Wesleyan University The Honors College

Growing Out

Adolescent Masculinities in a New Jersey Suburb

by

Jake Nussbaum
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Instructional Note

The textual component of this thesis was designed to be viewed in conjunction with a collection of photographs. If you are an electronic reader, these photographs can be viewed at http://wesscholar.wesleyan.edu/etd_hon_theses/

If you are reading a hard copy in Olin, these photographs are located in the back pocket, although I strongly encourage you to visit the Anthropology Department where there's a printed copy of this work in which the photographs are interspersed with the text as they were meant to be viewed.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2009, I returned home to Montclair, New Jersey to conduct the ethnographic fieldwork and photography for this project. My goal was to explore the construction of masculinity among young, white, middle-class, straight men, most of whom, like me, had been raised in the suburbs and identified themselves to some degree as "alternative." From May to August, I conducted interviews with some of my closest friends, and participated in a variety of activities from band practices to barbecues to house parties, taking pictures the whole way through. In September, I returned to school, where I continued to take photographs, occasionally returning home to do more research and see friends and family.

In this thesis, I seek to convey and reflect on what it was like for me and my peers to grow up in this community. I do not claim to speak for them, and I've tried to remain as true to their thoughts and words as possible. To meet this standard, I have maintained constant self-reflexivity in this project, trying to evaluate my own location and experience as an ethnographer/photographer/storyteller, representing people who are very close to me. My hope is that by using multiple forms of representation, incorporating multiple voices, and including myself as both an object and subject of knowledge, I have captured the complexity of my experience and that of my peers.

In this regard, I do not offer the photographs in this project to be viewed as a mere document of my experience as an ethnographer. Many of these shots were taken in places other than New Jersey, some are of people whom I've never

met, others are of people who had little influence on my ethnographic research. Some shots are posed and in that sense are just as "theoretical" as the text—deliberately constructed to convey an idea. Others are of situations that did not involve me and I just happened to observe. But, to be sure, *all* these photographs are composed, subjective interpretations of an external reality.

Photographs have the potential to bring their audience directly into the photographer's experience of seeing. In that sense, photography is unquestionably anthropological, seeking to convey the relationship between the observer and the observed. Historically, however, much of the photographic work I have encountered in connection with anthropology presents itself as an objective documentation of a place, people, or lifestyle, with very little recognition that the photographic process itself is a way to construct meaning. In this project, I attempt to take advantage of that very subjective aspect of photography as a way to bring the audience into my own way of seeing, but also to offer that perspective as itself an object of knowledge.

The same holds true for the way I use memory and narrative. Memories are grounded in lived experiences that become transformed over time through the subjective process of remembering. As ethnographer, I have tried to be cognizant of the potential for retroactive distortion, but that too can be useful in conveying ethnographic meaning. That is, the way in which we remember is important to our construction of selfhood. My research often relied on a methodology of inter-subjective, communal acts of remembering as a way to uncover significant elements of my peer group's collective identity. That process helped me

understand the ethnographic significance of my own memories, some of which I have narrated in this work.

In that regard, much of the complexity of this project stems from my ability to draw on my memories and shared past experiences with my peers. You might say that, as an ethnographer, I had more than just my foot in the door—my prior knowledge of the cultural codes and semiotic meanings I encountered, coupled with the strong personal bond I had with my "informants," enabled me to move quickly into rich territory.

But doing ethnographic research about friends and home has its own unique set of problems. I often felt caught between two seemingly conflicting goals, attempting to portray my friends in the fairest and most respectful light, without becoming preoccupied with trying to "protect" them. My intimacy with these "informants" allowed for a certain ease in our conversations, but it also made it difficult to keep track of my own interpretive ability to shape our dialogue.

Finally, I would like to situate this work in relation to the texts that have influenced and inspired me. From a theoretical standpoint, R.W. Connell's work, particularly *Gender & Power* and *Masculinities*, introduced me to the complicated, hegemonic process that leads to the proliferation of multiple gender identities in the social world. Lynne Segal's *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, adopted a similar theoretical framework in order to examine the gradual change

and incorporation of feminist values in Euro-American masculinities since the '50s.

Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* provided me with a framework for thinking about class identity, and the ways in which we use cultural tastes to claim distinction. Paul Willis's *Learning To Labor*, an ethnography of working-class lads in Hammertown, England, was influential on my work, helping me understand the connections between masculinity and class, and the ways in which individuals can contribute to the reproduction of certain class, race, and gender values through acts of rebellion.

Lastly, Fred Pfeil's *White Guys: Studies in Postmodern Domination and Difference*, was a critical text for me, exemplifying a complicated approach to exploring the ways in which straight, white men perceive themselves in relationship to one other and an imagined Other, as refracted in popular cultural forms. Since the very conception of this project, my goal has been to elucidate the contradictions and complexities of selfhood in the privileged or "guided" identity of a straight, white, middle-class man. I can promise that, throughout my experience, I have been committed to constructing a sincere, heartfelt, and truthful rendering of what I believe that to be.

1

There is a mythopoetic element to baseball. As in 60,000 fans with heads bowed after the fifth inning for the singing of God Bless America. I'm talking post-9/11, my head bowed and a bald eagle materializing in a wave of pixels across the Megatron. No, Megatron is a childhood action figure, Megatron is a cartoon villain. Consider this the mythopoetic act of my own memory, seeking to connect past and present, the present folding back on the past, inverting. I have an idea and it leaks over the barriers of time.

Amber waves of grain.

The baseball game is where you learn to be a part of the mass, because in a crowd of 60,000, the only way to truly feel recognized is to obey the norm. The moment of silence is held, the pitchers step off the mound at 9:11 pm, the slogans on the sweatshirts read *Never Forget* and *Fallen Heroes*. We come together after a tragedy, or we are squeezed together, with heads down at Yankee Stadium and hats off.

In my memory, I see mostly men in the crowd. There are young and old men here, being pulled towards a normative identity, to be the men we want to be (all we can be). And the next thing you know, you can hear a pindrop because *we are all going to stand and honor our heroes abroad*. In a crowd like this, it's easy to become an anonymous docile mouthpiece for the imagined masculine, white, middle-class voice of America. This is the man I imagine walking slowly in a spiral towards the middle, because at every possible point on his walk he is

choosing to go left, inward, towards the safety and power of the norm. To be the man that the crowd wants him to be.

I want to talk about him, white, straight, middle-class man, privileged, with a path at his feet, but a multitude of choices.

I am standing now with my head bowed and hat off, because Montclair, New Jersey is not fifteen miles from New York City and one day we (this town) climbed to the top of our mountain and looked out over the suburbs across the Hudson River, to the giant smokestacks of the World Trade Center falling down. Mythopoetic. Because it is in this town that my peers and I learned to go left in their spiral, or not. Better yet to go left and right at the same time, this small group of boys who skated together; and formed bands; and got older; and got violent; and got peaceful; and went to University; and who majored in economics or did not major in economics; and grew beards or did not grow beards, or were unable to grow beards; who knew when they were crossing a line and crossed it anyway, or never crossed it; whose bodies became sites of conflict and frustration; whose bodies vividly marked their privilege. Because I love the Yankees but I know sports are pretty fucked up; because I find myself laughing at that joke but I can't say if I'm laughing with you (the joker), or at you, to mark our separation. Do not assume you know who I am simply because I can fit right in with the crowd at a baseball game after September 11th.

I'm reconstructing this memory of the time after the attacks because it created this horrible gut-pulling between so many of my thoughts, identities, masculinities, selves. Because my neck bristles when, in college, six years after,

Eric is saying to me that 9/11 was a conspiracy, that he had some documentary film to prove it.

I said, "Look. Maybe it's because you're from the west coast. Like, it wasn't close for you, or, you have some distance to say that stuff. But I stood there, I could see the smoke."

Actually I couldn't see the smoke. I was in class at the time, in middle school.

All the TVs in the building were on tall black metal carts with wheels. They dragged one across the maroon carpeting to the middle of the room and found a live feed, in Spanish, on the only channel with clear enough reception. There was a news anchor on the screen with a window next to her head with flames and smoke in it, and I don't speak Spanish so what the hell. The reception wasn't clear either, there were little grey spots appearing everywhere, like the spots that blip around your vision after you get the wind knocked out of you.

I remember seeing a teacher on the phone and a child next to him gently holding the cord of the phone and looking off into some inaccessible middle-distance. I heard a girl in the bathroom sobbing because her teacher said something like it was world war fucking three.

Remembering is creating for the purpose of the present.

They let us out early, and on the bus home someone said that school might be cancelled tomorrow if the president announces a National Day of Mourning. I came home to my mother in front of the TV crying, the TV on mute as if she tried to turn it off but only got halfway there.

"Dude, you weren't close. It's easy for you to say conspiracy because we all know that Bush and the war in Iraq and everything. But how can you say it? I'm watching a man jump out of a window of a building. I'm thinking that my father was just in New York yesterday, September 10th, in the towers yesterday morning. People walking home covered in ash. And you're telling me Bush and conspiracy and how could two buildings that strong fall over unless there was some political plot?"

The knot in the stomach twists inward, tighter.

I am being attacked, and I am standing up, because of heroes, because *we were attacked*. Territorial, neck-bristling man. But I know he's right, at least about Bush, about the politics, exploitation, oil, Iraq. And it's awkward, to take that moment of silence at the baseball game, and I might have mouthed the words to *God Bless America* but I never really sanf them. I never bought that political crusade, never fully joined the crowd. Sometimes I even want to leave it, distinguish myself from the mass.

I want to skateboard away from police.

A few days after the attack my dad showed me his World Trade Center Visitor's Pass from the morning of September 10th. It had a picture of him on it that looked like a mugshot, and the time on it was 10:30 AM.

On the way to the ballgame we sit in traffic, father and son in an old gray Plymouth van, pre-game show on the radio, empty pizza box on the dash. My dad keeps an old broken bandsaw motor in the car for times like these, when he's

caught in thick gridlock. The motor is heavy, wrapped in blue electrical tape, and he curls it slowly with his right arm, keeping his free hand on the wheel, repeating this gesture until the traffic breaks. This is his weightlifting, it strengthens biceps, triceps and forearm. He's a sculptor by trade, a man invested in the physical nature of things, his hands covered in scars and band-aids. Corporeal man.

While we wait, I try and curl the motor ten times with each arm.

I should be asking what's the difference between my father and the communal identity performed by the crowd at the baseball game, between the man lifting old motors in the '91 Plymouth and the everyman laborers who get hammered in the bars on Friday night and spend the week's wages on Yankees tickets. These blue-collar men are products of my imagination, romantic figures fashioned from movie scenes, songs, and brief encounters with auto mechanics. But, my father, you see, he's an artist, a suburbanite, his house has three stories and a basement and an attic and a garage, and he prefers to shop at Whole Foods.

We get to the stadium and find our seats. "They're not front row Jake, but they're not the bleachers either."

When you sit down in the blue plastic stadium-seat, that's when it first hits you that you're in the crowd. It's schizophrenic— at once we're all pulling together, "Go Yankees," but there is also distinction— I'm not the one shouting *pussy* at opposing players; I am not the one sitting front row behind home plate; I

am the kid with his father on Sunday at the game; I am the kid choosing not to sing God Bless America; I am the kid buying the salted pretzel.

Bourdieu teaches that I assert my class (and gender) identity through distinction (1984), by displaying cultural and economic capital in practices of taste. But my social privilege allows me to erase, redraw, and put little holes in that distinguishing line, like when I roll my eyes at the woman on the Megatron in heavy eyeliner, navy sweatshirt, hip-hugging jeans, and white tennis shoes. She is the quintessential middle-American woman, I judge, the Real-Housewives-of-New-Jersey-Watcher, and here we are, both of us, out to the ballgame, pretzels in hand.

I use ideas of class and gender to position myself in the crowd, among the working men who live for baseball, the aristocrats in the front row seats, the suburban sons on day trips from Jersey, and all the other social types of my imagination. I simultaneously relate to and dissociate myself from these imagined figures, scorning the image of the woman on the Megatron but also sympathizing with her as a fan, as I try to hold my own in the baseball banter with the folks sitting around me and attempt to just *be average*. There's no better place for me to do that than here in the crowd, where I can ease into the anonymity and safety offered to a straight white guy.

But I'm hesitant to do that, too. Do I really relate to the stubble-faced guy sitting next to me who thinks the Red Sox are a bunch of faggots?

Internally, being in the crowd is a struggle, a particularly complicated place to perform identity where my conception of self is ever-changing,

constantly being shaped and reshaped through an infinite series of moments, objects, relations, thoughts, and movements.

I try to use this memory of the ballpark as a crystal through which I can retroactively examine and construct multiple, contradictory identities— buying into a prescribed social role, rejecting it, distinguishing myself from the crowd, and joining it, all at once. This framework of identity is based mainly on a theory of gender proposed by R.W. Connell, who argues that there are multiple gender identities, femininities and masculinities, individual performances of selfhood. But, Connell continues, to "recognize diversity in [gender identities] is not enough. We must also recognize the *relations* between… relations of alliance, dominance, and subordination" (1995: 37).

In Connell's gender framework, there is a hegemonic masculinity that dominates and subordinates other masculinities (as well as femininities), constantly seeking to reproduce and sustain itself in the power field. A public act of homophobia at a baseball game is one way that a particular masculinity attempts to dominate the gender identities around it, constructing the crowd environment as unsafe for some.

I use Connell's theory precisely because it allows room for multiplicity and instability within the individual. By approaching gender in terms of hegemony theory, we are asked to question how masculine norms are constructed, reinforced, contested, subordinated, and appropriated, rather than suggest that every person internalizes a singular version of masculinity, or that masculinity is a singular quality that people aspire to. This complex individual

interfaces in a multiplicity of ways with a perceived social norm as a way of articulating his own identity. The individual is an active participant in the hegemonic system, both in consenting and/or resisting. But in order to be recognized as a subject, one must first subject oneself to the social code (Foucault 1991).

I am interested in this process of subjection, as I watch a man dancing drunk in the bleachers, and his face is now on the Megatron displayed to the crowd, and he sees this and it's exciting to him, and he continues to dance. The crowd cheers and the man's dance changes, becomes less inhibited. He gyrates, approaching the point of no control. Beer sloshes up and out of his plastic cup, and the cheering gets louder.

I laugh at this figure because I recognize in him these often disparaged qualities of consumerism, excess, and conformity. But it would be wrong to say that I don't laugh with him as well, that I don't see the thing from his perspective, and don't feel his rush of happiness and blood to the face. What I mean is, have you ever lost control because you realized you were on the big screen? There is a collapsing of time and thought, and you recognize the external image of yourself in front of the crowd and do a dance move you've never done before. Foucault suggested that "docile bodies" were the products of surveillance (1991), embodying disciplinary power through rigid, structured movements. I offer the spasmodic body of the man on the Megatron as a new form of disciplined man, marked with collective approval, the sports-fan-consumer provoked by the crowd

into ecstatic performance. I'm laughing at his dance from across the baseball diamond, but his image sounds in me a deep and empathetic chord.

Is this the man jumping from the burning North Tower on live television and continuous replay? A man whose identity is now and forever the American victim, white worker with white shirt and tie, arm flailing. He was the purported everyman, the face of the crowd, the visual representation of an idealized American middle-class identity. He was the mythic symbol of the *attack on America*, and in my memory I cannot look away from his image on the screen, despite trying to refuse the nationalist ideology he was being used for by politicians and the media. I didn't want to be part of that agenda, yet I found it hard to distinguish myself from the look of that man on the screen. Me, a middle-class white American man, with a future in business, future in a suit.

The image of the falling man conflated being an American victim of terrorism with being a white, professional middle-class man. In that way, September 11th acted as a moment of erasure and collapse for diverse identities—suddenly, we were told that the differences among us had disappeared. What was left was a crowd of unified, docile Americans, sharing a moment of silence, the Others standing out like sore thumbs. Our mantra was, *We are all Americans*, temporarily suspending identity politics (for some), in a call to nationalism and a heightened sense of paranoia. Bodies with multiple and varying identities along gender, race, and class lines were suddenly asked, are you American? The only safe answer was yes. The only safe answer was to present yourself as aligned with the idealized falling man.

But those who did so immediately became participants in a larger movement towards imperialism and American supremacy. If you raised the American flag, you were complicit in raising the standard of "militant, white, masculinist, and heterosexual Americanness" (Grewal 2005: 214). If you sang "land of the free and home of the brave," at a baseball game in October 2001, you might very well be expressing solidarity with the crowd after a tragedy, but you were also supporting American militarization.

The image of the American male soldier rising out of the rubble of the World Trade Center to fight terror (an image that echoes throughout American history) became the hegemonic construction of *real* Americanness and *real* masculinity, while its nay-sayers were branded traitors and wimps. For a young man, the allure of that "real" American masculinity was particularly strong, for it valorized adolescent identifications with war, violence, heroics, and patriotism. In that sense, choosing to wave the flag, as Connell might argue (1995), was an act of submission to a hegemonic masculinity.

In the instance of 9/11, individuals were particularly encouraged, sometimes coerced, into aligning themselves with these larger disciplinary forces. Through a heightened sense of suspicion and paranoia, Americans were called upon to undertake the disciplinary project themselves, to keep tabs on one another and report divergences from the norm. Politicians and the media emphasized safety and security as a necessary and basic condition for the American way of life. "In such a society of security," Grewal argues, "the work of disciplining populations becomes shared by the many" (2005: 202). That is,

citizens actively take on the role of security guards, and through the disciplinary power of the normative gaze check one another for divergences from the norm. After 9/11, that meant singling out the stereotypical brown-bodied, bearded terrorist, as the ultimate figure of abnormality.

In memory, I try to picture my own body in the white ashy haze after the attacks. Tall, skinny, white, with a crew-cut. If I was riding the subway, no one would look twice and stop to question my Americanness. No one would wonder about my skin tone and if it meant bomb. Blue jeans and a button down shirt, pale skin and a crew-cut don't usually mean bomb. Of course, I was only in 8th grade at the time, but in my memory I'm much older, my age now, 21. Because, only at this age comes my realization that this was and is my privilege, to not have to worry about being stopped on the subway, to not stand out against the norm, to not be viewed with suspicion by security cameras in Times Square.

But does this mean that I am truly being seen? Asking this, I feel my increasing dissociation from the hegemonic identity laid out before me, a palpable distance between who I think myself to be and how I think I'm seen when I'm riding the subway or at a baseball game. I imagine myself sitting underneath a tower of privilege, the shadow of which renders my face recognizable only in its most normative form, as a white, straight, nationalist man. But that's *not me*, I think. But it is.

In memory, there is a lack of any emotion after the attack. I took to looking at pictures of Mohammed Atta, the infamous hijacker, trying to riddle

out the feelings of sadness and anger by looking at images of the terrorist and fantasizing conversations with him.

He says, "This building is only 12 miles away from you and you don't even feel it happen. You don't feel any impact. You feel nothing even when the city's burning down right next to you."

I think about Francisco, a kid who played on my little league baseball team. His father was in the tower when it came down. I don't know how I know this because no one told it to me directly. No one said it under their breath and looked away. I guess I gathered it from other quiet sentences.

San Francisco. We used to call him that on the team.

I say, "You know when it happened someone told me there would be a National Day of Mourning. That they might cancel school the day after."

He says, "This is what you think? You see planes fly into a building and you think school?"

"I wasn't old enough maybe. My Mom cried all day and night."

"You are old enough now. But you still can't feel? You are old enough to hear this, and I will tell it to your face. I flew to kill. To kill every single person that I did. Not one was a mistake. Not the ones that were burned alive, or had to jump from the 60th floor, or who were buried beneath falling concrete, or those that went in to help. Coordinated attack, Jake. Feel that. Say it out loud. Coordinated attack.

"The wrecking of this symbol. America on its heels. Your country with its guts on the ground. I am here to tell it to your face."

But I cannot see it the way I've been told.

I'm looking through these pictures of Atta's face, which they say is yellow-brown. Old and young, beard or no beard. Have you ever looked at a Renaissance painting, and felt nothing, even though you're told it's a masterpiece, a great relic of civilization? I can't say I know where I stand anymore, in my own white skin and disciplined body, because, looking into Atta's face, I can't militarize, or summon whatever it is I'm supposed to feel.

Shut up and speak fucking English in this country.

Say this: *The bombs bursting in air.*

Say this: We are all Americans.

Sometimes the fireworks that they set off on the 4th of July are so massive that you can see the ashy remnants of their cardboard casings floating back down to the trees. They float slowly and move from side to side, maybe looking more like a blind spot in your own vision than a physical piece of matter in the sky. This is appropriate, for ash is as much a lack of something as it is its own tangible thing.

Then there are fireworks that have no visual effect, which exist solely to create a sonic boom. They blink out in the air, pause, and then emit a deep shellshock pulse, so physical you think you feel your eardrums cracking.

In 10th grade we used to drive down to Pennsylvania to buy consumer fireworks, light-them-yourself types. They weren't legal in Jersey, but we'd drive

back with them anyway, setting them off on people's lawns in the middle of the night. Smoke bombs, roman candles, bottle rockets, starball contributions, missile batteries. Moon travelers with report. The idea was to pull up in front of a house late at night, like 11 o'clock, run out of the car (leave the car door open), light the fuse (it's lit when it sparkles), run back to the car, and peel out as the fireworks explode in the rearview mirror. Watch them as you drive away.

Because Montclair is a grassy suburb. People are out there now, mowing their lawns, sitting in lawn chairs, playing fetch with their dogs. These people use several varieties of lawn mowers and several varieties of sprinklers: spinning disks that spray in short bursts; large fan-shaped sprinklers; slow leaking hoses. Push-mowers and gas-powered mowers. Yard services that do everything from A to Z, we will even water your flowers.

There is a town ordinance: you live in Montclair, you keep your lawn *groomed*. It's an ethical obligation.

As time went on the fireworks got bigger. We started sticking around to watch them go off, sometimes returning to the scene of the crime to collect the empty cardboard shells off the grass, sometimes hitting the same house multiple times in one night. It came to be understood that this was a movement. Not a contest, but a collective intensification. We wanted to get our names in the paper.

I imagined a bleary-eyed man standing in his bathrobe in the brick vestibule of his house in the smoke and sulfur-smell left lingering from the explosion, and he's dialing the cops right now honey. This man was a target, the baseball man with two gas-powered lawnmowers. We were trying to subvert all

this, reveling in the booming echoes of Moon Travelers as we peeled out, hollering in our parents' cars and stashing the extra rockets under the seat.

They make one called the Glowworm and it's really not a firework at all, but a tiny black puck with a fuse and when you light it, it expands into a long writhing, glowing worm that flashes off and on. Flash to the 4th of July flash to the towers coming down flash to graduation day flash to Yankee Stadium. I saved the Glowworm for myself, for my own backyard, it wasn't spectacular enough except inside my own mind.

There was the Driver or the Lighter or the Placer or the Support or the Lookout. We thought we were in a heist film, emphasizing details like the sound of tires spinning against the road, the image of a car cruising past a house with its lights off. We coordinated our watches. Or we were in an old western about Billy the Kid, or a war flick with a platoon running for cover. We drew from a catalogue of these cultural references.

Add meaning, depth, and value to your lifestyle.

I imagined our targets to be the antithesis of my idealized self: A girl who got a 93 on a test but argued with the teacher for extra points. I found this offensive. A girl who was obsessed with horses and riding horseback. I imagined her in full riding gear, helmet, boots, with a blue ribbon pinned to her pullover fleece. I wanted to wake her parents up in the middle of the night in a fantasized

assault on the upper class. A boy who intended to graduate and go on to Harvard like his older brother and his lawyer dad. To crush them, this was the goal.

In constructing these images of our victims, I defined myself in opposition. But I also saw myself in them, and recognized my own identity and privilege as the suburbanite, elite-school-applicant, middle-class white male. I told myself that maybe such things disappear when you are sprinting full blast away from a sparking fuse. Maybe I could blast away the guilt.

A bottle rocket to break the window, to break the mirror.

Consider the weapon: gunpowder, explosion, missile-shaped cardboard, bottle rocket. I'm thinking 4th of July. I'm thinking Iraq, Afghanistan. Looking back, I see a certain brilliance in the weapon, in its delightfully under-developed irony. Masculinity, imperialism, terrorism, patriotism, violence, whiteness, all folding over each other like origami.

With fireworks we built a counterculture, attempting to subvert a conventional middle-class narrative of social success. *The Wild, Wild West*, *The Smoking Gun*, *The Saturn Missile Battery*, we lit these fireworks off on people's lawns to separate ourselves from the person who stumbles out of sleep to strobe lights and thunderclaps. By conceiving of our targets as the bourgeois upper-crust of Montclair, men and women who bought into the suburban lifestyle, I attempted to construct an oppositional identity as a wild rebel with little regard for social norms.

I was attempting to distance myself from what I perceived as an over-controlled, boring, respectable middle-class identity. The whole thing wouldn't have made sense if we were attacking houses in low-income areas. No, my imagined adversary was the docile, disciplined suburban man who retrieves his paper on Sunday morning and mows his lawn on Sunday afternoon. I wanted to burn the lawn.

Rebellion, I told myself, was essential to an identity that was not a product of school, state, father.

Young boys giddy under bright exploding lights, that's not a new story.

You could ask, what became of these rebels? Columbia, NYU, UVA, Northwestern, Yale. Schools known for their lawns, institutions with whole grounds crews dedicated to the upkeep of grass, knolls, and malls. With astonishing lawn mowers that you can ride like golf carts. With chapels and quads and statues of Thomas Jefferson.

Nate explained to me those high schools days, when we wanted to defy everything we thought of as correct behavior. He was on the soccer team and in the marching band, and he told me that becoming a man was about breaking the expectations associated with each:

> Nate: You see, soccer is just about winning… you're told that winning in sports is what men do. What my dad told me to do. So to be masculine for me was to go against the grain, deciding not to care about what everyone else on the team cared about. To elevate myself…

> Band was the opposite, because there people weren't expecting you to be masculine at all. So we broke those expectations too, acting immature and fucking with the teacher and breaking our drumsticks in half and yelling shit out the bus window. In other words, we did stupid boy shit. It was everything you wouldn't expect from the situation of being in the marching band. (7/20/09)

Nate describes how subverting the prescribed expectations of his high school activities helped him realize himself as a man. Performing the "unexpected masculinity" in any given situation, be it soccer or band, Nate avoided the normative images associated with each— the competitive, virile soccer player, or the subservient un-masculine band geek. He prioritized being a rebel over either of these opposed social types, utilizing constructed notions of dominant and subordinated masculinities (jock and band-geek) in order to construct himself as a "new," independent man, set apart from father, soccer coach, and teacher.

We must recognize that this is a privilege: Nate is able to move between more conventional and alternative identities because of his social position as white, straight, middle-class guy. *He* initiates divergences from the norm, and *he* provokes any suspicion from teachers, coaches, parents, and other authorities. He can always fall back on a socially safe identity if he needs to.

> Nate: We were always rebelling, but we knew the limitations. It was always in the context of privilege, in the confines of success, so in that way, we bought in to a lot of traditional ideas about masculinity, like how we took pickup basketball really seriously, or grilling meat. In some ways, that was just as unexpected. (7/20/09)

Nate pays constant attention to his unexpected position, as relative to what he perceives to be the mainstream, normative identity of a middle-class male, or the way of life that was offered to him by his father, and society at large

as characterized by the competitiveness of pickup basketball and the homosocial pleasures of grilling meat. For Nate, these "traditional" enactments of masculinity are actually unexpected for someone who has identified to some extent as a new man or a social rebel.

But he also acknowledges how reliance on social privilege can undermine rebel status, and how his class position, whiteness, and maleness, enable him to construct an identity that simultaneously presents itself as resistive and socially successful. After all, Nate, and all of my peers for that matter, didn't exactly fail out of school. We moved on to top-notch universities, the very symbols themselves of a certain type of middle-class success. There's clearly a major fissure here between how we perceived ourselves and an honest acknowledgement of "who we really were."

In other words, despite a self-constructed narrative of rebellion and an alternative lifestyle, we still ended up reproducing social privilege. In some ways, this mirrors Paul Willis's model (1981) of how working-class kids reproduced their social subordination through acts of cultural resistance and rebellion. The key difference is that here, the model of rebellion through self-marginalization contributes to the reproduction of social *privilege*.

Willis's ethnography suggests that "oppositional" identities often serve the cultural power they attempt to resists. This proves true to some extent for Nate, who openly conveys that his "unexpected masculinity," constructed in opposition to perceived social norms, was always within the confines of privilege, and in the end, did not keep him from achieving academic and social success. This structure

is mimicked in the political climate of middle-class Montclair at large, characterized by a liberal/conservative opposition which tends to conceal the shared individualist values of either party.

Nate constructs a dialectic model of "expected" masculinities, band geek and jock, which in his conception of self take a backseat to individualism and entrepreneurship of character. Nate's strongest desire was to be a new man, differentiated from social authority, not simply his father's son. It was this very trait of individualism that was foundational to American capitalist ideology, the fable of this country's conception being an act of rebellion against a patriarchal body, Britain. In that narrative, rebellion is synonymous with individualism, and is the central value of American masculinity as embodied by the founding fathers.

However, middle-class "individualism" can be articulated in different ways, as embodied in Nate's constructed opposition between the jock and band student, mediated by himself as playful rebel. He presents these stereotypical high school roles as disciplined and obedient, in contrast to his own creative identity which involves acts of self-expression and a capacity to "be oneself" in any school setting. Nate codes the "disciplined" or "boring" social roles of jock and band student in gendered terms, as either excessively or insufficiently masculine, unlike his own performance of the "unexpected," which he constructs as simultaneously masculine and authentically defiant. In part then, I am describing a process of ideological reproduction, in which unexpected acts of rebellion and irony, constructed in opposition to perceived social norms, are themselves deeply infused with the middle-class value of creativity.

But, this social reproduction is impure. While you might say that because Nate ended up at the University of Virginia and achieved social success in the eyes of his parents, peers, school, and town, that he has become the very person he rebelled against (I, too, went on to college despite ardently attacking imagined middle-class norms with fireworks). But you would be missing how Nate conveys an ethos of resistance, satire, and skepticism to the mainstream culture he has found himself in. This leaves us with another contradiction in terms: Nate is involved in co-optation, and his rebellious identity is incorporated into mainstream culture despite its oppositional nature; but, he is also carrying into that mainstream culture values of resistance and opposition.

The story of my peers and my multiple, often contradictory identities, is central to this project. These are identities, like Connell's masculinities, that are always interfacing with a hegemonic discourse of whiteness, straightness, maleness, and privilege. They are also, generally, the identities of white straight males. In that sense, we might be seen as the docile faces of the crowd. But to invoke such easy signifiers simply does not do justice to this complex experience of selfhood, and I aim to confuse the notion of what it means to be this particular version of an American, from this particular town in America, in this particular social world.

Growing up, there was a palpable tension between trying to perform as a responsible, socially aware, ethical, and unique individual, while also trying to satisfy our prescribed identity as a white straight American middle-class man. To

do both at the same time, we had to actively blur the line between conventional and unconventional masculinities; between mainstream culture and counterculture; between rejection and acceptance; between resistance and subordination; between irony and sincerity. This blurring was the attempted reconciliation of oppositional terms, which are themselves ever-shifting. My good friend Alex put it like this:

> In economics class, me and you sat at the same table as the jocks [who we thought were conventional men]. We all caused a ruckus at that table, sure, we disrupted the teacher and shouted things in class [we shared in constructing our identities with them]. But there was something separating us from the jocks, at least in our minds. I mean, we were in on the joke, but… Well, we were laughing at them and we were laughing with them. At and with. (8/28/09)

Alex doesn't resolve this tension. Rather, he describes our subject position as an ambivalent location and our identities as simultaneous performances of multiple, sometimes contradictory values. That is, we're "laughing at" and "laughing with." These shifting identifications prove that the very framework for social encounter which we produced, call it "alternative" vs. normal, falls apart when confronted with the actual complexities of living in the contemporary world.

"Last summer me and Steve and these two friends of ours flew out to Salt Lake City, and we bought this huge Ford and drove it down to Reno. And we were out on the desert some place, and just off the road there was this house that this Indian had sculptured from stuff all out of the desert. And out front he had a big picture of Geronimo that said "Landlord" over top of it. And there was a big sign above it that said, *This is the land of peace, love, justice… and no mercy*."

(Bruce Springsteen, Introduction to *Thunder Road*, 8/9/78)

"Stand up against the wall you fucking pussy faggots."

(Cop, 2000, or, Wrestling Coach, 2002)

"And tell me your names, one at a time. Show me your IDs. You guys are gonna fucking get it."

We were skating in the YMCA garage. Four of us, maybe five, 7th and 8th graders. Somebody kept trying to do a trick over this cement ledge and the rest of us stood in a wide circle watching him. I was filming all this with a handheld camera. Anyway the cops must have come around the corner pretty fast because no one really saw them coming and suddenly they were behind us, blasting their horn and sirens. Not that we would have run anyway, most of the time if cops come up to you while you're skating they just tell you to fuck off and you do and that's that. These two were different. Well, the one guy was, his partner just kind of stood in the background not saying anything. Anyway this one cop gets out of the car and starts just fucking ripping into us, like, *Against the wall fucking pussies I've got you now* or some shit. What I remember most clearly is this hat he's wearing, one of those fur-lined winter hats with folding earflaps, and I thought, *This hat looks Russian*. And the hat had a huge Police badge on the front of it, like

it was some type of fucking crown. And all I could think of was *This dude looks like he's from The Kremlin*. Meanwhile the background noise is all *you fucking faggot motherfuckers* and we're just standing against the wall holding our boards.

He didn't cuff us or anything but he made us get in the car, which is probably unconstitutional, and anyway I was just kind of in awe that I was in the backseat of a fucking cop car. I kept looking at the fence that separates the front seat from the back seat, and thinking, *That's there, that's really there*. Then the main cop turns around while he's driving and goes, *Oh well isn't this perfect?* and he raises the volume on the radio and it's that heavy metal song "I Am Iron Man" by Black Sabbath, and it's got this heavy drum beat, like this pounding low bass drum, and this cop has this shit-eating grin on his face, and I'm thinking, *Is this guy for real?* Meanwhile, the other cop is just sitting quietly looking ahead. And that drum beat is pounding like a fucking heart, just incessantly.

They ended up taking my camera and everyone's parents had to come pick them up at the station, and I said *Dad, we should sue these guys* and Dad said, *Red Tape*.

The other time was in wrestling practice, but that shit was pretty normal to hear in those days. The coach probably got off on calling us fags which now I can say is ironic because the sport he was coaching was wrestling where the whole thing is grappling another man for ten minutes or until you pin. Of course in those days there weren't any female wrestlers, at least in Montclair, but sometimes you would go to a tournament and there would be this girl wrestler

there and one of our team would have to wrestle her, and whoever it was we pitied them, just, like, psychologically, you know? Anyway the coaches called us fags and pussies all the time, it probably made some kids angry, which was probably the point.

A good example of that shit is this game we played called Slapback Oz-style. Oz referred to this TV show about prison, I never saw it, but I guess the concept of the show is these racial factions form, like the neo-Nazis verse the blacks verse the Latinos or whatever. Your typical popularized prison narrative. Anyway so Slapback was this game where every kid takes their shirt off and lays down in sets of three or four in a big circle while two kids chase each other around the room just trying to slap each other in the back as hard as they fucking can, just bare hand on bare skin. And if one of the kids lays down next to your set of three then the kid on the end of that set has to get up and run away and avoid being slapped. So Slapback Oz-style was like that except the coach put us in sets based on our race or ethnicity, like, *You three Jews, you're here, the Blacks, you're here, Mexicans, here.* Inevitably it never worked out perfectly and there were always a couple kids leftover and the coach would be like, *And you, whatever the fuck you are, you're here.* So we all end up with our shirts off and are lying down in sets of three, shoulder to shoulder, next to guys of the same color.

When you got slapped it didn't always hurt so bad but it would leave this huge red handprint on your back that might stay there for days. So you would always run from it, as fast as you fucking could, dreading that slap.

But usually it at the end of practice, before doing sprints, that the coach would say *stand up against the wall you fucking faggots*, and then we'd go stand up against the wall.

2

Giants Stadium, Meadowlands, New Jersey. 21 years old. My father and I are at a Bruce Springsteen concert, watching him play on the big screens on either side of the stage, too far away to actually see the real live man, to see the breath and sweat that we assume is there somewhere in the physical world. He's dressed in black jeans, Bruce is, black shirt, black vest, black fingerless gloves. We call him by his first name, all of us, tens of thousands.

At the same time, I'm knee-deep in this project, performing my duties as interpretive observer, already familiar with the tropes of masculinity, sex, race, and class that I aim to explore. So when I look around I'm even more aware of the fact that what appears to be 40,000 white people are standing and clapping in unison, more aware than I was when I first saw Bruce from the very same spot in 7th grade. What I remember from that concert was looking up and around at the giant bowl of people, watching them all move in sync, and uncontrollably laughing, like, how could this be real?

You go to the concert and you sit in the seats that, at some other time, are occupied by the football fan, that romanticized working-class figure that drinks Bud Light and is telling you that he bleeds green, the color of the Jets. If you cut this man, he will bleed green. That fan, who watches the sport whose essence is the pounding of bodies against each other and into the ground, whose creation myth is bone-cracking and mouthguard-chewing, and a legendary tall white quarterback with golden hair and a cannon for an arm. We share this fan's space now, as this other hero, Bruce, tells us a slightly different myth of masculinity:

Early in the morning factory whistle blows,
Man rises from bed and puts on his clothes,
Man takes his lunch, walks out in the morning light,
It's the working, the working, just the working life.

Through the mansions of fear, through the mansions of pain,
I see my daddy walking through them factory gates in the rain,
Factory takes his hearing, factory gives him life,
The working, the working, just the working life.

End of the day, factory whistle cries,
Men walk through these gates with death in their eyes.
And you just better believe, boy,
somebody's gonna get hurt tonight,
It's the working, the working, just the working life.

(Bruce Springsteen, *Factory*)

This is Bruce's myth of working-class manhood— the factory as site of both life and death, the ultimate contradiction of an overarching capitalist system. Factory labor is the individual's livelihood and his means of self-destruction, deeply and sorrowfully linked to growing up a man, which in turn is linked to a certain inescapable masculine violence: "you better believe that somebody's gonna get hurt tonight." For Bruce, being a working class man in American society means being tough, literally embodying an opposition to institutional power in the form of scar tissue and muscle.

Bruce's life story has itself been mythologized as a working-class struggle. Born into a working-class family in blue-collar Asbury Park, New Jersey, he found it hard to make a name for himself as a musician, but nonetheless built up a loyal following at various bars and nightclubs, until miraculously getting disovered by Columbia Records. But even then, goes the myth, Bruce kept working hard, "giving everything he's got up on stage, putting himself and the

music out there on the line," eventually releasing the widely popular *Born To Run* in 1984. But "even that doesn't change him: he's still the same Bruce… the hard-rockin' working-class guy" (Pfeil 1995: 82).

That's the myth, at least, and at the concert, this is the Bruce we see on the big screen. His outfit suggests toughness and grit (he could be on his way to the factory), without any hint of financial wealth. When he plays his back spasms violently and he drips with sweat, as if he's locked in a fight with music itself. Bruce's very performance feels like a type of painful labor, a visceral, corporeal ritual reenactment of the stories he sings. All this in front of a massive crowd, in a football stadium that Bruce is now calling a "hallowed ground" and dedicating a song to called *Wrecking Ball.*

Wrecking Ball is written from the perspective of Giants Stadium, which will be torn down later in the year. I can't pick up on all the lyrics, but there's definitely a line about blood and mud, and the chorus goes something like, "Well if you've got the guts, mister, and if you've got the balls, then bring on your wrecking ball." Giants Stadium, like the concerts and football games it houses, is a testament to a certain masculine, working-class toughness, a stadium that was, we might say, "built on the backs of Jersey's hardest workers." The song lashes out at any construction team brave enough to tear the stadium down, defying them to "bring it on."

There is a tangible power in this masculinist narrative, pulsing through the crowd and materializing in 9/11 memorial jackets, labor union patches, beards, and blue jeans. This power both attracts and excludes me, the privileged

suburbanite who is going to graduate college and won't be forced into the factory life, but also someone who shares Bruce's romantic opposition to capitalism and authority, an authority also embodied, in my mind at least, in the anonymous bourgeois suburbanite man whom my friends and I tried to challenge by lighting fireworks on his lawn; the man who wants to pass a town ordinance banning skateboarding; the faceless authority who we imagined as the counterpoint to so much of our lives growing up; the man known as The Man.

It's not that his songs were about us (we knew we weren't working-class), but we really wanted them to be, and we could relate to them. That is, we were the sons of privilege, born into a good life, if you will, yet we undeniably felt a distance from that safe and privileged world, the suburb-world with its teachers, soccer moms, and minivans. We equated our sense of distance with the oppression of working class men in Bruce's songs, taking up skateboarding, playing rock music, setting off fireworks, and other things we thought were rebellious, in order make that fantasized oppression even more real.

I'm not willing to chalk these activities up to "the natural stages of adolescent American male development," but neither do I want to suggest that we led a true, authentic rebellion against mainstream American ideology. Our rebellion was small, and privileged, and we were not marginalized for it as so many alternative voices have been in this country. Rather, it was an act of self-marginalization, distinct from the forced marginalization of the working-class men that Bruce sings about. *We* constructed the "mainstream" as restrictive,

disciplined, boring, and oppressive, when in fact being alternative, or being a "creative individual," was equally an expression of middle-class values.

Our social movement was simultaneously fringe and mainstream, and it was Bruce who provided the cohesion between those two seemingly contradictory places, telling fables of men who needed to live outside the boundaries of the mainstream in order to realize a conventional masculine identity:

They're still racing out at the Trestles
But that blood it never burned in her veins
Now I hear she's got a house up in Fairview
And a style she's trying to maintain
Well if she wants to see me
You can tell her that I'm easily found
Tell her there's a spot out 'neath Abram's Bridge
And tell her there's a darkness on the edge of town

Some folks are born into a good life
Other folks get it anyway anyhow
I lost my money and I lost my wife
Them things don't seem to matter much to me now
Tonight I'll be on that hill 'cause I can't stop
I'll be on that hill with everything I got
Lives on the line where dreams are found and lost
I'll be there on time and I'll pay the cost
For wanting things that can only be found
In the darkness on the edge of town

(Bruce Springsteen, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*)

Darkness is told from the perspective of a man who finds it impossible to embrace the American system of social mobility and the mainstream upper-class culture that is its measure. The song opens with the narrator describing a woman who *has* bought in to that lifestyle, a woman, who, we gather, grew up with the narrator, possibly an ex-lover, but never shared his taste for street-racing and wild

living ("that blood it never burned in her veins"). Instead, she's depicted as having become a member of the feminized bourgeois elite, with a home in Fairview (a name that reeks of suburbia) and "a style she's trying to maintain." This style, implicitly characterized as artificial and inauthentic, points to the narrator's own bitter feelings toward this woman— he knows her true identity and sees through her material façade. It's a salient critique of the exclusivity and hypocrisy of upper-crust life, and clearly the narrator finds this woman's efforts to climb the social ladder to be superficial and shallow.

But the narrator too once had money, a wife, and the "good life," or at least what society told him was good. Somehow, though, he fell from grace, and in this transformative experience he realized that the good life doesn't have much meaning, that there's something more to his identity than the artificial constructs of social and economic success, as symbolized in a stable marriage and a steady job. Some are born into this life, and others get it "anyway, anyhow," a distinction that reads as meaningless to the narrator, who no longer feels the allure of social mobility: "them things don't seem to matter much to me now."

But if the mainstream "good life" is an arbitrary construction of capitalism, where, then, can a man find meaning? It is exactly where the narrator awaits his fate, where he beckons his old lover out of spite to come and find him, on society's fringe, or the "darkness on the edge of town." This darkness is constructed as both a masculine and authentic space, under Abrams' bridge, which is linked to the street-racing mentioned at the beginning of the song. This darkness is a metaphor for the unknown space beyond middle class propriety,

marked by its unpredictability and wildness. This is a space of risk and danger, while lightness is conflated with the predictable, disciplined, and docile masculinity of the bourgeoisie. Rebellious, wild, and authentically masculine practices like street-racing are seen as a more honest way to live, and the social fringe constructed as a site of truth, where lives are truly "on the line," and dreams are "found and lost." To get there, the narrator is willing "to pay the cost," sacrificing wife, material wealth, and bourgeois respectability, to find real meaning where it can "only be found, in the darkness on the edge of town."

Darkness constructs the social fringe as the site of authentic masculinity, outside the light radius of the mainstream. Bruce reiterates this notion time and again in his lore, especially in *Darkness*'s companion song, *Backstreets*:

One soft infested summer, me and Terry became friends
Trying in vain to breathe the fire we was born in
Catching rides to the outskirts, tying faith between our teeth
Sleeping in that old abandoned beach house, getting wasted in the heat
And hiding on the backstreets
Hiding on the backstreets
With a love so hard and filled with defeat
Running for our lives at night on them backstreets

Remember all the movies, Terry, we'd go see
Trying to learn to walk like the heroes we thought we had to be
And after all this time, to find we're just like all the rest
Stranded in the park and forced to confess
To hiding on the backstreets
Hiding on the backstreets
Where we swore forever friends
On the backstreets until the end

Hiding on the backstreets
Hiding on the backstreets
Hiding on the backstreets
Hiding on the backstreets

(Bruce Springsteen, *Backstreets*)

Like *Darkness*, the narrator in *Backstreets* is a man living in the fringe, or the "backstreets," with his best friend Terry. There, their friendship is free and unrestrained, though they admittedly romanticize popular icons, "trying to learn to walk like the heroes we thought we had to be." But the moral of *Backstreets* is that you can't hide on the fringe forever, and to their disappointment, the narrator and Terry lament that they're "just like all the rest," pawns in a larger social system beyond their control. The two are "forced to confess" to their sin of living the wild, backstreet life, a comment on the panoptical and self-regulating nature of mainstream culture. It is mainstream life that forces Terry and the narrator to "grow up," abandoning their love and passions for a more docile lifestyle. The backstreets are constructed as the antithesis of that docility, the literal seat of alternative, authentic culture, opposed to Main Street, the site of capitalism and discipline. Like *Darkness*, *Backstreets* celebrates that fringe as the site of real, unadulterated masculinity.

But in both songs, conventional masculine symbols seem to resonate with the narrator, despite his insistence on finding an alternative approach to life. In *Backstreets*, the narrator fantasizes being a movie hero, the very icon of mainstream American popular culture. In *Darkness*, the narrator has a love affair with street racing, and puts his life and dreams "on the line" for a wild joyride. The fringe may be the home of sincerity and meaning, but it is also very much a place to enact the stereotypically male values of aggression and recklessness. The songs establish this connection between manliness and rebellion, as if the very

essence of American masculinity lies in its ability to buck the system, or free itself from the feminized domestication of bourgeois life.

For me and my peers, Bruce's construction of authentic masculinity formed the framework for many of our self-identifications:

> Phil: You amplify and romanticize specific ideas of your hometown. Jersey has the best fucking diners, delis, whatever… We never thought Jersey was shit when we were growing up. It's our home. But then again, it's very constructed. We're not *really* Jersey. Montclair is really a New York City suburb. And perhaps that's been as formative in my experience growing up.
>
> I plucked out the symbols of Jersey that worked well for me— my Cadillac, listening to Springsteen, skipping class, driving around, running away from cops at parties— these very specific and visceral things that were really a miniscule part of the overall experience but that work nicely together to construct a romantic idea of myself, my masculinity, and where I grew up. (7/2/09)

In a follow-up interview, I showed Phil this quote, and he responded simply:

> A lot of the symbols that I latched onto and mentioned in that session are relatively arbitrary. In a big way I think that they help me understand myself as much as they help me present myself to others. (7/2/09)

But while Phil might call these symbols "arbitrary" aspects of his life, I'm not inclined to call them unmotivated. In fact, their very significance to him is a testament to their formative power. We see here an instance of how acts expressive of rebellion and resistance can be used to rationalize coming from privilege— by highlighting the more rebellious, Springsteen-like aspects of his personality, Phil is potentially able to circumvent any questions of authenticity that might arise from revealing other aspects of his privileged personal upbringing. This is manifest in his distinction between "real Jersey" and the rich, wealthy suburb of NYC that is Montclair, the former being more important to

Phil's construction of masculine identity than the latter, though admittedly not as true to his experience.

The symbols that Phil romanticizes are exactly those which would suggest a working-class identification— the old Cadillac; the beard; running from cops at parties; skipping class; driving around; and listening to Bruce. These are symbols of that same wild, rebellious, anti-bourgeois masculinity, but one that is nevertheless, as Phil says later, "overtly traditional" (7/2/09). Take, for example, his used Cadillac, which was somewhat unique in the context of our wealthy suburb community, where you're more likely to see the hybrid cars and Subarus preferred by many liberal middle-class professionals, or the massive SUVs of more conservative corporate elites. While this categorization is clearly reductive, it highlights for Phil and me the tastes that we rejected, be it the feminized "correctness" of the Prius, or the over-the-top, "hard," militarized masculinity of the Hummer. The used Cadillac was neither, a car that was manly in its size and cultural connotation, but also ironic in its vintage and nostalgia, and therefore still cool.

I don't mean to reduce Phil's acts of wild rebellion to a mere fantasized identification with working-class men, because I don't think that does full justice to their complexity. I truly believe that Phil is trying to position his masculinity somewhere *between* "real Jersey" (call it the vision of working-class New Jersey popularized by Bruce) and the fake Jersey but real life world of bourgeois Montclair (as perceived by Phil). That is, from an outsider's perspective, Phil may choose to romanticize these symbols of his youth out of an insecurity about his

privileged upbringing, but from an insider's perspective, that interpretation simply doesn't acknowledge the aesthetic, emotional, and sensory experience of growing up as a man in a wealthy suburb, with a love for Bruce Springsteen that goes deeper than an appreciation for the artist's stories of wild rebellion, but emerges out of a real sympathy with the characters and their represented experience of an oppressive system. As much as I acknowledge the ways in which I romanticize working-class manhood, I can't deny the shivers I get watching Bruce perform, nor the deep, unshakeable feeling that he and I stand on common ground.

But resist what? What oppression did we face? Certainly, we weren't dreading a life of manual labor, and our social privilege allowed us to pursue a wide variety of creative, scholarly, and athletic activities. Phil himself actively pursued dancing and music during high school, things that he described as "real" activities, examples of authentic individuality opposed to the more "traditional" path of the 2-sport business major (7/2/09).

This stereotypical antagonistic relationship, between the "jock" and "creative individual," is crucial to understanding Phil's and my own shared feeling of oppression. The jock masculinity is constructed as omnipotent, hyper-masculine, and oppressive, a portrayal that is clearly motivated by perceived accusations that the "creative man" identity is feminine or weak. But in fact, being artsy or creative is also prized amongst the middle class as one route to success (Eherenreich 1989). Nevertheless, we "rebels" still perceived being a "jock" as the typical way to go, and therefore what needed to be resisted.

This is not to underplay the genuine urge to construct oneself as a "real man," as evidenced by Phil's desire to identify with the working class. Indeed, Phil faces two contradictory criticisms from society. The first is from the feminist left, that in his fantasy identification with working class life he reveals himself as nostalgic for an old-fashioned, sexist masculinity. The second is from that very same conventional masculinity, that he is not a man at all, but, quite bluntly, a sissy. To resist both of these criticisms takes a considerable amount of self-management, and it's no surprise that Phil is able to analyze his life so keenly and articulately. After all, self-awareness is essential to any subject who is constantly navigating the perceived territory between alternative and mainstream. To know oneself is to know one's position in the social field:

> Phil: Every emotion has its definite place, and its worth. I'm just afraid of a lot of the more traditional elements [of my masculinity] manifesting themselves in unhealthy ways. You've got to be aware of who you are and who you're becoming, and as long as you keep a strict awareness, you can shape yourself in a healthy and productive way that's still masculine. (7/2/09)
>
> Tim: Masculinity is being comfortable with yourself both as a man and as a human… (7/7/09)

For these men, then, self-awareness is an ethical necessity. Phil describes what he calls "traditional" masculinity as potentially unhealthy, in its oppression of women and its obsession with power (as symbolized in the Hummer). But masculinity itself, he affirms, is not incompatible with ethical action, so long as the subject reflects and is aware of his practices. Tim takes a similar position, suggesting that masculinity is both being a man, in the more stereotypical "manly" sense of the word, but also maintaining a commitment to "humans." In

other words, being a man means having a sense of ethics and generally agreeing with feminist goals.

What Bruce offered us a way to unify this contradiction in our selves—the conflict between our liberal urge to resist masculine conventions, and our need to be validated by, or achieve success within conventional middle-class society. Bruce himself is a tough, cool guy, a badass, but also a liberal, an opponent of the labor system, and a critic of the American consumerist dream. He embodies the contradiction I'm trying to elucidate:

1. That his music has the capacity to reinforce American norms of masculinity, like wildness and aggression, often under the heading of rebellion, a process of social reproduction that was echoed in so-called rebellious practices like skateboarding or playing rock music. Bruce made cohesive our self-identification as social critics and rebels with our genuine urge to realize our potential in the middle-class framework of success.

2. But Bruce's narratives of social struggle were also essential to the installation of an ethos of resistance to and skepticism toward the conventional middle class suburban lifestyle. This skepticism to the perceived mainstream way of life was omnipresent in many of our practices, whether they were overtly alternative, like skateboarding, or more mainstream affirmations of the social system, like going to a "good school" or finding a job.

Bruce Springsteen was my father's music. On Sunday mornings he'd walk downstairs to the living room in a green felt bathrobe, put on a Bruce record, lay a towel down over the green felt carpet, take off the bathrobe, and in his briefs proceed to do an endless variety of pushups and sit-ups. Every now and again, I'd climb on his back and make myself dead weight, just to increase his strain.

I remember Phil bought his Cadillac off the set of *The Sopranos* TV show. It was forest green, with a beige leather interior, and had two fuzzy dice in the mirror. The greatest thing about it was a fake bullet hole in the headrest of the front passenger seat. You could put your finger in it and feel the spongy yellow foam they used to make the seats.

> "The 'hidden curricula' is a space where ideas about gender [and identity] are dynamically processed, contested and culturally re-imagined. These acts are fashioned through or against, but always in relation to, the official cultures."
> (Nayak and Kehily 2008: 98)

Nayak and Kehily's concept of the "hidden curriculum" is especially useful in this conversation because it leaves room for talking about "underground culture" as both mainstream and alternative. Despite its designation, the hidden curriculum doesn't imply a necessarily *alternative* curriculum to the one in power. Rather, it refers to everything learned outside of the official school institution. From pop culture magazines to the locker room to the sidewalk, the hidden curriculum was far more significant in shaping masculinity and identity for me and my peers than were the state-sanctioned ideas of race, sex, and class circulated by the school. In fact, sex ed class wasn't mentioned a single time in my interviews, though I'm sure, if prompted, it would only prove to be a site of satire and mockery of the school-institution. The state-prescribed way of defining sexual identity was of little importance compared to the complexities of self that were appropriated from popular culture and learned through social interaction.

But as Nayak and Kehily argue (2008), the hidden curriculum always functions in relationship to the official curriculum, through *or* against. This echoes Connell's theory of dominant and subordinate masculinities, which are constantly struggling within an overarching hegemonic process. Both theories conceive of the social landscape as worlds of opposition and distinction, in which some particular ideal of masculinity acts as an anchor point against which all other identities are defined. For Nayak and Kehily, this is the masculinity of the

state. For Connell, it is the dominant or hegemonic masculinity in any sociohistorical context, in this case, the white, straight, middle-class man. My only addition to these theoretical frameworks would be to complicate them further, by arguing that the individual crafts multiple masculinities and identities within himself, therefore leading to an internal schema of contradictions and differences that mirror the external one. And this multiplicity is crucial to any discussion of self-making that starts with Bruce Springsteen, who, as we've seen, embodies contradictions.

Contradictions seemed to follow us everywhere we went, at least when I look back on it. Take skateboarding, which in those days didn't have the mainstream public visibility and identity that it has today. Skateboarding, for us, was an overtly alternative practice, based around confrontation with authority, actual and symbolic. Any day of skating likely included a confrontation with cops, security guards, priests, people driving cars, homeowners, bank employees, characters who often quite literally donned uniforms of power. But skateboarding was also a practice of self-mastery set against a framework of personal achievements, and thereby a confirmation of the middle-class value on creativity and individuality.

Skateboarding was a confrontation with the landscape of authority— it's no coincidence that it's performed mostly on private commercial land, municipal buildings, parking lots, and the steps of residential houses. Skaters often portray this as metaphorically "taking back" or re-appropriating architecture and public space. While property owners often condemn skating as vandalism to justify

banning it, actual instances of criminal activity are rare, and skaters tend to interpret this resentment from the public as a latent desire to maintain social norms of docility and upright citizenship.

Thus skateboarding introduced us at an early age to the importance of surveillance and the normative gaze in maintaining the dominant order (Foucault 1991). Embodied in the security camera, but reiterated in an infinite number of castigating and suspicious looks, the gaze was all too familiar, despite our sometimes "safe" white skin. Even in the "socially progressive" suburb of Montclair, skating was explicitly and implicitly outlawed, giving us skaters a keen education in the mechanisms of state power.

But while we hurled rocks at security cameras, we also carried cameras with us, filming each other attempting tricks, making jokes, and doing hi-jinx. A camcorder was usually present at almost any skate session, and much like the security camera, it was a mechanism for maintaining standards within the group, in this case demanding more dangerous and complicated tricks. In the camera's eye, skating was a creative performance, an art form, to be viewed with pleasure and aesthetically evaluated. Thus, when we weren't skating, we were in someone's living room watching a skate movie, openly voicing our opinions of our heroes' style and skills. To be clear, skateboarding was not a group competition with winners and losers; skaters insist upon its communal character by going out of their way to congratulate and show support for one another. But it is definitely a competition with the self, a practice of mastering one's physical

movements and mental determination, as well as the external obstacles of urban and suburban space.

Thus, in skateboarding, as in setting off fireworks on peoples' lawns, we continually pushed ourselves towards a riskier and more complicated performance, demanding more self-discipline and prowess. This notion of being in a constant competition with the self was often held up in reference to more arbitrary forms of group competition in other sports.

> Jake: Explain what it means to be independent, or an independent man.
>
> Nate: It's to not have any attachments that you fall back on. To focus on yourself.
>
> Jake: Is that part of masculinity?
>
> Nate: Yeah, but it's not inherent or anything. In our society now people are so reliant on each other. There's a sort of pseudo-independence, but most people would be miserable if they didn't have other people to fall back on.
>
> Jake: What does mastery have to do with this? Being a master of your self? Mastery over the world?
>
> Nate: In the past, I was into mastering the things around me. As I grew up, I became more interested in mastering myself. That's more masculine, I guess, but it's also just more mature…
> For example, my sense of competition has definitely changed over time. I used to want to prove I was the best at things. Now, I want to prove to myself that I can do well in whatever I put myself to. It's not about proving it to the world.
>
> Growing up, masculinity focused around sports. My Dad instilled that in me, that men play sports and are competitive, blindly striving to be the best, though not necessarily working the hardest. And that was the big thing about soccer… It was a hugely pseudo-masculine situation. Everyone would try and make themselves seem better than everyone else, but we were competing for *nothing*.
>
> For me, now, competition means making yourself the best you can at something… winning is something personal. Soccer was just about

> winning games. If you didn't win, it was always someone else's fault. And I don't associate that kind of immaturity with being masculine. (7/20/09)

Although not directly in reference to skateboarding, Nate's distinction between the mature, private competition of the self (central to his personal definition of masculinity), and the immature, public competition of the high school athlete interested only in gaining recognition, beautifully articulates the ways in which we often constructed our masculine values in opposition to what we saw as "jock" or mainstream values, even though our values were still very much conceived of in terms of manliness, power, and mastery. While you could argue that skateboarding was a public and in some ways vain activity, it was introverted in a way that high school sports were not— any audience was typically restricted to other skaters, any coaching was usually just friendly advice exchanged by equals. In both skating and soccer, a masculine gaze provokes its male subjects to attempt a more difficult performance, but in the world of skateboarding that gaze belongs mainly to the self and other skaters, not to any external audience. The video camera was a constant reminder less that others were watching than that one's self-imposed expectations needed to be met. When you were ready to do a trick, *you* asked for the camera to be turned on, not the other way around.

But having a camera was also a constant reminder of our economic privilege, which stuck with us like an irremovable badge. And yes, we definitely tried to remove it. So much about skateboarding, like Bruce's backstreet, is about authenticity, which we understood as a renunciation of bourgeois values. In that regard we defied common sense by wanting to do it at all, us, a bunch of well-off, privileged, male suburbanites (I would add "white" in most of our practices, but

that wouldn't be honest here, as skating was one of the rare instances that our peer group appeared racially diverse). In order to be "authentic" rebels, we had to look the part, and that meant disregarding what we perceived to be the cleanliness of a more docile, domesticated masculinity.

Historically, "dirtiness" has been immensely significant to white American middle-class constructions of the Other, starting with colonial depictions of Native Americans as "dirty savages (Slotkin 1973). Mainstream society and popular culture construct dirtiness as the embodiment of nontraditional, alternative, and often harmful values, while cleanliness is commonly accepted as a core value of any "proper" middle-class citizen. It should be no surprise then, that dirt and blood were something of an obsession in our skate community, a symbolic means of defying social norms. As Mary Douglas has argued (1966), dirt is often attributed contradictory values; in the U.S., transgressing taboos on dirt has historically been an attempt at distancing the self from a certain class image, the good suburbanite of our imagination.

This attempted distancing was doubly reflected in our praise for "extreme" practices, such as staying up all night, always eating junk food, and wearing the same clothes for long periods of time. Like being dirty, staying awake for long periods of time and being unkempt were part of an overt attempt at transgressing the social "norm," at least in relatively private contexts (they were rarely played up in larger social settings like school).

Being dirty and extreme was a way of distancing oneself from a vision of middle-class docility, widely associated with femininity. Clean clothes, lots of

rest, and a healthy diet were signifiers of a domesticated, feminized, or tame masculinity that conformed to social conventions. Bruce reiterates this in *Darkness*, in which the protagonist devotes himself to wild, reckless activities like street-racing, the antithesis of the feminized predictability and domestic responsibility of bourgeois life, or, as he puts, the "style she's trying to maintain." For us, too, being dirty and extreme meant rejecting motherly nurturance, and gaining respect as an independent, autonomous man.

Thus, within our group, skateboarding and associated practices were ways of embodying the masculine anti-bourgeois. They were cool, something to be proud of, and this was articulated in our speech, especially our use of the word "haggard." Haggard, for us, was a lot like the slang words "sick," "ill," and "gnarly," adjectives that peppered our everyday speech. But haggard didn't have the same cultural popularity as those terms, and wasn't borrowed from the stuff we read and heard in skate magazines and movies. Rather, haggard was a word completely re-appropriated by our peer group, distinctly localized, existing independently of other similar cliques.

In wider American usage, haggard typically means "having a gaunt, wasted, or exhausted appearance, as from prolonged suffering, exertion, or anxiety," or, "looking wild-eyed" (Dictionary.com). But when used by my peer group, haggard also meant "deserving of respect or appreciation," and could be used to describe both individuals and their social practice. If you skated all day, stayed up all night at a friend's house, then skated home at 9 in the morning and stopped at a 7-11 to buy a slushy because you were absolutely famished, that's

haggard. If you tried a kickflip down a flight of stairs, slipped off your board, and ended up cracking the back of your head against the sidewalk, ripping some hair out in the process, that's haggard. The term condensed the intense self-discipline, self-mastery, and devotion it took to be a skater, with the wildness and daring skating also required, figuring the skater as the romantic, autonomous artist who devotes himself completely to his work at the risk of violating social norms. "Haggard" was a way to recognize something as abnormal, wild, and extreme, but also cool, and authentically masculine.

Grimy, dingy, haggard, sick, ill, gnarly

All day in the street. It's as simple as that. We would spend all day in the street, on skateboards, in heat, with backpacks. Tinfoil and ketchup. Bloody shins. Go into Subway and get a sandwich and a soda. Go back out to the street or to the parking lot or to the curb. Run from the police. Return.

Sweat mixing with blood. Tasting blood, tasting sweat. Hands covered in dirt. Boards constantly going from foot to hand, hands constantly going from air to concrete, slapping down hard, leaving palms raw which really means a thousand tiny scrapes created by the friction between skin and ground. Eventually the blood just dries and becomes a sort of crust that mingles with the hair on your legs.

One time we were all in Dave's basement and his parents had just bought this really nice stereo system so the basement was filled with white styrofoam packaging and we spent the next hour breaking pieces of styrofoam over each other's backs, watching them explode into tiny styrofoam molecules that floated around until the air was thick with them. I would say they were like snow but that's kind of cliché, and they weren't like snow, because they weren't falling downward, they were just floating.

I remember this all in slow motion, the styrofoam particles dangling in the air, everyone laughing uncontrollably. That's probably the closest I've ever been to ecstasy.

Anyway so Ken raises this long piece of styrofoam above his head and he's going to crash it down over Gabe's back, who's bent over in front of him, and we're all standing around watching. Ken goes to swing the styrofoam down but the piece is too long and he ends up hitting the fluorescent light bulb above his head, because all basements have low ceilings, and the bulb breaks loose and falls. The long glass tube just cracks over his fucking forehead and he looks up and there's blood running down over his face and his eye, and his hand goes to his head and then back down to the white styrofoam and the blood starts seeping in. I think some of us were still laughing at this point.

So we take Ken upstairs to the bathroom and start wiping the blood off his face, and he ends up having to pick out these shards of glass out of the cut above his eye, which was still bleeding down over his eyelid and onto his cheek. Him

looking in the mirror taking glass out of his face and me and Dave wiping away the blood.

Later we went downstairs to clean up the mess and we found one or two of these broken styrofoam blocks that had been soaked red with Ken's blood.

Then Dave said, "Dude, that's so fucking haggard."

Skateboarding was an attempt to distance ourselves from class status and its prescribed social identity, a vector through which we could test and break the social norms that we perceived as inherent to all suburban life. This is, in part, the very same ambivalence about our position in the social grid that attracted us to Bruce Springsteen's stories of the working-class male struggle with authority. Listening to Bruce and reenacting his stories was like skating away from our silver-spoon identities, and skating was an attempt at "hiding on the backstreets." It was all a way to break free from the "uniform of our surroundings," as Phil put it (7/2/09).

But in the same way that Bruce's stories of a struggle with mainstream capitalist life were embedded with an aggressive, sometimes violent, conventional working-class masculinity, so was skateboarding an alternative practice that retained some of the values that we associated with a conventional suburban masculinity that we thought skating might help us evade:

> Dave: I definitely see skateboarding as a masculine activity. Not that I'm against a female skater, but it was exclusively males when we did it. The traits that I like about skateboarding are linked to these masculine values that I had when I was younger. It's all about being confrontational, whether it's with a piece of concrete or with someone trying to kick us out

> of a spot. It's very boundary setting/ boundary breaking, not to mention violent, an eruption of your own individual power.
>
> I really like how loud skating is. I'll be ripping down the street, and when I stop I realize how loud I'm being, and I think that people must be noticing me, like who's that weirdo, and I kind of appreciate that. (8/9/09)

Dave's description of skateboarding shows a fusion of alternative and conventional masculine characteristics. On the one hand, skating is distinctly alternative, the practice of a "weirdo." But on the other, it's a way to experience violence, confrontation, self-assertion and being loud, the "eruption of individual power." Clearly, this conception of skateboarding has a lot to do with its iteration as exclusively male. While Dave isn't against the idea of female skaters, and there was never any outright rule of "no girls allowed," he does describe the scene as an important place to perform an aggressive masculinity, characterized by male power and privilege. These culturally recognized masculine values of confrontation, aggression, and violence, are doubly articulated as the skater's values, giving the practice itself a sense of masculine exclusivity. However, unlike the more conventional practices of say, high school soccer, which Nate had described as all "for nothing," skateboarding turned aggression and competition into an artistic expression, making it meaningful for us in a way that high school soccer never could be.

Alex made the same distinction about playing guitar in a band:

> When I get on stage, I have this confidence that I don't have anywhere else. I don't fancy myself a good public speaker or anything like that, but when I'm on stage I really don't care. I feel confident, like I can look people in the eyes and still have control over what's going on. I do feel a certain sense of dominance… having control. But it's a personal feeling of dominating my inhibitions…

> With my band, the primary thing is to make music with my friends. But part of it is also to show that we're good musicians, and maybe that's a certain competition. I mean, I practice guitar a ton. It makes me happy that I'm good at it. Competition isn't just in playing sports, it's in everything. (8/28/09)

Alex describes playing music as a type of personal competition, characterized by an intense amount of practicing, and rewarded by a feeling of confidence and control during performance, undoubtedly provoked by both imagined and real masculine and feminine gazes. Playing guitar, like skating, is conceptualized as the pursuit self-mastery, which culminates in public performance. For Alex, this is distinct from playing soccer, yet nevertheless shares in its spirit of competition, which as he says, is "in everything."

What are we to make of the persistence and re-inscription of ideologically conventional conceptions of masculinity and gender difference within an identity that stakes its claim to authenticity around being nontraditional? To be sure, when values of violence and aggression are aligned with masculinity in any setting, then an ethos of male dominance is being reproduced, even if it is under the heading of "subculture." But, skateboarding isn't *just* an exercise of male aggression and dominance, although my analysis perhaps tends to favor that lens. Skateboarding is also about practicing an opposition to those norms and embodies the antithesis of that masculinity. And in that sense, it was largely successful in instilling in me and my peers a real resentment to the hegemonic agenda. The same could be said about listening to Bruce Springsteen, who offered an equally conflicted message— working-class resistance on the one hand, and conventional American masculinity on the other.

I use skateboarding and Bruce Springsteen here because they work nicely to situate my peer group's self-perceived position in the social field. But, much like the way Phil described "plucking out" memories to construct a particular narrative of self, as an ethnographer, I too find myself guilty of selective memory. Being a skater was just one of many identities that my peers and I constructed; it's helpful for showing the ways in which conventional narratives of masculinity inscribe themselves in unconventional, even resistive spaces, but I by no means want to paint a portrait of us solely as self-identified social rebels. Quite bluntly, the facts state otherwise. Skaters or not, we were all deeply committed to achieving academic success, which, though it may not have been as highly valued in larger social settings as athletic prowess, was socially encouraged. In fact, in a largely liberal community, the "mindless jock" was often the stereotype being frowned upon. For me and the friends I interviewed, the question was not whether we were going on to a college education after high school, but which college we would attend. This expectation of higher education is that of the socially, racially, and economically privileged, a disposition internalized during a middle-class upbringing and essential to the reproduction of class status, and most certainly not the outlook of true class rebels (Bourdieu 1984).

If skateboarding showed how conventional masculinity infiltrated an alternative space, so, too, was the more socially accepted pursuit of academic success continuously infiltrated by an alternative, resistive ethos. That is, even in

studying and getting good grades, we were constantly articulating an "alternative" style to success:

> Phil: I graduated high school going to Middlebury, a school that presents me with the opportunity to make tons of money. There, I have the very distinct and clear opportunity for [economic] success. But instead of giving in to that social desire, I'm choosing to find my own definition of success, personal success… But that success is still socially acceptable. So, you might, say, "We take the long way" [to social acceptance].
>
> Jake: What's the easy way?
>
> Phil: The easy way, or the more traditional way, would be to work your ass off in high school, get good grades in college, major in business or economics, come out of school making 80 grand as a consultant.
>
> Jake: Isn't that almost the same thing we're doing, except majoring in anthropology, or in your case, dance?
>
> Phil: Maybe it's the same thing, but I need to believe it's different. There's a real separation. I need to think that what I'm doing is more worthwhile, even though the paths are parallel. Note the financial differences: what I described, for white upper-middle-class men, becoming consultants, that's the traditionally masculine way. It's the way of the provider, the way you'll make the most money. You have to note that financial distinction. That way is not what I want for myself. (7/2/09)

Once again, Phil's words convey the complexity of his academic and artistic pursuits within the context of middle-class formations. On the one hand, Phil admits to desiring social acceptance, and wanting to achieve it through hard work and performing well at a good school. On the other, he's clearly drawing a line between his orientation and that of a more "traditional" masculinity. He's not looking to wear a suit, make money, be a breadwinner, or any other typical characteristics of the enterprising capitalist. Phil's alternative is to pursue "real practices" (as he defines them), such as dance, writing, and music, and to achieve personal success through "finding himself." Here, we see how the constructed

antagonism between the "jock" or docile man and the "creative individual" allows Phil to conceive of himself as socially progressive, even in the strongly normative practice of academic success.

This is decidedly parallel to the practice of skateboarding, which revolves around a personal definition of success, call it self-mastery, more than the "arbitrary" success found in the world of competitive sports. Thus, for the skateboarder who pursues academics, success is romanticized as personal and creative accomplishment, the realization of an inner self, opposed to the elite businessman who succeeds in external or "arbitrary" frameworks. There is clearly a diversity of masculinities being encouraged by the middle class, and it's Phil who makes use of the romantic construction of the businessman as "traditional," and the artist as alternative. But, he is also right to point out that if social success were measured by financial income, which in many circles it is, then the way of the businessman is clearly more socially acceptable. Here, Phil's perspective is a liberal one, marking mainstream practices which serve capitalist hegemony with disdain, and romanticizing their creative alternative.

But that reduction can be misleading, for at times, Phil seems to place more value on being distinct from his surroundings than he does on embodying any particular masculinity. And that also means distinguishing himself from the stereotypical left-wing, middle-class individual, as exemplified by his identification with Bruce's working-class man, and his gas-guzzling Cadillac. Ultimately, though, he acknowledges how, on his own path, he shares in the

privilege of a white, straight, middle-class, identity, characteristics common to both the proposed alternative and conventional suburban types.

In talking with Phil, I can see the ways in which the middle-class value on academic achievement can be given an alternative inflection and highlight the paradox of a genuine urge to resist mainstream society with a simultaneous desire for belonging. What seems to have primacy over either particular alignment is the value of creative individualism, whether it's overt alternative practices, or the re-framing of mainstream acts in an alternative light. This was particularly evident in my conversation with Lee, who, like Phil's "traditional man," went on to be an economics major in college and now works at a bank in New York. Lee describes feeling a distance between himself and his coworkers, calling them "traditionally masculine" in much the same way that Phil speaks of the "traditional man":

> Jake: When I was talking to Philippe, he described the "traditional masculine way" in the context of Montclair, as getting good grades, playing sports, going on to be a business major, coming out of college as a consultant with a five-figure salary. He set himself up in opposition to that. But when I think of you, that's what you've done, yet there's nothing that strikes me about you that would suggest you're one of those typical or conventional guys.
>
> Lee: At work I see a lot of that traditional masculinity, and I feel separate from it. I see a lot of my coworkers as traditionally masculine—a lot of them grew up in the suburbs and fit Phil's description (which also fits me). But beyond that, I don't feel it. I don't like sports that much, I don't talk about football with them. I stereotype them as sort of a fraternity, which is something we've definitely created amongst ourselves, just not in the same way… They chase girls and all that. Drinking, hard partying. Or the older ones are always complaining about their wives. I don't see myself that way. I don't ever see myself doing that kind of thing. In the relationships I've been in, I'm usually the one more emotionally involved (not a conventionally masculine thing). I don't feel like I'm better than them, but I definitely feel different. (8/4/09)

Lee feels a distance between himself and what he portrays as the conventional male characteristics of his coworkers— the football, the drinking, the objectification of women. Ironically, some of these traits evoke the imagined lifestyle of the working-class men represented in Bruce's songs. In the actual presence of these macho or "hard" middle-class men, Lee feels a distance, much like the way I felt at Bruce's concert, unsure of my class and gender position within the larger social field (even though when I'm at home listening to Bruce, I find it easy to fantasize about being one of the men in his songs). Even within what Phil describes as a traditionally masculine middle-class space, Lee perceives himself differently, decidedly not "one of the boys."

But there is a deceitful simplicity to that summation, and it doesn't capture the nuance of Lee's words. As he says, those guys are a "sort of fraternity, which is something we've created amongst ourselves, just not in the same way." For Lee too, the distinguishing line between himself and his male coworkers is blurry, hard to see, even harder to articulate, and context-dependent. Clearly, he identifies with multiple masculinities. Perhaps the implication here is that while these all-male spaces differ, they have more in common with each other than they do with an imagined femininity. Most certainly, when we're all hanging out together, I feel like one of the boys, and that feeling of fraternity seems to cross the conventional/unconventional, mainstream/alternative dialectic, although at times, it too is resisted.

Lee's ambivalence about fraternity and brotherhood is evidence that masculinities are always constituted by defining a feminine Other. Both the worlds of the alternative skater kids and their mainstream "jock" counterparts are very much structured as exclusively male worlds, regardless of the differences in taste and values between the two. In most of my interviews, masculinities were frequently discussed in relationship to each other, and only rarely conceptualized in terms of femininity, a silence which itself is symptomatic of a certain perceived lack of understanding and mystery about the Other. This tendency to emphasize the importance of masculinities is at least partially attributable to my own position as interviewer and my interest in relationships amongst men. But it is also due to the social privilege that has historically been associated with manhood— the man conceives of the self as an independent or free subject, while the woman is stationary, tied to her domestic duties. In this narrative, the woman, be it mother or girlfriend, can "feminize" the man by tying him down or domesticating him, while "real" masculinity is constituted as outside her reach, or defined on its own terms.

This sentiment seems to pervade the varying conceptions of masculinity articulated by my friends during the interviews:

> Ken: I think our middle-class upbringing gave us a really limited perspective on the possibilities for our future. There's a real pressure to join a *set* of people. You've got your athletic kids, who go to college and study business. What Philippe was saying about it. Then there's the other type, who are children of artists, or are creative, and pursue that. (7/6/09)

Ken rightfully asserts that the middle-class has room for diverse and diverging masculinities which nevertheless share certain assumptions about what is

acceptable behavior. That is, both masculine "types" that Ken outlines have limitations around what constitutes being a man, and for both types this means having a sense of fraternity and all-male space, and in that sense reproducing male privilege. This is not to say that diverse masculinities actually share the same sense of ethics. Clearly, a liberal masculine personality will have different interactions with women than its conservative counterpart— as evidenced by the slow, uneven incorporation of feminist values into middle class cultural formations (Segal 1990). But even for those "liberal" men, my peers, there was still a clear urge to indulge in the pleasures of a more conventional masculinity.

3

In memory, I can't credit the idea of the Meat Feast to any one person. I want to say that it was there all along, lying dormant in our collective unconscious until at some point at the end of 12th grade it found itself on the tip of David or Ken's tongue, and they said in unison, "meatfeast." This is not to say that the feast doesn't have a genealogy— its precursor was something called The Symposium, in which ten of us sat around David's dining room table wearing nothing but white sheet togas, drinking jugged wine and making philosophic declarations.

Then there was Jaundice, the skate crew that David and Ken founded, consisting mainly of friends and named after an affliction that turns people's skin yellow. The Meat Feast was originally conceived of as a family reunion of the entire Jaundice team and its cousins, all men, to take place during our first year of college, on the day after Thanksgiving. The "meat" in meat feast was really M.E.A.T., an acronym for Men Eating Animals Together, which was the inspiration for its rules: no girls, no vegetables, and the only things you could put into your body were animal flesh, guacamole, jug wine, and Pabst Blue Ribbon. Actually, I don't know if we formally articulated these rules before or after the first feast, but in my memory they were concrete and unbreakable from the get-go.

The irony was that a bunch of skaters and musicians and kids who considered themselves alternative or socially liberal were going to participate in this over-the-top ritualized reenactment of masculine stereotypes— macho,

aggressive, bloody, shirtless, drunk, screaming, violent, wild, carnivorous—adjectives that might describe a college frat-house on a Saturday night or a Hell's Angels reunion. We wanted to perform this role of primitive, instinctual man, who breaks free of society's domesticating chains. Because we thought that idea was absurd, and acting it out in an exaggerated way would make it ironic. All this on the day after Thanksgiving, Black Friday, America's traditional day of excessive consumption, when people trampled each other in the malls at 5 am so they could get their hands on a new ipod. We were going to have our own little idiotic mess of consumption, with our stomachs already full of turkey and mashed potatoes.

They say the first Meat Feast was naïve and gleeful. *Innocent*, Ken called it. I remember it the same way, mythologizing it as this harmonious moment when all was right with the world. "And God said Meat Feast and it was done." Like a fond childhood memory, when the sun was shining and all was right with the world.

That first feast came together at the last-minute: the phone calls were made, the grocery store was raided, *and it exploded into this raw, primitive, extremely stereotypical masculine behavior. Shirts off, screaming, drinking, eating a lot… (Ken).* We started out cooking a stew and passing around wine, and then all these emotions started pouring out— happiness in the forming of screaming, drinking, and most of all gorging on red meat. It felt like being possessed, like suddenly I had no control over my actions. It felt like being born. This is a true celebration, I thought. We're celebrating ourselves right now, our friendships and shared

experience as men. Everyone was raising toasts to each other, recounting their favorite memories of high school and earlier. It was revelry.

Then I had a conversation with Ken's mother a couple of days afterwards. "You're men," she said. "You need that sort of thing. To let it all out, your primal instincts." I knew intuitively that she was wrong, that she didn't get the irony. *Men need that sort of thing?* No, that was the whole point, that we didn't. We were deliberately playing that line of thinking out, but only in the safety of our friends, who we knew would keep the event to themselves, and never share it with their parents, girlfriends, etc… That's why there were no photos, because that protected the event from the gaze of normal society. But then again the pleasure was real. It did feel like being born. *It's all one big ejaculation*, Dave said. *You can really let go.*

At the second Feast, we made a giant meat stew. We made it out of beef cubes, lamb shanks, ground beef and spices, all mixed together in a big tinfoil baking tin. I stood with my shirt off and an apron, stirring the mess with a giant wooden spoon, until it was ready to serve in Ken's dining room, which we had covered with tarps to prevent grease and beer from getting everywhere. We scooped out the stew with Pitas, and then dipped those into guacamole, letting the grease drip out of the back of the pita and down over our bare wrists.

There were about forty-five of us, over at Ken's house, most of us with our shirts off. Some of them I knew, my oldest friends, others were new faces, men who were college friends of my friends, cousins of friends. This Feast didn't have

the innocence of a spontaneous event. No, this was planned months in advance, and the things that we had done the year before were laid out and ritualized like commandments: The toasts had to be made, the shirts had to come off, and NO photos, and NO women, the last prohibition being emphasized in random flurries of pro-man exclamations. Dudes who had just met were hugging each other, clapping each other's bare backs, leaving red greasy handprints.

There we were, standing on top of blue tarps in an otherwise spotless dining room adorned with a china cabinet and a chandelier, shotgunning beers together and having a sing-along to a Bruce Springsteen record. With Pabst cans in the air we raised toasts to New Jersey, *Thunder Road*, friends, Jaundice, whatever. It was only the second feast, but these toasts already had a sense of fixity in their repetition, and neglecting to raise them would have been a violation of custom. *You could tell that everyone was wracking their brains to find the most important things from our collective past (Dave).*

"Here's to bros."

"Here's to Bon Jovi." Laughter.

"Here's to Pabst."

After the toasts we kept digging in to the meat stew and whatever else people had brought, like chicken wings, burgers, sausages, dogs. There was meat everywhere. People were getting covered with meat and grease, like a *sensory overload. So much meat and grease in your stomach and you could see the grease on everyone's faces. You wanted all your close friends there. It's incredibly comfortable. I felt like I was walking through a hallway and everyone there had something in common. It*

was a feeling of safety. (Dave) Grease dripping down the chin, and the hands, covered in it. Beer cans on the floor. Speakers turned up to full volume. Excess.

At this point my memory of the event starts turning from sentimental to harrowing.

We kept eating and then we shot-gunned more beers, and the grease just kept piling up. I felt like I was in the hull of a ship at sea, with beer cans rolling across the floor in slow motion, through pools of grease. Shaking someone's hand while simultaneously aware that I didn't know who this person was and probably wouldn't remember in the morning. I made it through the crowd of guys to the stairwell, and from there I sprinted to Ken's bathroom where I started throwing up, the same bathroom I brushed my teeth in when Ken had me over for a sleepover in 5th grade, or where I used to shower after a long Saturday of skating. That's what I was thinking about with my hands and knees on the tile and my head in the toilet bowl, vomiting meat and beer and wine. I was thinking that one time I'd been in this room with my pajamas on.

I didn't feel like a newborn anymore. It was the opposite, like I was expelling whatever it was I thought I knew about myself, trying to abandon whatever sense of childish, sentimental glee I felt during the Feast. Until someone banged on the door and I flushed the toilet and went back downstairs to the living room. Ken was at the piano playing Neil Young, and I sat down on the couch between two guys, who were talking across me. I tried to follow their conversation but I felt like I wasn't there, like I was an invisible spectator. I

noticed an American flag at my feet, which I picked up and covered myself with like a blanket. Then I passed out.

Well, it used to seem very funny. (Ken)

The third Meat Feast: We rented out a dining hall above a fire department in a neighboring town and cooked ten different kinds of meat on a barbecue outside. There were close to a hundred people there, most of them I didn't know, most of them getting shit-faced. Something about it was different, or something about me was different. I felt like a ghost, watching these kids take off their shirts and wrestle each other to the ground and throw raw meat across the room, watching Zack stand up on the center table and dump a pot of thick meat-grease all over his bare chest, and then pouring a jug of wine over himself too, while some other kids stood around in a circle pelting him with guacamole, until he was covered in a grey patina of filth. "Grown men." I stood there like a specter against the wall, going over in my mind again and again what a mistake this all was. Kids were playing meat hockey with chunks of ham. Kids were having a contest to see how hard they could slap each other's backs, if they could slap so hard that it would draw blood.

I wasn't the only one standing against the wall, looking uncertain.

It was clear that there was more than a grain of insanity and oppression to it. The entire thing basically is about suppressing all differences, everyone does the exact same thing, and anyone who doesn't is implicitly told that they shouldn't be there and compelled to start acting like everyone else immediately. If you start to look at that model of behavior

in larger situations, it's resulted in some of the most terrifying moments in human history. And part of me doesn't want to engage in it anymore— all these really smart, self-aware people show up to this event and end up getting sucked right into this violent and destructive act. The ease with which you can slip back into this glee is really alarming. I've come to be pretty disgusted by some of the excess and consumption. (Ken)

I went home early and took a shower, but I couldn't shake the image of Zack, shirtless, standing on that table like it was an altar, covered in this afterbirth of grease, wine, and guacamole, eyes half-closed in some type of Bacchic ecstasy.

The next year we had to talk about it. By then I had begun this project, and my work was accentuating an already vivid awakening to some of the more frightening aspects of the Meat Feast. So me and Dave, in Tierney's bar on Thanksgiving Day, talked about the philosophy of the whole thing. One thing was clear, that above all, we just wanted to get together with our friends.

I said, "This isn't what we wanted, people losing their inhibitions and making fools of themselves," even though I was thinking, *Maybe it's what we wanted a few years ago, but we've changed.* "We wanted a family reunion."

I said, "It can be just as masculine to keep your inhibitions as lose them."

And then I said, "When the Meat Feast loses irony, it's pointless."

So I offered to have the feast at my house, under the premise that it not reach the same fever pitch of years past. About 25 kids ended up coming, most of whose shirts stayed on. There were new faces, like always, and new meats, like always, but things just never reached any point of explosion, probably for the

better. I felt comfortable talking to people, telling them about my project and asking them questions, even taking photographs. But the most important elements, it seemed, were still in place: Bruce's discography on repeat; lots of meat, including the ingenious bacon-wrapped buffalo burger; and a house full of men enjoying themselves.

But there was also this awkwardness to it, like the first hour of a middle school dance, where half the kids haven't really worked up the courage to dance yet, and I know this had to do with the whole approach of "toning it down." People weren't exactly sure how to act. I definitely had my fair share of uncomfortable moments, highlighted by an escalating mom-joke contest that became so distorted and strange it started losing it's humor completely, and became something else altogether:

"Your mother is the baby of a crack baby."

"Your mother was in the 80th floor of the World Trade Center."

"Your mother's in the NRA."

"Your mother sucks your own cock."

Other insults I chose not to remember.

Maybe I would have enjoyed all this a few years ago, but I didn't anymore, these two kids I'd never met, sitting across from each other at a campfire saying the most twisted things they could think of.

Later that night, we went out to a picnic table in the park next to my house and stood around it passing each other trays meat and jug wine. Two guys no one knew, who had just been walking through the park, came up to the table

and asked us what we were doing. We said "This is a Meat Feast, you're welcome to join," and offered them some chicken. They obliged, telling us that they were seniors at Montclair High, and some of our group mentioned they were recent graduates. Then one of the kids said, "Cool. Did you play any sports?"

We went back inside. Eventually, people started clearing out and a few of us were left to clean up the beer cans and wash the dishes. I thought to myself that this was an improvement, of sorts.

Someone said, "We're calling it the recession-era Meat Feast." I had to laugh at that one.

It's hard to begin talking about the Meat Feast, because there is such a clear progression in regards to what happened and how it was perceived both from an individual and collective standpoint. Some things were consistent throughout all four years, most noticeably the lack of any female presence and the ardent consumption of meat, while other elements changed each time— the constituency, the location, the presence of cameras, etc… Consistently, the Meat Feast was a ritual that empowered its participants by giving them a space to perform an aggressive, wasteful, violent, and predatory masculinity that in other contexts would be seen as grossly inappropriate. Behind closed doors, this transgression of social norms is expressed through a hyper-masculine performance, which defines itself against and subordinates all other gender identities, especially the imagined, restrictive feminine.

The Meat Feast is most obviously constructed as a hyper-masculine space by its two preeminent restrictions: "No vegetables except wine," as we used to say; and no women allowed. Meat is seen as the ultimate symbol of a predatory masculinity, the reward of the hunt, while vegetables are the food of the domestic, feminized gatherer. At the Meat Feast, more exotic meats or game (buffalo, venison, etc..) are especially praised, further accentuating the importance of meat as symbol of primal masculine power.

This "wild," "natural," or "primitive" masculinity can only be expressed in a space that is outside the reach of feminine influence, thus the rule banning women. Simply put, a feminine gaze would force the participants in the Feast to think twice about their own wild behavior. In that way, "civilized society" is conflated with femininity, and both are constructed as a restraint on authentic masculinity. This is mirrored by the term "haggard," which, as I've shown, praises an individual's performance of a dirty, extreme, and distinctly undomesticated masculinity. If anything was "haggard," it was the Meat Feast, which featured vomit, grease, and excessive consumption as its centerpiece.

This is what was playing out during the stupefying mom-joke contest at the fourth Feast. While those misogynist jokes were decidedly strange and unnerving in a new way for me, the intent of mom-bashing seems to fit with this larger insistence on a heteronormative masculinity. Vilifying someone's mother is a way of proving oneself as a real man who lives wildly, freely, and *naturally* above the influence of women, echoing the sentiments expressed by the word "haggard." But whereas that word was more often than not a way of

acknowledging and respecting a wild masculinity that implicitly refuses feminine influence, mom-jokes have the additional element of explicit femininity-bashing, thereby actively constructing the Meat Feast both as a safe space for an "authentic" masculinity *and* an unsafe or inhospitable space for women.

This construction is reiterated by a number of more subtly articulated symbols. Take wine, for example, which is the ritual's mandatory drink. Outside the "primitive" space of the Feast, in opposition to whiskey or beer, wine might be seen as feminine signifier of an over-cultivated bourgeois lifestyle. But here, wine has a different connotation, hearkening back to the Symposium that was the Meat Feast's precursor. Our Symposium was a mock reenactment of a Greco-Roman tradition, in which men gathered to drink wine and argue over philosophy. The Symposium, like the Meat Feast, was offered as a site of over-the-top masculinity, asserted through philosophical declarations, or "intellectual combat." Thus, in the very localized traditions of The Symposium and Meat Feast, wine was valorized as a masculine drink.

My drink of choice, though, was always Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. Pabst for me connoted the working man's drink, conceptualized as cheap, hardy, but damn it if it doesn't get the job done. This was implicitly connected to the image of working-class masculinity that Bruce offered: tough and direct, engaged in the "hard life" (the working life), wild and authentic. By drinking Pabst, I attempted to situate myself next to that man, and claim "authentic" masculinity by embracing a "popular" taste (Bourdieu 1984).

This cross-class identification is reiterated in the mandatory sing-along each year to Bruce's classic *Thunder Road*, in which the oppressive normality of social life is forsaken for the masculinized open road:

You can hide 'neath your covers and study your pain
Make crosses from your lovers, throw roses in the rain
Waste your summer praying in vain for a savior to rise from these streets
Well now I'm no hero, that's understood
All the redemption I can offer, girl, is beneath this dirty hood
With a chance to make it good somehow
Hey what else can we do now
Except roll down the window and let the wind blow back your hair
Well the night's busting open these two lanes will take us anywhere

We got one last chance to make it real…
Riding out tonight to case the promised land

(Bruce Springsteen, *Thunder Road*)

Here, the narrator offers an escape from boring, working-class society in the form of a symbolic car-ride to the promised land, "one last chance to make it real" (a journey that's metaphorically conflated with working-class masculinity in the symbol of the car). This journey, though, only makes sense for the narrator if he can convince his girl to join him, reiterating that the only thing holding him back from authentic self-expression is a woman. But, that woman is also the only thing capable of defining him as a real man, and without her presence in the car, the narrator's masculine attempts to make it to the promised land are for naught.

That we all sing this song together every year at the Meat Feast suggests that we experience our ritual is a similar wild ride towards an imagined authentic masculinity. And although there are no women present, the Feast's participants understand that the hyper-masculinity being expressed is always conceived of in opposition to an imagined, domesticating femininity, which is nevertheless

necessary in order to validate a heterosexual identity. Thus, the Meat Feast's over-the-top homosocial masculinity is sanction for one night, but it would never make sense in the "real" world, in which relationships with the opposite sex are seen as essential.

Hence, the excessive performance of this homosocial, hypermasculinity is riddled with "ironic" content, a notion which I would like to question, but nevertheless a salient one. In a framework of irony, self-expression takes on a double meaning, and this is nowhere truer than in the Meat Feast, where performing an obviously outlandish masculinity is reconciled with ironic distance. To be sure, no one denies that the Meat Feast is fun, and the rush of pleasure and power I felt during those first years was unmistakable. That being said, the event, at least in retrospect, provoked a strong tension between what I thought of as my "true self" and the identity I was ironically performing.

This tension is evident in my peers' and my own ambivalent and contradictory narratives about the Feast itself, exemplified by our use of the word "repression." One of the easiest ways to narrate the Meat Feast is to call it a release of a repressed masculinity, which 364 days a year lies dormant in these young male bodies. This is the sentiment Dave expressed by calling it an "ejaculation" (8/9/09), also conveyed by Ken's mother, who called the Feast an outlet for a pent-up, "primal" masculinity. The problem with this narrative framework is that it constructs aggressive hyper-masculinity as something essential and inherent to males, the natural state of things, or how all men would behave if freed from the domesticating bonds of society. If that were true, the

Meat Feast would lose all value as an ironic act, something that my friends insisted upon in the interviews:

> Dave: Growing up in a liberal environment means understanding that what you have isn't always intrinsic or earned: race, economic background, gender, etc… Part of being a liberal person is realizing that those frameworks exist outside of you, and you experience guilt over the privilege they've given you in society. And sometimes that guilt hides the fact that some more traditional [primal] masculine values shouldn't be suppressed necessarily, so you can see the Meat Feast as a way to celebrate what's been suppressed. And the fact that it's behind closed doors is an admission that it's not the way you should act or be in society. (8/9/09)

In Dave's accounting of the motivations for the Meat Feast, he simultaneously disavows the notion that there is any intrinsic privilege in being a man, and affirms that sometimes in order to feel manly, certain suppressed or primal values need to be released. These "suppressed" values of aggression and violence are based on a binary structure of gender roles in which the male is the powerful hunter and the female is the domestic gatherer. That gender binary is in obvious contradiction to the idea of being a man as social privilege— if masculinity is socially constructed, then the hyper-masculinity of the Meat Feast cannot be inherent in male bodies. But, if this hyper-masculine performance is some type of release, then man's social privilege is offered as natural. Dave's articulation of this tension suggests that the Meat Feast is a multi-dimensional experience, made possible through the ambiguity of the ironic act:

> Dave: We still really wanted to be men… but we also needed to distinguish ourselves and say that we're not like all men, and repudiate our conventional masculine values. Irony was a way of dealing with that tension. (8/9/09)

Irony is often an attitude more than a specifically marked act or gesture, and is therefore useful in creating ambiguity around one's own practices. For example, the Meat Feast takes place during "Brovember," a holiday month that me and my friends made up in order to celebrate brotherhood, friendship, and reunion. During Brovember, it is especially important for our circle of friends to see each other as much as possible, living an intensely homosocial lifestyle with an increased amount of drinking, skateboarding, road-tripping, concert-attending, etc… Brovember, like the Meat Feast, is a sanctioned period of extreme practice.

But Brovember is also ironic, because it's built around the imagined identity of the "bro" and the practice of "bro-ing out," constructs with which my circle of friends might not always identify. That is, we correlated the "bro" stereotype with the jock, a conventional man who spends a large amount of time hanging out with other similar men (hence, "bro-ing out"). In a certain sarcastic tone of voice, labeling your friend a bro could be a complete joke, calling attention to the overbearing elements of their masculinity, or pointing to the contradictory aspects of a bunch of supposedly "alternative" dudes sitting around with each other drinking beer and talking about women. But among my peers, being called a bro was also something to be proud of, for it meant being a reliable friend, someone to be trusted, someone who was fun to be around and enjoyed male bonding. In that situation, "bro" was more likely to be short for brother. These different meanings were most easily conveyed through tone of voice—if said sarcastically or with flair, then calling someone a bro was an ironic insult; if

said with a straight face and with sincerity, then calling someone your bro was a great compliment.

The shifting meaning of the word "bro" reflects the larger tension between irony and sincerity in the Meat Feast and Brovember, which are at once sincere reunions of friends and ironic performances of a homosocial, hyper-masculine lifestyle. Irony in these events can be marked by a gesture, facial expression, or tone of voice. Certain especially over-the-top acts, like wearing an American flag as a robe, are more obviously ironic, while other things like shot-gunning a beer (drinking it as fast as possible) are more ambiguous. If done ironically, shot-gunning can simultaneously convey a multiplicity of meanings— mocking a hyper-masculine jock activity, while at the same time engaging in it. That is, no matter how "ironically" you shotgun, the element of performance is always limited by the simple fact that you are *really* ingesting beer into your body at a rapid rate. Irony allows you to be the performer *and* the role.

Still other performances of straddle the line between irony and sincerity. For example, at the most recent Meat Feast someone made the joke: "Next year we'll be having anal sex, I'm sure of it." The joke is ironic because it highlights the homoerotic elements of this all-male ritual, which are clearly in conflict with a supposedly hyper-masculine, *straight* performance. But the joke is also quite real in the ways it constructs anal sex (re: homosexuality). That is, the Meat Feast might be "ironically" hyper-masculine, but its participants nevertheless disavow any homoerotic element, affirming that to be hyper-masculine is to be straight, thereby reproducing the stereotype that homosexuals aren't "real men." By

making this ironic joke, the individual simultaneously questions male homophobic tendencies and reiterates them.

As David has pointed out, irony at the Meat Feast is often a way to rationalize otherwise unethical acts, or "excuse ourselves" from them (8/9/09), while at the same time, irony has the power to stigmatize those acts. Almost all of my friends whom I talked to about the Meat Feast alluded to the fact that it was only once a year, a "special occasion" (Tim, 7/7/09), a licensed transgression behind closed doors and definitely not a way to behave normally. In this sense, calling the Meat Feast ironic has the effect of making the heteronormative, homophobic identity it encourages seem abnormal, while still licensing pleasure in its performance. Of course, this stigmatizing effect doesn't excuse the fact that it recreates an oppressive situation, even if for the purpose of making it seem absurd. In this sense, irony absolutely functions as a double-edged sword.

They make these mortars which are essentially reusable cardboard tubes that shoot fireworks into the air that burst out over your head, like your own miniature 4th of July show. Well, one time we were in the driveway and we put a firework into the mortar, but before we lit it we stuffed an old American flag in there too. Someone kept saying in a singsong voice, "It's illegal to burn the flag! It's illegal to burn the flag!" and we were all cracking up over it. Anyway, someone lit the fuse and we all backed up expecting the flag to shoot into the air with the mortar charge and disintegrate into ashes in the sky. I imagined myself dancing underneath it all.

But it didn't exactly happen that way, because the flag created a seal on top of the charge, causing all the pressure to be released out the bottom of the tube, so the whole fucking mortar lifted into the air and started helicoptering around at eye level, at which point the entire thing exploded right in front of us, like a real bursting red white and blue firework going off right in front of our faces, shooting burning pieces of cardboard and flag in all directions. We tried to scramble out of the way but it was impossible to move fast enough, and Brian got hit with one of the pieces and it left a burn mark on his shirt below the right shoulder.

After that, we took what was left of the flag, hung it off the garage, sprayed it with lighter fluid, lit it on fire, and then shot it over and over again with a bb gun rifle.

While the Meat Feast may be the most extreme and concentrated example, irony was certainly present in a less dramatic form in everyday life. One obvious connection is to "grilling," a practice which generally entailed sitting around a barbecue, cooking meat, and drinking with a bunch of guys. Grilling was initially regarded as a stereotypical suburban male practice, connected to the same "jock" masculinity that was ironically exaggerated in the Meat Feast.

Thus, we sometimes performed grilling ironically, with more than a hint of the sexism and male-exclusivity that we correlated with a "normal" or mainstream masculinity. "When a bunch of dudes are hanging out grilling, you tend to see more of the sexual humor, making jokes about subordinating women, etc…" (Tim, 7/6/09). Tim described grilling to me as both a way to *feel* and *perform* a normal masculine identity, a response to a "subconscious" (natural?) desire to feel normal. But Alex also talked about how that aspect of performance, along with self-awareness, could also distinguish us from normal men. Grilling, he argues, wasn't simply about *feeling* normal:

> Alex: Sometimes I feel like we've adopted grilling as our own. It feels different. There's this idea of cooking meat, being with your bros, drinking brews. Something we do all the time. And the Meat Feast is just the amplified version of that. But it's also analogous to a "running joke…" Whether we're laughing at it or with it, it's our running joke. (8/28)

Alex describes what you might call an appropriation of the conventionally "bro" practice of grilling meat and drinking beer. Our practice, he claims, was different, distinguished by a certain amount of self-awareness and the ability to take a step back and see the ways in which it was laughable. As I've argued before, self-awareness is crucial to a masculinity that is trying to navigate the perceived

opposition between mainstream and alternative. As such, self-awareness is an essential component of the ironic act—one must know one's own position in order to ironically perform the Other's. In that sense, grilling becomes for Alex a sort of "running joke," which he both "laughs at" and "with." It's ironic and sincere.

But the tension between irony and sincerity isn't the only way "grilling" should be read. In my talks with Tim, he told me explicitly how the actual act of cooking meat took on a creative quality that mirrored some of the values expressed around skateboarding and making music:

> Tim: The act of cooking is this individualistic kind of thing. I enjoy planning it out, grinding the meat, planning the recipe. That is, I would consider the farmer who grows and eats their own vegetables to be more manly than someone who goes to the grocery store and buys meat hot pockets. (7/7/09)

Tim prides himself on his culinary skills, and it shows in the way he articulates cooking as a romantic act of personal expression. For him, grilling is an art, complimented by a feeling of "independence" and "self-reliance" (his words), an act diametrically opposed to the more mainstream image of the cook-out, just dudes throwing meat on a grill. This is evident in Tim's constructed duality between the self-sustaining farmer, who lives outside the consumer market, and the ignorant man who eats unhealthy, frozen, prepackaged meat. Despite the fact that this romanticized farmer is eating vegetables, he is still more manly than the boring consumer. Conventionally, Tim correlates the "productive" aspect of the farmer with masculinity, while the other man is merely purchasing a commodity, and is therefore less masculine.

Tim's description of grilling is exemplary of how a practice perceived as normal, conventional, and boring, can be appropriated and constructed to resemble an act of creative individualism, echoing a distinction expressed by my peers about going to college (hardly an ironic act). When I pushed Tim further about it, he reiterated Alex's notion that we had "our own" version of grilling, which was definitely a sincere practice, though more tasteful (literally and figuratively) than the stereotypical cook-out:

> Tim: The many times where we would just grill at someone's house were pretty much always sincere from my point of view. I guess my view of grilling differs from the normal "bro" view, in that mine is about eating good food prepared by my own hands and sharing it with my friends, and the stereotypical bro "grill sesh" is basically just an excuse to get drunk. I don't think any of the grilling I've done in Montclair was ironic (save the Meat Feast of course). (3/24/10)

Tim describes his grilling as distinct from the stereotypical bro's, in that it relies on a superior, more distinctive cultural taste— it's about eating good, homemade food more than it is about chilling with the bros and getting drunk. Tim's construction of grilling as a creative act, more artistic than the average grill session seem to be in some form a type of lashing out against the perceived "normal" male identity, disciplined, homosocial, lacking quality taste. In an attempt to construct his own identity as a type of "new man," he practices a more tasteful form of grilling, cooking his own food and buying fancier beer. Nevertheless, the central masculine symbols of meat and beer remain in place.

Irony was often used to similar effect, as a way to maintain perceived "core" principles of masculinity without sacrificing one's own integrity as an alternative, creative individual. The Meat Feast allowed us to distinguish

ourselves from a boring, disciplined, domesticated masculinity, by acting wild and "unchained." Thus, at some level, we performed this hyper-masculinity to clarify for ourselves that we were still "real men." At the same time, we called that wild, sexist masculinity an ironic performance, thereby dispelling our own doubts about the authenticity of our "alternative" or "new" identities. That is, irony allowed us to mask our insecurities about acting like aggressive and heteronormative men.

> Ken: In addition to the fact that it's funny and ironic, there's a really visceral enjoyment to it. Maybe we needed to create an environment where this type of behavior is acceptable, behavior that we do enjoy. If I didn't sanction a specific space for it, I wouldn't know where to put those impulses. (7/6/09)

Here, Ken's account also suggests uncertainty about whether the Meat Feast is indeed a deliberate performance at all, instead calling it a necessary outlet for natural "impulses." For Ken, though, this uncertainty disappeared over time:

> Ken: It was raw, primitive, extremely stereotypical masculine behavior…
>
> Jake: But is it natural? Does it speak to some animal urge that all men share?
>
> Ken: I'm suspicious that there's some kind of animal urge common to all men, and that we have to do this thing to get it out… But then again, it *used* to seem very funny. A sort of childish glee that you were all of a sudden free of societal responsibility. But I'm really frustrated with that idea now, feeling in so many ways that I don't feel close to what happens there anymore. (7/6/09)

Ken describes an increasing sense of distance from the ritual that I too have felt over the years. His earlier, "childish" interpretation that the Meat Feast freed the male from social responsibility and allowed him to act on natural impulses, is in alignment with an essentialized model of masculinity as a primal or instinctual

thing. But Ken articulates how his perspective has changed, and that he no longer sees himself that way or sees the value in that approach.

When pressed, Ken described for me why he thought some of the notions of masculinity that the Meat Feast celebrated were destructive, showing how conceptualizing gender as an inherent thing can denigrate those identities which diverge from the norm, labeling them as unnatural and deviant:

> Ken: Specifically the second year, there were these moments of extreme homophobia… By then, it was clear that there was more than a grain of insanity and oppression to it. The entire thing basically is about suppressing all differences, to do the exact same thing, and anyone who's different is implicitly being told that they shouldn't be there or is forced to do it immediately. One thing that's made me more hesitant about it, is that if you start to look at how these models of behavior pan out in larger situations, they've resulted in some of the most terrifying moments in human history. (7/6/09)

If the masculinity in the Meat Feast is a performance of the natural order of things, as enacted by the ravenous devouring of animal flesh, then as Ken describes, alternative masculinities are being suppressed and silenced. Homophobic and sexist comments act in support of this so-called natural hyper-masculine or "traditionally masculine" identity.

The most extreme manifestation of that line of thinking is the rule banning women from the feast, which after so many years of being rigorously upheld has come to largely be seen as destructive, a way to experience a powerful masculinity which exists free of an imagined, domesticating, restraining femininity:

> Lee: [The Meat Feast] is an outlet for these incredibly aggressive, sexist, masculine tendencies. And sometimes we are very sexist, refusing to let women come. That's obvious. (8/4/09)

> David: Everyone we intended to invite was all men. This was back when we were much more immature people, so we rationalized that male exclusivity by making an ironic rule that it was male only. We kind of excused ourselves from it. (8/9/09)

> Tim: When a bunch of dudes are hanging out at the Meat Feast or grilling, you tend to see more of the sexual humor, making jokes about subordinating women… The hyper-aggressive and male aspects of us come out there a little more. (7/7/09)

As Dave says, male exclusivity was originally rationalized as an "ironic" rule, reminiscent of the "no girls allowed" signs we would put up in tree-houses or pillow-forts. Banning women licensed a regression to an adolescent masculinity that was homosocial, naïve, and unaware of the existence of any identity besides Man and Woman. Excluding the imagined femininity polarized masculinity itself, condemning all gender identities but the most "essential," and ensuring that this extreme masculinity would not be subject to the restraining female gaze.

From the description above, it's fitting to see the Meat Feast as a ritualized microcosm of the larger hegemonic structure of masculinities outlined in Connell's work. While Connell argues that in our society the self-disciplined, "rational" man is dominant, at the Meat Feast, that identity is feminized and subordinated to an aggressive and wild masculinity, characterized by a lack of inhibitions and masked by an "ironic" tone. David reiterated this explanation for the Feast's championing of hyper-masculinity, suggesting that the ritual is a way for self-identified alternative men to compensate and react to being labeled "effeminate" by the constructed mainstream man (call him the "jock" for lack of a better word): "Being a painter doesn't exactly ring a bell in people's heads as necessarily being a man" (8/9/09).

As I've argued earlier, though, creative individuality is often associated with masculinity in middle-class cultures. After all, my father is a professional artist, as were many of my peers' parents, and it's hard to determine how much the accusation that creative men are effeminate is based in real experience, and how much is imagined in order to reify an "alternative" identity. What I do know is that my time on the wrestling and baseball teams featured an intense amount of homophobia and a strong collaboration by players and coaches to establish and uphold a "normal" male identity, an experience corroborated by my peers. It makes sense that the Meat Feast, which mimics and exaggerates the "dominant" or "jock" masculinity, would demonize the feminine other and the homosexual in the same way.

It is important to expose the sexism, homophobia, and general suppression of "deviant" behavior in the Meat Feast. "We clearly wanted to indulge some sort of fantastic, unified vision of masculinity that was simultaneously visceral and funny, but more or less straight-faced" (Ken, 7/6/09). Sadly, realizing this unification (call it an idealized adolescent vision of "true brotherhood") meant actively suppressing difference. However, the more "indulgent" aspects of the Meat Feast were simultaneously expressive of humor and mockery of the hyper-masculinity that was being performed, and this "ironic" element to the performance should not be undervalued:

> Dave: It's such a microcosm. It was not only just men, but in our minds it was also exclusive to the type of masculinity we thought we were [alternative]. So in the Meat Feast we really embraced these overly masculine tendencies—taking off our shirts and boozing. Those things were not the tendencies of our group at all, and we were all really aware of that. (8/9/09)

There's truth to that reading, in the simple fact that this over-the-top masculinity, as exaggerated as it may be, was not perceived of as the "true self," but as a performance, a licensed transgression of normal behavior. There's a clear tension between that idea of the Meat Feast as performance, and the Meat Feast as instinctual release, evidence that these men not only expressed contradictory masculinities, but contradictory ideas of gender itself. Calling the Meat Feast a performance suggests an understanding of masculinity as something the individual constructs in order to express himself at any given time; whilst calling the Meat Feast an instinctual release suggests that identity is a mask put on for society to cover up one's true, intrinsic masculinity.

For us, irony provided an extremely complicated, multi-layered structure in which to perform this equally complicated and contradictory structure of identity. If anything, this is reflective of the wide variety of contradictory cultural values that we engaged with, even in the so-called "uniform" world of the New Jersey suburb. The middle class is far from a uniform place, and Montclair was an especially racially and socio-economically diverse town at the time, fostering a vast array of identities. Even amongst my peer group, which was linked by similar class, race, and gender identities, there were massive differences.

Irony can be a way to account for those differences (or in the case of the Meat Feast, gloss over them), by allowing the individual to speak multiple cultural dialects at once. In our case, irony allowed us to answer to the jock and the skater, the disciplined man and the wild man, the conventional man and the alternative man, etc… These masculinities, we told ourselves, were incompatible

with one another, even if they overlapped in certain places. But labeling them as such did not render them unimportant, and we yearned to be recognized by each other and the people around us as men, even if it meant expressing a contradiction.

As we grew older, however, this need to be validated as "real men" in any context became less and less important, as evidenced by the feeling of distance from certain elements of the Feast that Ken and I shared. The most important thing, we agree, is that the Meat Feast brings old friends together. But ever more these friends are finding it harder to relate to each other in the same old adolescent way, as evidenced by the most recent "recession-era Meat Feast," which lacked some of the more oppressive elements of years past, but was also characterized by an awkwardness and unfamiliarity. This is suggestive that even within a relatively homogenous group of men, individual distinctions of masculinity and identity are always being made.

A couple months ago a few of us went out to this bar called Tierney's down the street from my house. We were all drinking pretty heavily and we ran into this kid named Max who used to skateboard with us every now and then, but not someone any of us knew too well, like an acquaintance I guess. Anyway this kid just starts telling us about his life, like how he's in the fucking marines and they're paying his way through community college where he's learning to fix air conditioners. Like, "Yeah, I'm shipping out in three or four months. If you know anyone with a broken air conditioner." He had marine corps tattoos on his arms and a buzz cut and just seemed super excited to run into us at the bar, and he's like, "Yeah, I'll pretty much be here every night till I leave."

That same night we were still at Tierney's and this crew of guys walks in, who I recognize right away, the old captain of the high school lacrosse team and his father Steve, and it's Steve's birthday, so they're all out getting hammered. So Steve stumbles up to me, drunk off his ass, he's got a baseball hat on and 4-day old stubble, and he says, "Jake, there are a lot of pussies in this town, but your father's not one of 'em."

The whole thing was remarkable. And I'm not gonna lie and say I didn't take some pride in hearing that shit. But when I got back home I just felt sick about the whole night, until eventually I put my head in the toilet and threw my guts up.

CONCLUSION

In concluding this work, I find myself ever more aware of how much remains unsaid and unseen. I already feel that this ethnography has glossed over so many of the contradictions and complications surrounding a straight, white, middle-class, male upbringing in suburban NJ. Undoubtedly, this is the contradiction of the ethnographer— in order to say anything coherent about culture means having to present it, in some sense, as cohesive. I have attempted to deal with this contradiction by openly setting out to foreground contradictions in identity within a relatively small group of friends, as well as within my own memory.

But I will say without hesitation, that even in aiming for multiplicity and contradiction, I have simplified. For one thing, it has been far too easy to equate my experience with that of my peers, and theirs with each other's. That is, I haven't adequately accounted for differences in experience and interpretation within my peer group. Each friend told me a different story, and only through locating and emphasizing the overlaps did I construct a framework of meaning for the group as a whole. I could have chosen to look more closely at these internal differences, and made this an ethnography about the ways in which, even among their friends, men of similar backgrounds represent themselves differently.

I have also largely focused on understanding these men as they engage with each other. I could have done this ethnography focusing on more socially diverse settings— at parties, in class, etc..., looking closely at how these men and I negotiated encounters with others, whether that meant spending time with

someone of a different race, gender, class, or sexuality, or simply someone with a different idea of what it means to be a man. Instead, I chose to look at the more homogenous settings of skateboarding, the Meat Feast, etc…

This choice developed largely from my own interpretive emphasis on the internal differences within an overarching framework of "masculinity," an approach that I derived mainly from R.W. Connell's work. For that reason, I emphasized in my interviews, memories, and photographs, the ways that these men were relating to each other as a way of distinguishing themselves from other men. But I do not by any means wish to present my social world growing up as strictly homogenous or homosocial. The lack of an active female presence in the text and photographs is partially due to the limited scope of this project, and my own choice to focus on these supposedly "male" activities. However, I would be wrong to downplay the significance of all-male activities to me and my peers. Hanging out and growing up together was hugely important to our identity-formation.

I would also like to comment on the absence of non-white voices in this project. That, too, derived from my interest in looking at masculinity from the perspective of my friends, all of whom were raised by white parents.

With all that said, I do not regret my approach, for it has forced me to seriously investigate what it means to be in the comfort and safety of a homogenous environment, whether it's chilling with the bros or skating with my oldest friends, and how that space is continuously defined in terms of an imagined Other. This is not to suggest that chilling with the bros is always

reproductive of a certain dominant or oppressive identity. To echo Phil and Tim's thoughts about being a "healthy" man, in order to prevent oppression and sexism, one must constantly evaluate his own position in the larger social field. In my case, this entails recognizing that being a white, straight man is a social privilege, reliant on the exploitation and denigration of the Other, both imagined and real.

Only through awareness and acknowledgement that certain homosocial practices are actively constructed by their participants as exclusively "male" or "white" or "straight" or "middle-class," can one work towards achieving forms of male bonding that aren't dominative and reproductive of social oppression. As Tim put it, "masculinity means being comfortable with yourself both as a man and as a human." Comfortable here doesn't entail being "in the safety of your own home, amongst your own kind." Rather, it means feeling comfortable knowing that no matter how you identify as a man, you are recognizing your responsibility to work towards a less restrictive and oppressive social world, and uncomfortable knowing that you might be contributing to the reproduction of privilege.

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