

Kurt Cobain, Writing Program Administrator

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ABSTRACT

Before his suicide in 1994, Kurt Cobain's short career mirrored the professional trajectory of some writing program administrators who similarly struggle with the complex, affective dimensions of their labors and ambivalence about their roles as managers and spokespersons. In this essay, I combine narrative—from the perspective of a WPA and a lover of the music Cobain made with his band Nirvana—with theorizing that extends work reflecting on the psychic and affective toll that administrative labor sometimes takes on WPAs. I perform a close reading of a Nirvana song, "Serve the Servants," which presents like an angry WPA manifesto and infer both possibilities and limits of inward- and outward-directed rage as affective stances.

WPAs daily find themselves immersed in anger, frustration, and disappointment.

—Laura Micciche, "More than a Feeling" (434)

In truth, Nirvana was the last logical outcome of punk and represented a serious version of the "blank" in blank generation. Incoherence, if you take it seriously, can end only in chaos. The gun in Kurt Cobain's hand at the very end.

—Nicholas Rombes, *A Cultural Dictionary of Punk* (163)

Punk won. That seems really clear to me . . . There was a defining era of music, and it created something that is so malleable that it can be used by anybody. It can be used by a guitar player. It can be used by a professor.

—Ian MacKaye, *Global Punk* (Dunn 7–8)

Kurt Cobain's rock band Nirvana appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in April 1992, Cobain in torn jeans and a dime-store cardigan. Visible under the sweater, Cobain wore a T-shirt on which he had written "Corporate Magazines Still Suck" (Cross 231). Cobain drew attention to his ambivalence toward stardom by punctuating the moment's contradictions. What epitomizes mainstream success more than *Rolling Stone*? What's more punk than a homemade T-shirt? Cobain found fame writing lyrics that questioned things like masculinity and gender binaries—set to commercially nonviable punk rock—and in 1992 improbably found himself on the charts. He valued authenticity, ideology, and social change and loudly sloganeered when microphones were shoved in his face (Cross 261). Success seemed like a distraction, at best, and a toxin, at worst, to Cobain, who wished to focus on the music he loved and the ideals to which he was committed. He idealized the bedrooms where he wrote songs and the bars and dorms where he had played to audiences whose members he considered equals. The photo shoots and meetings that came later seemed like the antithesis of "real" work.

Cobain took a lethal dose of heroin and then shot himself in April 1994 while listening to R.E.M.'s *Automatic for the People*, an album best known for the hang-in-there ballad "Everybody Hurts." During the two years between the *Rolling Stone* cover and his suicide, Cobain's career transitioned. The additional trappings and labors of his new position brought less satisfaction, and Cobain experienced guilt and self-hatred, made obnoxious jokes, and succumbed to the depression and substance abuse problems with which he had long struggled. He also administered tirelessly to many of the fairly obscure bands like the Melvins and Meat Puppets who had influenced and supported him and at times used his position to advocate for ethical and progressive causes. Cobain's trajectory—glorious and tragic, alive with real and perceived ethical dilemmas and confrontations drawn between ideals and material realities, characterized by paradoxes—presents parallels with the trajectory of a writing program administrator. This essay explores those parallels and performs a close reading of a Nirvana song, "Serve the Servants," whose narrator sounds at times like an angry WPA. Cobain's career reveals how WPAs can conceive of inward and outward directed rage, irreverence, and a grungey consciousness as productive stances. Cobain also suggests the limits of those stances, as he frequently disavowed his activist orientation post-fame.

SMELLS LIKE AFFECTIVE SENSATIONS

Thanks to an older brother's record collection, I grew up loving punk possibly as much as Cobain himself and I saw the genre's narrative of rebellion as a salve against boredom and the mundane humiliations of childhood. I used first communion money to buy a copy of the Clash's *Combat Rock*, and the lyrics made me want to be a writer while the rhythms made the world look different. I was in high school when *Nevermind* landed Nirvana on that magazine cover, excited and confused by punk's popularity. I had a copy of *Nevermind* and appreciated the band's anger, and, like Cobain, I suffered from depression. I recognized the paradox of power and alienation in songs like "Lithium," whose lyrics suggested loneliness needn't be so lonely. But I was a casual fan, and though I attended lots of rock shows in the early 90s, I never saw Nirvana. I think this was because I associated Cobain as much with tabloid stories about drugs and a dysfunctional marriage as with great music. The spectacle took over. I remember sitting on the lawn at Lollapalooza in 1992, and "Smells Like Teen Spirit" played on the PA between acts. Kids cheered as loudly as they did for any of the day's live performances. I was working at my college newspaper in 1994 when 89X-FM announced my generation's most famous suicide.

But it was recently, watching the affecting documentary of Cobain's life *Kurt Cobain: Montage of Heck*, deep in the angst not of adolescence but rather the angst of writing program administration, where I experienced intense empathy and identification. The documentary explores Cobain's inventional acts—animating journals where he composed both lyrics and a public persona—and reveals the depths of his existential pain and rage. His pain was tied to a crippling depression and addiction, to be sure, but also to an intense sense of professional guilt and a disdain for success. I saw myself also as someone whose relationship with my work had changed and whose own depression had simultaneously worsened.

I had been WPA at my mid-sized comprehensive university for four years when I watched *Montage of Heck*. I didn't step into the role until I had tenure, a privilege not all WPAs have. While a junior faculty, I had taught service-learning courses and written about open-admissions education, basic writing, and working-class studies. Sure, pre-tenure years involved stress, but they also represented a focused effort. I taught my courses and published about matters impacting me, my campus, my community, and my field. I don't mean to idealize a period that involved high-stakes labor and huge student loan bills. But there was excitement and singleness of purpose. Becoming a WPA meant toggling among many, many tasks. The joy we introverts take from the solitary labor of writing seems to disappear. WPAs

teach and write and most of us love to teach and write—but of course we also shake hands and sign contracts (albeit with textbook publishers not record companies), compromise, and learn how the proverbial sausage is made in the administration building. It's hard not to empathize with the soul-crushing frustrations Cobain felt when his life went from writing songs on his guitar and playing punk shows to handling those other tasks demanded of individuals at that next level. Isn't teaching a section of comp a little like playing that gig for, say, 20–25 people?

Watching *Montage of Heck*, it occurred to me that becoming a WPA meant having microphones shoved in my face, too: *Why can't you just use the SAT to place students instead of your expensive holistic reading sessions? Why aren't you teaching students not to plagiarize? Why can't majors in my department format citations properly?* An entire, affective rhetoric of satisfaction surrounds teaching and writing—a rhetoric largely absent when we talk about administration. In her work on how WPAs frame their scholarly identities, Melissa Ianetta points out, “some of us do not represent our administrative work in our public self-imaginings. In general, we are scholars first, teachers second, and . . . administrators? Well last, if at all” (145–46). Ianetta mentions the relative invisibility of WPA work on university websites (144). Part of the reason we don't make our WPA work more visible is because it lacks the affective and material rewards of our other labors. Cobain defined himself as a songwriter and performer, not a representative of his record label or a spokesperson for his generation. In that *Rolling Stone* story, Cobain said, “I'm a spokesman for *myself*. . . I don't have the answers for anything” (Azerrad). I feel that. I've been kept up at night, fretting about the problems on campus I haven't solved: perceived literacy crises, dysfunctional budgetary models, reliance on contingent labor. It's partly the depression, partly a sense of professional responsibility. In *Montage of Heck* I saw myself, a sometimes ineffectual and insecure, sometimes loud, sometimes smart voice.

Kids like Kurt Cobain come up playing in garages and bars, doing what they love in a small, safe space—the rock and roll narrative of the little room.¹ Cobain's little room was a dorm at Evergreen State College where Nirvana played a notorious, raucous show in their probationary days and henceforth became known for “intensity” and “energy” (Cross 113). Fans have romanticized that show to the point of nostalgia, and I don't wish to glorify teaching in a similarly uncritical way by suggesting it is a romantic pursuit rather than part of our material work. My point is that many of us gain an affective joy from teaching—a joy sometimes harder to glean from work done on a more public stage (extending the punk metaphor) while

interacting with an array of stakeholders often with more overtly capitalist values.

THE “VALUE” OF A GRUNGE ETHIC

Recalling Cobain’s struggles with the trappings of the value systems of the larger rooms in which he labored prompted reflection. Can WPAs enact a “grunge” aesthetic?² Should we? What would it mean to look to Cobain’s ethic and infer a usable stance in relation to institutional dynamics that many of us find harmful?

Cobain professed many punk values, and critics have certainly wrestled with the extent to which a punk consciousness can offer diverse individuals and groups “resources for self-empowerment and political resistance” (Dunn 9). Michael Utley analyzes 1980s American hardcore punk, teasing out useful ways his corpus suggests writing pedagogies of resistance against “institutional authority” (111). Geoffrey Sirc sees the formless and raw ethic of punk as both a counternarrative and heuristic for composition classrooms. Responding to Sirc, Seth Kahn fleshes out a DIY punk pedagogy rooted in “the idea that punk discourse moves beyond criticism” and “typically provides alternatives” (“Pedagogy of the Pissed” 101). Trending closer to the concerns of WPAs, Joe Essid suggests that writing center coordinators in austere institutional contexts use a punk ethos to “agitate,” and he writes compellingly about how first-wave punk itself grew out of austerity and thrived therein (3). Essid discusses harnessing negative social conditions (think London and New York during the late 1970s) and responding with vigor and consciousness.

But material conditions ought not be considered apart from affective conditions. In *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies*, Donna Strickland suggests that many compositionists find “management” distasteful though managing is a crucial part of our discipline’s history. Strickland argues that this unconscious dilemma “comes from an affective association that prefers teaching and that is averse to the pejorative connotations of management in a humanistic and occasionally Marxist field of study” (119). She argues the discipline should “investigate our emotional stances toward our work” and use affective potential as “the forerunner to action” (121). Strickland begins to point toward the potential of emotions we might commonly consider negative to instill an ethic of advocacy and activism. Mindful of Cobain’s story, I would argue that rage is one of those emotions with which we (must) contend—and put to use. Like Strickland, Micciche offers a useful framing of the intersections among the material conditions of writing programs and the affective states of WPAs.

While Strickland engages with the paradox of our discipline's ideological opposition to management but our long engagement with that very type of work, Micciche focuses on a different paradox: "the WPA seems to occupy a powerful location" but the relentless affective challenges—including those stemming from the gendered nature of administrative work, unjust labor arrangements, and the ways WPA work is often foisted on junior faculty can be profoundly disempowering (434). Both Strickland and Micciche get at the intensity of the unresolved tensions, the lingering and complex feelings stemming from WPAs being implicated in the machinery of the late-capitalist university. *The Chronicle* has covered the increased rates of depression among academics after promotion (Blanchard; Wilson). Post-tenure depression, according to this flood of media coverage in the higher education press, often involves feelings of "despair and apathy"—boredom and ennui compounded by guilt created by awareness that one has no reason to feel bad after achieving greater material security (Blanchard). Think of Cobain's sense of guilt upon promotion.

Kahn's argument that the DIY punk ethic necessarily involves moving beyond critique toward practical action is useful. Ethical engagement counters ennui. Acknowledging that WPA work involves problems deserving of our rage but finding ways to be in service to something larger than one's own material good are direct confrontations with the negative affective states Micciche and Strickland discuss, and therein lies the value of a grunge ethic. Anger that perhaps had led to an unproductive loss of temper can be recast, can evolve into something different. Lynn Worsham reveals in "Going Postal" how a phenomenon with affective potential—a phrase like "going postal"—can change over time and across contexts.

Reveling in the contradictions of examples like Cobain, who was a deeply flawed advocate and activist, has much to reveal about who we are and who we might be as WPAs. A punk or grunge ethic for WPAs is perhaps above all else an abstraction. "Be more punk" sounds pretty good, possibly due to the term's connection to taking stands against dominant culture and its most problematic apparatuses (see Hebdidge's foundational analysis of punk subcultures in London in the 1970s). Although punk movements and artists have long flirted with nihilism (Hebdidge; Rombes) dating back at least to the Sex Pistols' iconic repetition of "no future for you" (*Never Mind the Bollocks*), punk also suggests, paradoxically, possibilities for action. To be punk might involve a screaming desire for change—personal, institutional, or social. As a lover of punk music, a human being, and a WPA, I have experienced these desires. But the nihilism has reared its head, and so have material realities. Punk has never been pure, as a social movement, an aesthetic, or an ethic. In my role as WPA, for instance, I

have taken inspiration from my lifelong passion for punk and opted to take common cause with less powerful stakeholders on my campus or to stand up to unethical administrators. In my role as WPA, I also have lost my temper in unhelpful, ineffectual fashion, or, worse, felt like a silly puppet crying out, “No future!”

The term *punk* has possibly more optimistic resonances (say, compared to the term *grunge*), resonances that at the very least suggest doing and acting. I recently read the affirming, smart, young-adult novel *The First Rule of Punk* by Celia C. Pérez. It is the story of María Luisa, or “Malú,” a multiracial junior high school girl who inherits her love of punk from her white father and discovers the genre’s connections to Chicano culture when she and her Mexican-American mom move to a new city and Malú slowly plugs into her new race-conscious, multicultural, multilingual neighborhood. The novel’s passion for punk artists like the Brat and the Plugz is palpable, and with a light touch Pérez connects the young protagonist’s discovery of these artists and other punks from the Mexican-American community with her burgeoning sense of identity and her active engagement. Like Malú, as a little kid I had much affinity for punks with a conscious—Joe Strummer, Jello Biafra, et al.—whose entire aesthetics focused on this *something larger*.

Admittedly, punk morphed into something that resonated a bit differently. In the 1990s, grunge seemed at times to emphasize punk’s anger and disaffection more than its productive elements. Kahn suggests that the 1990s iteration of punk, and specifically its chief spokesperson Cobain, foregrounded both a “negative” vibe and an “air of passivity” in both lyrics and Cobain’s public persona (“Kurt Cobain” 85). Kahn suggests this “forfeiting of agency” (86) on Cobain’s part significantly limits the artist’s ability to be an intentional actor and shows how Cobain lost control of his own trajectory while facing down the demands of fame (91). Kahn makes a strong case that Nirvana songs like “Rape Me” and the numerous moments in the media when Cobain disavowed his role as an advocate all signify his rejection of “the attendant power and responsibility” (90). I agree that Cobain lost control but also want to explore in this essay how even the flaws and ambivalences inherent in Cobain’s music and story reveal a narrative at the very least familiar (and for some of us, maybe transformative) to WPAs who wrestle with affective pain.

IN A LITTLE ROOM

Cobain had a pseudo grad school experience when the members of Nirvana relocated to Olympia, Washington, where creatives thrived thanks to Evergreen State—the liberal arts college known for not giving grades

and for allowing students to design interdisciplinary programs across the humanities and creative arts (see Cross; Morgen). Nirvana found its earliest fans in Olympia and Cobain found kindred spirits in Tobi Vail, an Evergreen student who would later gain acclaim in the band Bikini Kill. A high school dropout, Cobain read Vail's women's studies textbooks which contextualized his opinions about masculinity and experiences with bullies (Cross 153–55). Though stimulated by Vail, feminism-as-worldview, and the Evergreen shows he was playing, alienation plagued Cobain. He “felt inadequate” during his time in Olympia, a working-class kid performing for artsier, richer kids who dressed better, read better, and even knew their histories of rock better than him (Cross 88). Cobain's professional paradoxes began in these early, punk days of the band—as he performed, wrote songs, and lived frugally—though perceived inadequacies triggered depression. Think: imposter syndrome.

Vail and her books provided Cobain with an intellectual framework for action. He understood punk ideology as struggle, having grown up in working-class and working-poor communities and a dysfunctional family. But feminism provided an imperative to reflect on experience and sensation. Tobi Vail served as a mentor in Cobain's early professional life, exposing him to abstract knowledge. I suggest Cobain had something like a grad school experience in Olympia not just because he learned to draw on different media, genres, and phenomena in his work, but also because his ethic coalesced: the ethic of taking common cause with the kid in a flannel shirt from the logging family over the undergrad with the cool record collection. I think of my own grad school years, lacking in material security but rich in intellectual exchange and discovery, and the disciplinary-cum-ideological habits that took root (for instance, from taking an influential community literacy practicum during my first term—a three-credit salve for my own imposter syndrome). The ethic Cobain developed in Olympia, likewise, shaped his career.

You probably know the story of *Nevermind* in 1991: Nirvana knocks Michael Jackson off the top of the charts and gains exposure on MTV, magazine covers, *Saturday Night Live*. If you're a WPA, you probably also know the sensation of being pulled away from labor you call “my work,” and you might also know the sensation of being asked to do things for which you do not necessarily have as much training, or that perhaps compromise your lefty values. If so, then maybe you can identify with nostalgia for your “little room.”

BORED AND OLD

After *Nevermind*, the first track on Nirvana's follow-up, *In Utero*, was called "Serve the Servants"³ and led off with a seemingly autobiographical couplet, "Teenage angst has paid off well / now I'm bored and old." Cobain used the first lyrics from the most anticipated record of 1993 to joke that songs about being an outsider have made him rich and to admit his best years are behind him. The line alludes to the rock cliché about not trusting anyone over a certain age, though he was just in his mid-20s when he wrote *In Utero*. If age invokes a familiar rock and roll rhetoric (*Don't trust anyone over 30! If it's too loud . . .*), boredom invokes even more overtly punk tropes. The Ramones, Sex Pistols, Buzzcocks, and Green Day all sang about boredom. Nicholas Rombes suggests that punk sought "to transform boredom into the very premise of modern life" (29), and punk's "disordered" aesthetic has roots in a kind-of bored, "detached" disregard for contemporary culture (28–30). By declaring himself "bored," then, Cobain's narrator positions himself inside of everyday culture and punk subculture. These lines resonate when I think about my own move from junior faculty member to WPA.⁴ On my worst days (a meeting with an administrator went poorly, perhaps), it's hard not to experience this stew of nostalgia and bored resignation. The lines also resonate because ideological critique informed a good deal of my earliest published work and paid off reasonably well. It didn't sell records, but it earned me tenure, and a similar, if less lucrative, irony holds. Cobain wrestled psychically with the notion of commodifying teen angst, and isn't it at least as stark to consider the ethics of profiting from radical theoretical constructs and stepping into a managerial position involving exploitative labor arrangements?

The song's narrator expresses anger at himself for commodifying alienation and depression and loathes his own privilege, but there's outward-directed anger in the subsequent lines:

Self-appointed judges judge
more than they have sold
If she floats than she is not
a witch like we had thought
A down payment on another
one at Salem's lot

As much as Cobain's narrator cops to selling out, he stands by his art and questions those sitting in condemnation—presumably of his music, lifestyle, drug use, and high-profile relationship with Courtney Love (called a witch and worse by the media)—and he boldly boasts of his achievements like a hip hop star rapping about how many records he's sold. References

to the Salem witch trials stand as critiques of the media's sexist fixation on his wife, who was put on trial by a media who alleged she did heroin while pregnant and attempted to break up Nirvana (Cross 262). Certainly a critique of the media's sexist witch hunt would mesh with Cobain's feminism, though the line could also reference Stephen King's novel *Salem's Lot* about blood-sucking, suave vampires, a comparison equally suggestive of what Cobain thought of the media. But an equally important reading acknowledges the juxtaposition of inward- and outward-directed loathing. Even in a humorous lyric, Cobain's existential misery is palpable.⁵

That juxtaposition rings true. With the speed of a Nirvana refrain, I've moved from loathing myself for even having considered "selling out" to Big Publishing, to outward-directed rage, angry at a colleague on the other side of campus for a misrepresentation of a complex issue like plagiarism or for her rush to judge a student. And I've felt like student writing proficiency was on the receiving end of a witch hunt, felt like student error was a drowning witch. Perhaps Cobain felt like the stakes were lower while playing "his" shows in dorms. Maybe I felt the same when I taught "my" classes and then worked on "my" article. Further, the bitterness of the bit about "judges" being "self-appointed" invokes for me writing's unique place as a subject about which many individuals think they are experts since everybody is a practitioner. Who are the self-appointed judges on our campuses? Those who wish to toughen the penalties for plagiarism, or the advocates of skill-and-drill pedagogies, or the administrator who skirts faculty governance? "Serve the Servants" meditates on an awesome ambiguity—at once pointing loathing inward but then subsequently lashing out and expressing anger at such individuals who lack capital—for Cobain, critics; for WPAs, those lacking professional expertise.

The refrain repeats the line "serve the servants," a missive that sounds like an abstraction, a vaguely rebellious battle cry perhaps invoking class allegiances, perhaps the band's interest in being of service not to the media elites they possibly mock in the song but rather their young fans. Perhaps the line is also an abstraction when read through my WPA lens, though perhaps there is catharsis, too, or a similar invocation of class allegiance about whose interests the labor of a WPA might support. As the song spins into tonal shifts, my middle-aged ears listen. Who *do* we serve as WPAs? Someone other than those who sit in faux judgment, hold witch trials, or urge us to take "cost containment" measures and run other neoliberal errands? What might it mean to serve the servants? Better yet, what might it mean *as WPAs* to let our minds be inspired—like fifteen-year-olds—by rebellious rock-and-roll? In my 40s, I hear Nirvana after a day of WPA labor and I am still the same kid buying *Combat Rock* with his first com-

union money. The kid who, like Kurt Cobain, hears punk rock's rage and imagines a world of freedom, not a world of bullies. I hear Nirvana and new narratives emerge too. I listen to "Serve the Servants" and think about inward- and outward-directed rage. I think about whether rage is a usable construct for WPAs. At what moments are we mad at ourselves? At others?

THE CORPORATIZATION OF THE UNIVERSITY STILL SUCKS

During a lively question and answer period following her plenary address at the 2014 WPA Conference, Melissa Ianetta suggested being the WPA means having to be "the grown-up." I think she is mostly right. Yet, what of the affective moments that prompt something else? What would our homemade T-shirts say? *Pearson still sucks. Reliance on contingent labor still sucks. Making fun of student writing still sucks. The corporatization of the university still sucks.* I appreciate the relentlessly performative nature of Cobain's persona, how he refused to rest comfortably after promotion. Was he mature, à la Ianetta's helpful advice? No. He had silly spats with other musicians, for instance. However, Cobain refused to rest comfortably like other elites sometimes do. Certainly we know academics who rest comfortably upon promotion, as surely as we know administrators who care little about the servants.

WPAs exist in a middle space between servant and elite—middle managers—though ultimately what we do is grunge in the world of academe: engaging with first-year and even "remedial" curricula. For those of us WPAs who are angry, or even ambivalent, Cobain's narrative suggests there's no escaping the messy space between elite and servant. The word "bored" positioned Cobain's narrator within punk subculture (using the boredom trope like so many other punk musicians) and within mainstream culture too (copping to being just another boring old guy), and WPAs are a lot like that. WPAs are on the cover of glossy magazine but still wear flannel, even if the outfit is a performance. Cobain's narrative suggests how being a punk has limits. I admit I have failed to be the grown-up. I wish I could say I've behaved better than Cobain when he succumbed to the worst clichés of rock rivalries, but I cannot. I am guilty of passive-aggressive sniping and, in the age of social media, unfriending colleagues after contentious faculty meetings and disagreements involving campus politics. I never succumbed to anger or an immature impulse like this before becoming WPA. My version of a stupid media beef with Axl Rose, I guess. But in addition, the intensely polemical debates over curriculum, scheduling, and the like that I believe are part of the emotional work of WPAing have exasperated my own imposter syndrome and triggered bouts of depression that are

among the worst I have contended with. WPA labor, my own anger, and my mental health have mingled in sometimes toxic ways. Little wonder *Montage of Heck* had such resonance.

On the other hand, I maintain perhaps paradoxically that anger can potentially be a useful stance—including something like the irreverent rage expressed by Cobain.⁶ Cobain's irreverence in the face of his stardom, though at times counterproductive and dysfunctional, kept his performances unpredictable, garnered attention (sometimes a good thing), and worked against blind acceptance. Recently, a high-ranking administrator visited a faculty meeting and was discussing technology initiatives on campus including the creation of a new high-salary administrative position to oversee tech initiatives. Several faculty members raised concerns about working class and working poor students on campus who lacked laptop and internet access. This administrator was unaware that lack of access to technology was a concern—though the campus runs a food pantry for hungry students—and dismissed faculty concerns. When these questions persisted, the administrator suggested there was nothing she could do if concerned faculty were not able to present her with quantitative data on the number of students who lacked access. I responded, “Maybe you should ask your new technology czar to generate that data.” I don't think I accomplished much except perhaps some affective, smug self-satisfaction but my point is that calling out hypocrisy and using indignation and anger (*how can someone in charge of technology—in charge of resources!—not even be considering the material needs of our students?*), rhetorical tools including irreverence and sarcasm, and the credibility that comes along with having the WPA title (such as it is) is a responsibility. Kurt Cobain lost friends, and he sometimes appeared on a very large stage to be acting the fool, but two and a half decades after his death it is hard to accuse him of apathy. He wished to use the privilege he gained from advancing in his chosen profession—even through the psychic pain—for something larger.

Many WPAs may find themselves in a position to act on the rage we sometimes experience as a result of, for instance, the labor conditions of many writing professionals. Indeed, *the corporatization of the university still sucks*. But I tread lightly here, aware that my race (white) and gender (male), for instance, influence how my rage is likely to be received by campus stakeholders. Not to mention the fact that I have tenure. Just as grunge was often a pop culture movement dominated by white males, cavalier suggestions to act on rage in institutional contexts assume particular types of privilege. So, humbly, I offer qualifications, reiterating the notion that as WPAs we may find ourselves in contexts where rage is available to us. We may feel the outward-directed rage at higher administrators (who perhaps refuse to convert

part-time lines into full-time lines) and inward-directed rage at ourselves (as we continue scheduling contingent workers), respectively.

Like the narrator of “Serve the Servants,” we WPAs at once rage at other stakeholders and at some level ourselves too. Which is another way of saying, we are still “boss compositionists,” James Sledd’s term from 1991. “Still” being the keyword, as in “Corporate Magazines Still Suck.” Cobain was familiar with narratives of authenticity; punk rock was already fifteen years old when Nirvana broke. The clichés he critiqued and lived—*Rolling Stone* covers, drugs, death at 27 (like Hendrix et al.)—were already familiar tropes a quarter century ago when Kurt Cobain hit heavy rotation. And, likewise, here we are as WPAs still contending with these feelings. Sledd opens his scathing 1991 critique of the profession in which he coins “boss compositionist” wondering, “why has so much talk [about lousy labor arrangements in writing programs] produced so little action?” (269). Sledd’s article and *Nevermind* dropped at about the same time. Numerous proposals have responded to Sledd’s critique offering reformations of writing programs in order to improve labor conditions (see, for example, Crowley; Harris) and some programs have taken positive steps, but the era of neoliberalism has often meant a restoration of an unjust order. We may find ourselves in positions to act out.

I have often failed to enact broad changes to my school’s labor arrangements, but I’ve fought like hell (successfully) to make part-time faculty and undergraduate writing center consultants co-investigators on institutional research projects, a small punk move. I’ve taken a DIY approach to scheduling and other tasks I was uncomfortable assigning to an administrative assistant. Though we can—and should—acknowledge that we are still boss compositionists, we can also embrace the grunge in small-scale ways. We are already working with first-year and remedial students. We have opportunities to take common cause with outsiders. I think of Bruce Horner’s call to think of “basic writing,” the so-called bottom, as the site of “leading edge” work (19). Horner advocates that WPAs not only value basic writers but collaborate with them on scholarly projects and honor their diverse and dynamic language practices. This is just one example of breaking down hierarchies. And it’s not breaking down hierarchies out of a sense of charity—or even merely out of a sense of justice. Nonhierarchical scholarship can be the two-minute punk anthem, the most interesting thing on the radio. I mean academic journal.

Grungey things we can do as WPAs include:

Bringing them along. To the degree that WPAs possess institutional privilege and capital, we might emulate Cobain’s commitment to sharing

opportunities. I call this “bringing them along.” While rejecting offers from popular touring festivals of the 1990s, Cobain brought relatively obscure punk bands like Tad and the Melvins on tour, exposing these acts to wider audiences than they previously had enjoyed. Cynically, one might accuse Nirvana of making these choices in order to appear to be adopting a “cool” tastemaker pose. Regardless, the end result contributes to an ethos rooted in sharing and collective action. WPAs have opportunities to engage in diverse types of knowledge production and disciplinary labor, from program assessment to institutional research, and much of this labor lends itself to collaboration. With whom are we choosing to collaborate? I like how even through rage, discomfort, depression, and dysfunction, Cobain positioned himself as a mentor, giving to others what members of Bikini Kill gave to him in the early, Olympia days. And not primarily a mentor in the top-down sense of the term, but rather a mentor using privilege (the money and fame in which he suddenly found himself awash) to honor contributions to his craft from those he thought ought to be recognized or those he observed not in possession of the privilege he himself had. I’m not suggesting we abandon responsibilities or prerogatives vis-à-vis more traditional types of mentoring—many of us mentor graduate students or junior faculty in a way that has necessarily top-down qualities—but rather suggesting that we also look for opportunities to use our own privilege (perhaps even the privilege we find discomforting à la Strickland’s argument) to work with and share exposure, glory, and opportunity with a diverse range of deserving, contributing stakeholders, including those who are sometimes overlooked or forgotten such as writing center consultants, part-time colleagues, community members—comrades and collaborators that come from many corners of campus and beyond.

Rejecting bullshit hierarchies. Kevin C. Dunn suggests the punk aesthetic foregrounds “tearing down the artificial boundaries between performer and audience” (13). Dunn paraphrases Frankfurt School critic Walter Benjamin and characterizes punk’s artist-audience connection as one of the keys to punk’s potential for affecting social change, suggesting that connection “turn[s] consumers into collaborators” (136). For Cobain, feminism and punk coalesced into an angry worldview, a suspicion of authority. He did not like to be seen on a separate, higher plane than kids at his shows, and he likewise refused to see journalists and industry executives as authority figures to which he should bow. That is to say, his rejection of authority could be directed both inward and outward in the same way that rage and loathing could be directed both inward and outward. If “Serve the Servants” suggests Cobain’s dual anger at himself and the world around

him, then his larger worldview also suggests his consistent rejection of hierarchies. He didn't see himself as being any better than his fans and, in fact, scoffed at the notion. He certainly didn't see reporters or industry executives as worthy of kowtowing and dealt with them accordingly. This consistent egalitarianism is instructive. WPAs can identify with that middle ground position—potentially “over” some stakeholders and “under” some, and may find occasion for scoffing and irreverence—perhaps to the point of destruction. Cobain had that posture of rage against outsiders from “above” who came at his craft—members of the media, for instance, or a producer who didn't have his trust—and lashed out. Part of this was to protect his work, but that caretaking was made possible by Cobain's staunch belief that power, money, and a job title did not entitle anyone to tell him what to do. I don't think I have to speak of the imperative to put that ethic into effect when having words with the Vice Chancellor For Dumbfuckery. And, likewise, when recasting our relationship with those we might come to see as “collaborators” (Benjamin 98; Dunn 136–140).

Serving the servants. On one level, serving the servants is about acknowledging our aforementioned middle manager status as WPAs and identifying down instead of identifying up—staying closer to the first-year students and the lecturers and adjuncts than the deans and provosts. To be sure, WPAs inevitably navigate relationships with all of the above. Obviously it behooves us to develop effective strategies for working with all. But whom do we serve? Who are the stakeholders who get us to campus early on Monday morning and keep us there well past 5:00? I'm not talking about identifying down because it feels good and because of the affective dissatisfaction we have with our management role (Strickland). Nor am I talking about holding hands and singing Kumbaya, a stance that a punk like Cobain would despise. I am talking about making a deliberate, conscious choice to take affirmative stances in favor of the servants. Feminist punks like Bikini Kill often asked men at their shows to step to the back of the crowd and invited women to step forward and get closer to the stage (Dunn 42). That is an affirmative, material stance and an embodiment of this ideal. Cobain himself went out of his way to stay in alignment with the marginalized—from bands that lacked his own band's fame to the queer and bullied kids in his audience. And while cynics (including, perhaps, the narrator of “Serve the Servants”) might claim he cashed in on this pose, consider the lucrative opportunities he missed by opting out of tours with arena rock acts whose gender politics he critiqued. And so I return to the question, whom do we serve? Refusing to get into bed with Big Textbook or Big Testing because we decide refusing is the best way to serve students

might mean passing on a lucrative opportunity—lucrative for the college’s bottom line, for instance, and by extension a chance to score points with administration, but an opportunity not in the best interests of students.

Talking some shit. My temper has gotten the best of me as WPA and I am not always proud of that. Having said that, to the degree that we have privilege and power (e.g., tenure, a contract, etc.) within our institutions, are we taking risks and putting ourselves out there? Are we willing to talk some shit? Cobain’s notorious willingness to speak his mind in frank, sometimes offensive ways translated into moments where he shattered taboos—expressing, for example, his disdain for machismo, sexism, and homophobia in the world of rock and roll and the culture at large (see Azerrad). This, too, is a tricky proposition for WPAs, as we are told as members of academe to be collegial and exercise decorum. That is, to be more middle class and, by extension, to prop up the current status quo. Part of rage is expressing rage. Part of privilege is giving voice to important ideas because those ideas are important and because we have a platform to speak. Talking shit can be the right thing to do—a way in which to advance a just cause. But in addition, it can be a way to find release, to let go of some of the unresolved, negative paradoxes Strickland and Micciche describe being all-too-common in WPAs. There are moments that call for us to be mature, à la Ianetta. There are moments that call for us to talk shit, to be embodied, affected, and grungey.

Cobain’s story is instructive. My professional life shifted dramatically upon getting tenure and becoming WPA. My depression worsened. I let the stress impact relationships. I am not a drug addict and don’t suffer the existential battles that Cobain did. But like other WPAs, I found myself in crisis mode, debating the merits of my program and my field of study with administrators, struggling with the guilt of being a middle manager and a boss compositionist, living a professional life of emotions, often bringing those struggles home, and trying, as the poet May Sarton writes, “to handle it all better” (101).⁷ It’s tempting to avoid giving offense, to avoid conflict and rage, and to seek comfort. The mythology of earned, *deserved* privilege is ingrained to the point that those who do not collect warrant something like pity. *Kurt worked so hard to attain success, and he can’t even enjoy it.* As if performing on *Saturday Night Live* or topping the charts must gratify. Perhaps we all sometimes feel we are deserving of pleasures and instant gratifications and feel the pull to act apathetically, or to be calm and decorous when emotions are perhaps justified.

I have moments like this as a WPA, where either my temper or my apathy wins. There’s something to be said for willingness to speak and

fill uncomfortable silences, sometimes with an irreverent, sarcastic, angry, grungey, utterance. I'm glad that I have not been a WPA who seeks at all costs to avoid conflict. But I'm also haunted by Ianetta's admonition that WPAs need to be grown-ups. Intellectually, I know that being the grown-up means letting things go, or at least waiting until the kairotic moment to take action. To sit back, listen, weigh options, and then act strategically. Right? Of course. And yet—here is the paradox—the strategic, prudent course of action can sometimes be too safe, and too decorous. WPAs can look to Cobain's anarchic spirit, including his rejection of decorum but also his rejection of doing what is easy and what is logical. Logically, it makes sense to remain calm. But what of emotions? When Cobain declared, "I'm a spokesman for *myself*. . . I don't want to be a fucking spokesperson," he wasn't saying he didn't care for anything or anyone outside of himself—just that he had little interest in the liberal decorum that so often leads to presumption. He didn't want to be Bono speaking earnestly on behalf of the Western world, presuming to solve every social problem. But the problems remain, and, in Sartre's words, I need to handle it all better. Kurt didn't. I want to try.

NOTES

1. The White Stripes captured the dilemma of the little room in their song of the same name: "Well you're in your little room / and you're working on something good / but if it's really good / you're gonna need a bigger room." Like Nirvana, the band could not be contained by little rooms for long. "Little Room" appeared on the White Stripes' breakout album, *White Blood Cells*.

2. The media dubbed Nirvana and its contemporaries "grunge." In the early 1990s the term came to refer to an amorphous genre of latter-day punk rock, a wardrobe of flannel shirts, and, briefly and regrettably, a generation. Grunge and punk music improbably became so profitable that soon after Nirvana's *Nevermind* became a hit, the fifteen-year-old, genre-defining record *Never Mind the Bollocks Here's the Sex Pistols* went platinum (Waksman 300).

3. A great deal of the song seems to address Cobain's painful relationship with his father. Cobain wrote a scrapped set of liner notes:

I guess this song is for my father who is incapable of communicating at the level of affection in which I have always expected. In my own way, I decided to let my father know that I don't hate him. I simply don't have anything to say to him, and I don't need a father/son relationship with a person whom I don't want to spend a boring Christmas with. In other words: I love you; I don't hate you; I don't want to talk to you. (qtd. in Cross 262)

4. It is worth reiterating that numerous WPAs assume their roles before or without tenure. I do not wish to uncritically equate “WPA” with “senior member of the profession.” Certainly, faculty of all ranks and graduate students serve as WPAs.

5. See Morgen for a graphic, compelling, and often surreal representation of Cobain’s struggle with mental health issues.

6. Cobain seemed angry at music journalists on principle and often answered specific questions from the media with abstractions like “Punk rock is freedom” (Cross 191), just one example of his irreverent, pissed pose.

7. In her memoir *Journal of a Solitude*, Sarton captures the imperative to interrogate our own values and behaviors. She writes, “I asked myself the question, ‘What do you want of your life?’ and I realized with a start of recognition and terror, ‘Exactly what I have—but to be commensurate, to handle it all better’” (101).

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