultural ideologies of those within the vintage chopper subculture. I explicated the pragmatic and metapragmatic functions surrounding the performative *freak out the squares* by locating how magazine editors, photographers, and chopper builders define biker and square and differentially establish identity through violent semiotic usage (an abject) with the actual or imagined square. My examination of these practices has promoted an approach towards investigating the use of violent semiotics that I wish to expand and conclude upon.

I've noticed that embodiment denotes constantly being some *thing*. *Being* in a society mediated by power relations also means constantly *being* some *thing* to someone else (Fanon 2008; Foucault 2007; Heidegger 1971). What then does *freak out the squares* offer to my interlocutor Phil who, despite working his entire life, lives a life of precarity and abandonment in a city he grew up in and now, due to dramatic rising costs of living, is forced to leave? As a working-class right-leaning libertarian, Phil seeks refuge in places like Arizona, where he can own property and live in a place he feels isn't going to limit his liberties. Phil expressed to me

that the United States, California, and localized Santa Barbara governments were culprits in taking away his embodied way of life – which is riding and making motorcycles. Motorcycles acted as axes of differentiation in Phil's *deep story* (Gal and Irvine 2019; Hochschild 2016). Vintage Harley-Davidsons thus work to fuel the type of *deep story* that Arlie-Russell Hochschild noticed among her White interlocutors who privilege the affective dimensions of a story. She writes,

> "A deep story is a feels-as-if story—it's the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel. Such a story permits those on both sides of the political spectrum to stand back and explore the subjective prism through which the party on the other side sees the world. And I don't believe we understand anyone's politics, right or left, without it. For we all have a deep story" (Hochschild 2016: 135).

Phil sees governmental economic policies as constraining his identity *and* he uses vintage Harley-Davidsons in Santa Barbara to express these beliefs and defy the economic and ideological shifts regimenting his existence – despite him knowing that his actions will be insufficient at bringing about any real change to his situation. Abject objects, as realized through the dirty vintage Harley-Davidson ridden by working-class individuals of Santa Barbara, are not intended to address the economic reality of people like Phil – they are used to protest the square through the sign's ability to establish perlocutionary effects upon the imagined square.

Playing with identity politics, as evident through Tim featuring naked women and Cary painting a swastika on his gas tank, is also another way individuals can use violent semiotics to *freak out the square*. Even though violent semiotics in these cases aims to offend the square, Tim and Cary expressed their moral commitment to disregard ideological differences between them and the *other* to do the "right thing" for those in need. At its outset, this seems to invoke a colorblind approach towards systemic racism that views individual acts of discrimination as the locus of racism (Alexander 2012; Hodges 2016; Omi and Winant 2015). However accurate or

not this reading may be, it fails to account for how Tim and Cary use violent semiotics to ascertain feelings of empowerment against a politically correct and socio-economic elite. Identity politics thus works to fuel these varied *deep stories*. The moral relativism connected with varying *deep stories* is apropos to understanding how individuals within the vintage chopper subculture and biker subcultures writ large can use violent semiotics as axes of difference to *freak out the square* yet still maintain their moral commitment to helping individuals regardless of their identity.

Determining the abject sign that *freaks out the square* thus relies upon an individual's imagination. When Cary chose to paint a swastika on his tank to *freak out the square,* he imagined, however briefly, who the square was and what their response would be. In this case, imagination, as it relates to the relational play of identity making – motivated the usage of violent semiotics (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Bikers use their imagination to presuppose the square that constrains the ideologies which undergird their individual liberties. It is evident that the uptake of violent semiotics relies upon the intensity of associations concomitant with an individual sign (Agha 2005; 2007; Silverstein 2003). Returning to Cary's experience, if he and his friends couldn't collectively imagine the square – presumably a White middle-to-upper-class Angeleno who invokes an accusatory lens of identity politics – then the swastika wouldn't incite as intense of a degree of response. Identity politics, as an accusatory and exculpatory practice, fuels this discourse surrounding the subcultural biker, the square, and violent semiotics.

By drawing upon my ethnographic examples, what I aim to point out then is that racism and sexism as approached through an accusatory lens of identity politics fails to see *why* violent semiotic usage perdures. By theorizing identity politics in a more heteroglossic and dialogic manner – where violent semiotics are understood not only as racist or sexist, but through what

they pragmatically and metapragmatically perform for individuals – we can identify how the uptake of violent semiotics comes to reify morals, ideologies, and class-positioning (Bakhtin 1981). Broadly speaking, Harley-Davidsons, as highly citational aesthetic objects, act more and more as axes of differentiation regarding one's ideologies on liberty or political affiliation, and this approach towards understanding the processes of violence and discrimination identifies the pragmatic and metapragmatic functions such semiotics afford for every party involved – thus explicating how implosive political divides in the United States come to be semiotically mapped onto objects and aesthetics (Austin, Gagne, and Orend 2017; Cowie 2004; Fukuyama 2018; Halberstam 1993; Hochschild 2016). Attending to the semiotic complexities entangled within violence as a circulatory process that concerns the ebb and flow of power (Foucault 2007) thus views violence not as a series of definitive unrelated instantiations of violent outbursts. Such an approach tasks the field of linguistic anthropology to understand the linguistic and semiotic practices associated with the mechanism of violence so as to illuminate the intricacies surrounding the robust nature of signs and their differential functions among cultures.

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