

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Emotions, Space, and Cultural Analysis: The Case of Bike Messengers

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in

Sociology

by

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2009

## DEDICATION

To my mother, who would have been proud.

To Keri, who had to put up with all of this.

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Various segments of this dissertation have previously been printed, and I would like to thank the various publishers for their permission to reuse parts of those articles here. Chapter five is derived from “It’s the Job I love:’ Bike Messengers and Edgework” (*Sociological Forum* vol. 21 no. 1). Chapter six is derived from “Bike Messengers and the Really Real: Effervescence, Reflexivity, and Postmodern Identity” (*Symbolic Interaction* vol. 29 no.1). A variation on chapter seven is forthcoming as “Appropriating the City: Space, Theory, and Bike Messengers” (*Theory and Society* vol. 38). Chapter eight is a reworking of “Style and Action: A Decoding of Bike Messenger Symbols” (*Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* vol. 34 no.3).

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## PUBLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Bike messengers are individuals who deliver time-sensitive items in the downtown cores of major cities. More than just an occupation, many bike messengers are part of what can be considered an all-encompassing lifestyle (i.e., a subculture based around “urban cycling”). The goal of this dissertation is to explain this lifestyle.

I propose that an adequate explanation must incorporate emotions (as embodied lived experience) and physical space (as a set of structures dialectically related to all action) into the analysis. My basic argument is that when riding through the city (whether for work or for play), messengers take part in what I call an “affective appropriation of space.” It is this emplaced lived experience that gives the bike messenger subculture its meanings. To illustrate this I provide a practiced-based semiotics of messenger style that highlights the interconnection between symbols and practice. Ultimately, I argue that culture is not only emotionally felt, but spatially experienced. I conclude by ruminating on the political implications of affective spatial appropriation for understanding alienation and exploitation in the workplace.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### **A Glimpse into the Messenger Subculture**

Saturday, August 24th, 2002. It was just after dark, and I was in Claremont Park in the Bronx. I was dressed in a mockup of a New York Yankees baseball jersey and my face was painted yellow and red. Five other guys were dressed just like me. We called ourselves the Furies; we were a comic book caricature of a street gang. Standing around us were 84 other equally fictional gangs: the Bloody Marys, the Cutters, the Electric Vikings, the South Side Slashers, and more. In total, almost 600 hundred oddly dressed men and women were in Claremont Park that night. We all had bicycles, and many of us were bike messengers. Not just New York bike messengers, but messengers from across the country and around world: Boston, Chicago, London, Philadelphia, Tokyo, Toronto—to name just a few places. The event was called the Warriors Fun Ride—part bicycle race, part scavenger hunt, and all party (complete with costumes).

The “fun ride” was a tribute to the 1979 cult classic *The Warriors*—a film depicting a not-so-futuristic New York City overrun by hordes of street gangs (all wearing ridiculous uniforms). The movie’s “heroes” are a gang from Coney Island, the Warriors, who must fight their way back to Brooklyn from the Bronx. Like the movie, the goal of the fun ride was to make it to Coney Island. However, before arriving at the finish, each “gang” had to make it to checkpoints scattered across the city. At these checkpoints, there was some sort of challenge or task to be completed. One checkpoint, for example, involved a game of handball. At another checkpoint,

one member of each team had to get a real tattoo (a small line drawing designed by the organizers commemorating the event). Teams received points based on their arrival time at each checkpoint, and their success at completing each challenge. Additional points could also be earned by finding answers to various trivia questions about the city (questions that no one would know the answer to unless they successfully traveled to the place in question). Beyond the checkpoints and trivia questions, there were also mandatory party stops with food and beer (and other more illicit types of intoxication)—stops where many of the racers, less interested in the actual competition, stayed well past the required time. Just like in the movie, the event was organized so the finishers arrived at Coney Island at dawn. Fifty-two of the original 85 teams stuck with it to the end.

The Warriors was my first messenger event. The Thursday before, new faces started appearing in Tompkins Square Park (the most common place for messengers to congregate after work). Out-of-town messengers had started arriving in the city. Excited about the coming event, more than the usual share of local couriers also made a point to swing by the park that evening. By Friday, Tompkins was bursting with messengers. The Cutters, a “gang” from San Francisco, were already in their “uniforms”—ripped jean vests with the backs painted (motorcycle gang style) with straight razors and brass knuckles.<sup>1</sup> Like many messengers, the stripped down,

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<sup>1</sup> It should be mentioned, however, that, for messengers, the name “Cutters” is not generally a reference to violent intent. It is actually a reference to *Breaking Away*, an Academy Award winning film from 1979, now forgotten by time. However, for messengers, and many other cycling enthusiasts, it is considered a must-see classic.

scratched and stickered look of their bicycles concealed (for the lay observer, at least) that their machines were actually worth thousands of dollars. The Cutters rode around the park performing wheelies and other, far more complicated, bicycle tricks. Other messengers joined in a friendly game of one-upmanship (like dueling banjos, but on bikes). Friday was officially the time to preregister for the event, but, more importantly, it was a time to socialize. Many of the out-of-town couriers were already friends with New York messengers, having met many times before at other courier events held around the world. Others were meeting people for the first time. Many messengers came to New York not even knowing where they would stay, but all find places; hospitality to traveling messengers is universal. Some messengers financed their trip by staying for weeks after the Warriors, working for New York courier companies in order to save up enough money to return home.

Saturday, as my team rode from the Brooklyn to the Bronx, we crossed paths with numerous other “gangs” also on their way to Claremont Park. It seemed as

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*Breaking Away* is a coming-of-age movie about four teenagers from Bloomington, IN. Unlike the college students who fill the town, the local youths are known as “cutters,” because their parents work as stone cutters in the local quarry. The film’s main character, in an effort to “break away” from his working class (and much stigmatized) roots, is obsessed with Italian culture—most especially, Italian bicycle racing. The movie’s title, in fact, is a reference to racing strategy. In the end, the main character embraces his working class roots, and, with the help of his three friends, beat (the seemingly unbeatable) teams of college students in a local bicycle race. The local teens call their team the Cutters—to proudly accept their class status (and, thus, make their victory at the bicycle race a larger victory of working class grit and determination over middle class privilege). In the case of the San Francisco “gang,” the term “Cutters” was used with a double meaning—their vests clearly frame the term “cutters” in a menacing and violent light. More often, however, messengers use the term cutter to emphasize their underdog, salt-of-the-earth status.

though the entire city was filled with out-of-place Halloween revelers—*on bikes*. Claremont Park was simply out of control. Standing on a park bench and speaking through a bullhorn, one of the event organizers advised the crowd that the event was to be more of a “fun ride” and less of a “race.” He told us to focus on having fun, and less on competing. He also attempted to explain that scoring for the prizes would be based not only on time, but also on answering the trivia questions. With these words said (and a smattering of referential quotes from the film: “Can you dig it?” “Come out and play,” *ad nauseam*), a countdown for the start began. As usual, the race began well before the words “two” left the organizer’s lips. The Warriors began like a race (a *messenger* race, at least) and, for many, it would very much continue to be a race (again, to the degree that messengers “race”). For, despite the organizer’s contrary advice, time was a major factor, and speed, in and of itself, was the goal for many participants.

From a legal standpoint, there was nothing official about Saturday night. No governmental agencies were informed of the event—certainly not the police. There was no set “race course.” There were only set destinations. It was each team’s responsibility to find the best way to get there. Indeed, that was the primary challenge of the event. It was understood that, in order to get from checkpoint to checkpoint, riders would do *whatever* they deemed necessary to shave time off their route. There were no rules, and traffic laws were *completely* ignored. People were darting in and out of cars, and swerving in front of buses. This is completely typical behavior for bike messengers, but to those unaccustomed to such “urban cycling” it, undoubtedly,

looked like suicidal pandemonium. Adding to the chaos, as if on cue, rain began to pour from the heavens as our nearly 600 souls swarmed through the streets of the Bronx.

Hours later, at one of the mandatory party stops in Brooklyn, hundreds of cyclists filled the streets of a rundown warehouse district. Nearly dry from the earlier storm, people ate free burgers, hot dogs, and veggie burgers and drank beer donated by Pabst (without a doubt, the most cherished sponsorship the event organizers were able to procure). At one point, a lone police car attempted to make its way through the throng of people. No one moved. The cop turned on his siren. Still, no one moved. He used his loudspeaker to tell us to disperse. The crowd just ignored him. Another command rang out from his car (this time followed by the threat of arrest). Slowly, the crowd shifted just enough for the car to pass. For whatever reason, the cop backed down from the challenge and the party went on. At this point, for most of the teams, the original vigor had long since waned. For the teams that did not finish, most called it quits here. Not because the ride had failed to be fun—the exact opposite. The event was so enjoyable, many people figured, why push one's self further, simply to make it to the official end? Fun had already been had in copious amounts.

For the rest of us, though, we carried on. While a few teams still had their eyes on the prize, my team, now riding with a Chicago gang modeled after the *Saturday Night Live* skit the Super Fans (famous for gorging on bratwurst and toasting “da Bears”), had no qualms about taking the rest of the night slowly. However, even riding slow, traffic regulations were still ignored. Somewhere in between

Williamsburg, Brooklyn and Coney Island, we spent half an hour trying to find a bodega to sell us beer in the wee hours of Sunday morning (which is against the law). I was the only member of our combined group to believe it was humanly possible to complete the ride without further imbibement. Clearly, I was insane, and finally a storekeeper took pity on our plight and consented that no law should inhibit the group's further inebriation.

Even though I arrived at Coney Island completely sober (I was a distinct minority), I was so tired that the morning exists only as a shadowy blur in my mind (and I must admit to being so tired that my field notes are of only marginal use). Some people stripped down and swam in the Atlantic. There was a final showdown between the teams in a tug-of-war match. Our baseball-themed gang was pitted against a hockey-themed gang from Toronto. We lost. Exhausted, we took the train back to Brooklyn, and I got a few hours sleep before heading up to Astoria Park, in Queens, for the awards ceremony (the one part of the weekend that did, in fact, have a city permit). Among the various awards given out were best overall gang, best co-ed gang, best female gang, and best out-of-town gang (since local knowledge is an extreme advantage in such an event). Awards were also given for best costume, neatest manifest, best crash, etc. The prizes included two tickets to Copenhagen for the Cycle Messenger World Championships (one rider from the best overall gang and best female gang), a thousand dollars cash (for the best gang costume), as well a bicycle, a bike frame, and various cycling components for other prizes.

## **Bike Messengers and Sociological Study**

*“What’s the Lure of Delivering Packages?”*

Bike messengers are paid to deliver time-sensitive items (e.g., court filings) in congested urban areas. Chapter two will analyze the structures that make up the occupation. For now, a few introductions from the mainstream press will sketch its profile. In 1993, an article in the *Toronto Star* claimed, “They live the life you may have dreamed of but never had the courage or foolish disregard to try... The life of the bicycle courier... You have a primal dream about it. You go to the parties the straights have never heard about... *You have the kind of sex they would give their fortune for.* ...And you don’t wear a tie, either” (Cheney 1993: A1). A decade later, The *Seattle Times* printed a set of equally compelling lines, “In case you haven’t been in the urban core of any major American city for the past few decades, bike messengers are those toned, tattooed daredevils who cut through exhaust and traffic all day long delivering just about anything that will fit in their shoulder bags [...]” (Sanders 2003: 2). Both of these excerpts follow a typical strand in popular culture: the bike messenger as folk hero. In fact, in the mid-1980s, a writer for *New York Magazine* penned, “[T]hey are becoming folk heroes—the pony-express riders of the eighties. The bicycle messenger might even be regarded by some as the ultimate urban man—tough, resourceful, self-contained, riding against the odds the city stacks against everybody” (Smith 1986: 40). Conversely, a columnist for the *Washington Post* captured the other side of public sentiment proclaiming, “In my gentler moments, I’ve called them law-flouting, obscenity-spewing, bath-needing, wild-riding,

pedestrian-smashing madmen” (Levy 1989: E4). Twelve years later, the same condemnation was expressed in an editorial for *The New York Times*. “Some of these boys look good in tights, but most are maniacal and dangerous. [...] Getting hit by a bike messenger is a true New York experience” (Lee 2001: 14).

For those not living in major metropolitan areas (especially, major metropolitan areas with primary transportation infrastructure constructed before World War II), bike messengers sound quaint at best. Often, the concept just sounds silly. Every now and again, I am asked (always by someone who has never spent substantial time in such a city), “But what do they deliver?” followed by a chuckle. However, as the small sampling of various newspaper articles above shows, for those living in larger, older cities—Boston, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, Washington, DC—(as well as a few newer ones), bike messengers are a source of cultural fascination. Even to the casual observer, bike messengers appear to be part of an interesting, but obscure, subculture.

When I was working as a messenger in Seattle, a businessman in an elevator asked me, “What’s the lure of delivering packages? I see a lot of people doing it, and they seem to love it.” And love it they do. In my three plus years of participant observation—or, more accurately, “observant participation” (Wacquant 2004: 6)—I cannot count the number of times I have heard messengers describe their occupation as “the best job ever.” The businessman’s question, “What’s the lure of delivering packages?” should be enough to make anyone stop and ponder—most certainly a sociologist. Really, what is the allure?

Working at Sprint Courier in New York, my average daily wage was \$63 (for the days that I did work). I had no health care, no paid holidays, and no sick leave. When I was injured or when my bicycle was broken, I made no income. I was in multiple accidents with motor vehicles and pedestrians, thankfully nothing serious, but this had as much to do with luck as with skill. In order to deliver packages in a timely manner I regularly broke traffic laws, and racked up hundreds of dollars in citations (which I, not my company, was responsible for paying). Moreover, I had to endure working in the rain and snow. I had to put up with irate drivers and condescending clients. *What is the allure?* How does this job, which sounds downright awful when described this way, result in an internationally attended, all-night race/party through the city (complete with commemorative tattoos)? Or, to put the question somewhat differently, how does a low-end service job (rife with danger and minimal material compensation) produce so much attachment that people want to throw parties celebrating the occupation? To quote from an advertisement (which ran in a desktop published magazine produced by New York couriers) for an upcoming race in Philadelphia: “Come join us in Philadelphia this September to remember Tom and all the other messengers who have fallen—as well as to celebrate being a bike messenger, the best job you’ll ever have” (CMWC 2000: 21).

### *Meaning and Identity in Contemporary Times*

Work, we are told, is no longer our primary source of identity (Aronowitz 1973; Dubin 1992; Gecas 1994; Lasch 1978; Lyng 1990). Of course, there are

exceptions. Medical doctors and military officers, for example, see their selves through their chosen occupation (see Light 1980 and Dowd 2000; respectively). And, certainly, religious officials are expected to have virtually no separation between their “work selves” and their “real selves.” These occupations (along with lawyers) are what could be considered the classic professions. There is a high degree of formal training and strict barriers to entry. They also involve creative decision-making, personal responsibility, and an uncertainty of outcomes (i.e., individuals are charged with making choices in which the final results are unknown—which is why they receive so much training and restrict who is allowed to join the profession’s ranks). Dubin (1992) contends that these occupations, because of the challenges they offer their practitioners, can become central life interests. That is, the job tasks themselves can be a source of individual satisfaction and the occupation tends to be an integral part of identity. Central life interests (whether they are vocational or avocational) are how individuals realize their authentic selves. They are activities that actors are not forced into (out of necessity or obligation), but out of personal desire (e.g., a soldier may only march through the woods because he is ordered to, but an outdoor enthusiast needs no such external motivation).

For Dubin, work is rarely a central life interest anymore, and this should come as no surprise. How can fry cooks, janitors, or data-entry assistants feel challenged by their job tasks? It is difficult (if not impossible) to imagine these jobs as central life interests. They are part of what Gorz (1980 [1982]) calls the heteronomous sphere. In contrast to the autonomous sphere—where people find intrinsic purpose in their

activities—heteronomy involves the boring, unsatisfying labor required to meet the diverse needs of society (i.e., menial jobs are part and parcel to social complexity). The authenticity of work identities will be more thoroughly addressed in chapters four and five. For now, though, it is safe to claim that the vast majority of contemporary occupations are disconnected from meaningful action. And, this, of course, is an observation Weber (1904-1905 [1958]) made long ago. “[T]he idea of duty in one’s calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. [...] For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: ‘Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved’ (182).

A critique of the modern labor relations transcends the workday. It is not only that paid labor has become instrumental—devoid of intrinsic value (i.e., rewarding beyond its material compensations). In being forced into heteronomous labor (with only the ghost of a calling prowling in the background), the meaningfulness of life itself is thrown into question. Indeed, sociology as a discipline was born from a concern that (industrial) capitalism not only alters social relations, but challenges the ontological foundations of society. This fear is at the heart of Tönnies (1887 [1955]) distinction of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and his value-driven contrast between tradition and modernity is repeated throughout our discipline’s earliest writings. Speaking about capitalism, for example, Marx (with Engels 1848 [1978]) states, “Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbances of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from

all earlier ones. [...] All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned [...] ” (476). Weber (1915 [1946]), writing of rationalization, claims, “[C]ulture’s every step forward seems condemned to lead to an ever more devastating senselessness” (357). Lamenting the anomie of industrial organization, Durkheim (1893 [1984]) contends that the modern individual is “unable to escape the agonizing and exasperating question: to what purpose?” (212).<sup>2</sup> In other words, sociology is built on the assumption that meaning was, in earlier times, non-reflexively accepted, but is now problematic—that is, reflexively contemplated (Giddens 1990).

But, what then of the lure of delivering packages? As we have already seen (and as I will develop more as the dissertation progresses), messengers are devoted to their labor as if it was a calling. Couriers inject both spirit and heart into their labor. However, there is no ideological devotion to messengering’s economic function. They do not celebrate their role in commerce. To the contrary, we will see that messengers are lured to deliveries *in spite of* their clients’ needs. Why, then, do messengers conflate their work selves and their “real” selves? Why does the job provide such a profound sense of meaning? To answer these questions (i.e., to explain the lure of delivering packages) is to contradict what Weber saw as an inevitable march towards senselessness. That is, modernity may be defined by the dynamics of the free market; it is coldly rational and often anomic. But, if riding a bicycle around the city dropping

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<sup>2</sup> Those more familiar with Durkheim’s work may note that the sampled quote is actually in a section describing egoistic suicide. However, isolated individualism and normlessness both derive from the same main source—a lack of social solidarity precipitated by an inability to integrate with the larger collective.

off packages can produce deep affiliations with one's labor (to the point that some people travel around the world for events like the Warriors—doing for free what they would otherwise be paid for), then assigning purpose to one's life is not so agonizing or exasperating. Of course, there is nothing novel about this claim. It is a well-known fact that most people (regardless of their circumstances) find meaning in their lives. The mystery, therefore, is not that we find meaning, but *why* we do and *how* we do.

One of Marx and Weber's lasting legacies is a set of theoretical propositions insisting that life in the *Gesellschaft* (or, more specific in Marx's case, a society organized by the principle of private property) should be anything but fulfilling. Intellectuals on both sides of the Seine (metaphorically, as well as literally) have grappled with this matter. At the most basic level, the Left accuses the masses of false consciousness (for finding satisfaction in bourgeois decadence), and the Right belittles the individual for finding satisfaction in the mediocrity of the masses. Beyond the political implications of this debate is a question about where meaning resides (i.e., what actions should be seen as authentic and what should constitute a person's identity). Such matters *far* exceed what can be accomplished in this dissertation. I do, however, propose to make a small contribution to this much larger question. Specifically, analyzing the bike messengers' subculture allows us to see how a low wage service job—an occupation far more analogous to fry cooking, janitorial work, and data-entry than the classic professions—can generate authentic action and a strong sense of identity. In explaining why and how this is possible, a previously divergent set of social theories must be synthesized, and in this synthesis I hope to sharpen the

sociological tools for which researchers can dissect the old, but pervasive, problem of meaning.

In other words, in looking at why and how there is a lure in delivering packages, sociologists (and those willing to think sociologically) gain greater insight into the human condition. The theoretical contribution I am prepared to make is a cultural analysis that combines emotions and space in the construction of meaning. As I will briefly detail below, and then elaborate in much greater detail as the dissertation continues, the answer to *why* there is a lure in delivering packages comes from emotions generated in practice, and *how* this is achieved comes from locating these practices in material space.

### *Emotions and Space*

What distinguishes messengering from most service jobs is the incorporation of play into the workday. For Aronowitz (1973), play is “the one human activity within capitalist society that is noninstrumental—that is produced for its own sake” (61). Play is the starting point for unraveling the puzzle of the messenger subculture. To address play is to bring emotions into the analysis. By definition, play is an activity entered into only for the intrinsic rewards of participation (see Caillois 1958 [1961]). While people can give discursive accounts of the games they play, play itself has no purpose beyond the emotional satisfaction it gives the individual. As we will see in chapter five, it is the emotional involvement required in making deliveries that

forms the foundations for the subculture. In a word, unlike most paid labor, urban cycling can be fun.

Durkheim was the first sociologist to appreciate the relevance of emotions (and the significance of his appreciation is often overlooked—especially outside the study of religion). As a point of comparison, both Weber and Durkheim view religion as a fundamental part of life. Weber (1904-1905 [1958], 1913, 1915, 1919 [1946]), however, is concerned solely with religious doctrines. He assumes modern life is meaningless because the word of God is brought into question by scientific knowledge. His point alters Marx's critique—it is not economic exploitation, but (bureaucratically organized) scientific rationality that melts solids into air. What causes this melting is the logical discrepancies between the values professed in the scriptures and what is required by capitalism; there is a cognitive divide between the ideals of the apostles, for example, and the ideals of bureaucracy.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, for Durkheim (1912 [1995]), religion is not a system of ideas; cognitive logic is ancillary to its function. Instead of beliefs, religion is a series of social celebrations that “make us act and help us live” (419; also see Bellah 2005). In Durkheim's theory, society is not held together by religious propositions, but by religious rituals<sup>4</sup>—events that generate collective effervescence.

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<sup>3</sup> As Weber (1915 [1946]) writes, “And, in the midst of a culture that is rationally organized for a vocational workaday life, there is hardly any room for the cultivation of acosmic brotherliness [...]. Under the technical and social conditions of rational culture, an imitation of the life of Buddha, Jesus, or Francis seems condemned to failure for purely external reasons” (357).

<sup>4</sup> As a point of contrast, one can think about Berger's (1967) Weberian explanation of

The emotional charge of collective effervescence is part of what Allan (1998) calls affect-meaning—the *felt* reality of culture. Affect-meaning is generated through action and is non-cognitive. That is, it has a corporeal quality distinct and separate from the rationalized logic of discourse. It is the cognitive dimensions of existence (i.e., sense-meaning) that receive the most attention in sociology. Our discipline is attuned to asking people what they think, and wary of efforts to try and grasp how they feel. This point will be more fully developed in chapter four. For now, the essential point is simply that “social structure is not a set of meanings people carry in their heads” (Collins 1981: 995). Instead, it is emotive—knowledge we carry in our bodies and feel through our hearts. As such, affect-meaning (what Durkheim considers the foundation of all societies) is *lived* through the body and has a realness “that is not doubted by the person” (Denzin 1984: 93). The importance of this realness for the creation and perpetuation of the messenger subculture will be addressed in chapter six. There we will see that the play of courier work is sanctified in the ritual of messenger races.

Because emotions are lived through the body, the generation of affect-meaning always happens in a *physical* place. Which is to say, culture is emplaced (Gieryn 2000). Such a point is beyond obvious, but as will be explained in chapter four, the

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religion. “Every human society is, in the last resort, men banded together in the face of death. The power of religion, depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it” (51). Against this, a Durkheimian perspective (e.g., see Bellah 1970a) asserts that it is not the banners themselves that matter, but an individual’s emotional attachment to them (which is always a product of the effervescent social milieu).

implications of this are systematically ignored in sociological analysis. Attempting to work through the ethnographic significance of place, Richardson (1980) writes, “The answer to the question of how [individuals are enculturated into a given society...] *lies somewhere, I am convinced, in the cultural landscape*—more precisely, in the ways in which people use material settings to present themselves to each other and thereby recast anew their reality” (222). In terms of this dissertation, explaining the lure of delivering packages involves more than affect-meaning (i.e., acknowledging the role emotional experience plays in authentic action and identity formation). It equally involves asserting the sociological significance of space (see Pred 1990a; Soja 1985).

As should already be apparent, messengering is a strictly urban phenomenon. The city, however, is not simply a stage in which social action occurs. Instead, the city must be brought *into* the analysis—it is “an agentic player in the game” (Gieryn 2000: 466). As Gregory and Urry (1985) note, “[S]patial structure is now seen not merely as an arena in which social life unfolds, but rather as a medium through which social relations are produced and reproduced” (3; also see Pred 1986). As we will see in chapter seven, in making their deliveries, messengers manipulate the space of the city—the play of work and the effervescence of rituals only happen through a unique use of space. It is this appropriation of the urban environment (see Lefebvre 1976 [1991]) that generates the lived emotions of messenger practice. I call these place-based and corporeally-felt activities the *affective appropriation of space*.

*Rethinking Cultural Analysis*

The point of this dissertation—the sociological puzzle I want to solve—is why messengers find meaning in their (seemingly) menial occupation. Which is to say, why have they constructed and maintained such a vibrant subculture that (to a large degree) emulates their work? First, it must be mentioned that, subculture is a contested term (Dowd and Dowd 2003), but it is not my interest (at any point in this dissertation) to become embroiled in the many debates surrounding subcultural studies (see Williams 2007). Following conventional usage, bike messengers in this study are part of a subculture because their practices, symbols, and values mark them as distinct and separate from other members of American society.<sup>5</sup> The real issue, therefore, is not debates in subcultures, but in how the inclusion of affective spatial appropriation improves cultural analysis. How does it explain the lure of delivering packages? How does it help untangle classic (and pervasive) theoretical problems surrounding meaning? To be succinct, I will assert that there is no messenger subculture beyond the affective appropriation of space, and that messenger identity (i.e., the meanings that couriers ascribe to the world) are inseparable from an analysis of emotions and the physical environment.

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<sup>5</sup> To follow Williams and Copes (2005), “We see subcultures as culturally bounded (but not closed) networks of people who come to share the meaning of specific ideas, material objects, and practices through interaction. Over time, members’ interactions develop into a discourse that structures the generation, activation, and diffusion of these ideas, objects, and practices” (70). To this I would only add that subcultures present themselves as somehow distinct from the larger cultural whole. Alternatively, one can discuss networks with less distinction as “social worlds” (Strauss 1978).

Chapter eight provides what I call a practiced-based semiotic analysis of messenger style. Courier style, of course, is “pregnant with significance” (Hebdige 1979: 18). It is intimately tied to how messengers view themselves. The primary argument of this dissertation is that there is an astounding homology between the affective spatial practices of bike couriers and their style. That is, the objects of cultural analysis—practices, symbols, and values—are integrated and constituted through emotions and space. In other words, I am claiming that in order to solve the theoretical puzzle of the messenger subculture (i.e., why it exists and why messengers so strongly identify with it), emotion and space must be given explanatory priority. Overtly cognitive and aspatial sociological theories fail to grasp the courier’s world, and misrepresent the significance of why messengers love their jobs.

Throughout the dissertation, we will see why messengers love their job. There is a larger political question to be addressed in explaining their affection, however. The conclusion will detail this matter more completely, but at the outset of this dissertation, I would like to briefly explain what I mean. To argue that lived emotions are an important part of cultural analysis is not terribly controversial. However, with the second step—the inclusion of space—new (grander) issues come into focus. Messengers do not merely generate emotions as they use space; they generate emotional ties as they *manipulate* space (and the norms that govern its use). This is why I focus on the affective *appropriation* of space and not simply the affective *use* of space. Every individual, of course, uses spaces in every moment of their existence. Because the material world has a taken for granted quality to it, Lefebvre (1976

[1991]) contends that spatial structures reify social structures. In other words, the built environment makes the ordering of things appear as the nature of things (Bourdieu 1970 [1990]). But, this process is never completely totalizing. Lefebvre contends that taken-for-granted conceptions of space can be appropriated in unintended ways. This is what de Certeau (1984) calls tactics—“the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong” (xvii). Both believe that it is these (small) everyday manipulations of the existing order that liberate individuals from the crushing conformity of rationalized societies.

As will be made clear in chapters five and seven, messengers work in an occupation that requires tactics. To understand the lure of delivering packages, then, is to rethink the conditions of human liberation (and the role of cultural practices within it). The liberty discussed here is not liberation from capital, or gender and racial oppression. It is liberation from an overly reified existence. That is, liberation from choices that seem predetermined—from the false transparency of a pre-ordered world—from alienation. Looking at how messengers appropriate the urban environment highlights the joys and thrills that can be achieved in small tactics that alter (even if only momentarily) the dominant order. This is why Lefebvre (1968 [1971]) speaks so highly of the carnivalesque festival (see Bakhtin 1941 [1968]).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “[U]ntil the advent of competitive capitalism and the expansion of the world trade the quotidian as such did not exist [...]. In the heart of poverty and (direct) oppression there was *style*; in former times labours of skill were produced, whereas today we have (commercialized) products and exploitation has replaced violent oppression. Style gave significance to the slightest object, to actions and activities, to gestures; it was concrete significance, not abstraction taken piecemeal from a system of symbols. [...]

Of course, in many ways, this sort of liberty is exceedingly small. It offers no respite from economic demands and social inequality. And, again, this matter will be more thoroughly addressed in the conclusion. But, and this is the essential point, by analyzing the messenger lifestyle through emotions and space (not simply through aspatial questions of cognition), we not only come to understand why the subculture is significant to its members, we see glimpses of what is required for all of us if we want to step outside Weber's iron cage.

### *Summation*

To summarize, bike messengers represent a theoretical puzzle—the empirical reality is not adequately explained by existing cultural analyses. We live in an age of waning occupational identities and the ever-menacing threat of senselessness. Messengers, however, embrace their occupation in a way nearly impossible to conceive for other low-level service jobs. Through the course of this dissertation, I will demonstrate that the reason for this untoward identification is in how messengering allows for (in deed, requires) the affective appropriation of space. In order to demonstrate the connection between emotions, space, and subcultural identity, I will provide a practiced-based semiotics of messenger style. With this analysis, it

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That is why we must contrast style and culture, to show upon the latter's fragmentary character, its lack of unity, and why we are justified in formulating a revolutionary plan to recreate a style, resurrect the Festival and gather culture's scattered fragments for a transition of everyday life" (Lefebvre 1968 [1971]: 38).

will be clear that significance of style is inseparable from the emplaced emotions of courier practice.

My dissertation, therefore, is about rethinking cultural analysis by asserting the importance of emotions and space in sociological theory—that meaning and identity have affective and spatial dimensions. In making my primary argument, however, there is a grander issue lurking beneath the surface—a question of liberty. By combining emotions and space in cultural analysis, the condition of liberty is framed in a drastically different light from typical liberal (or conservative) conceptions. The inequalities of class, gender, and race (in addition to age, physical disability, religion, sexual orientation, etc.), of course, still provide the fundamental impediment to human freedom. At the same time, fighting for equal access to the material and social benefits offered by society does not speak to meanings (or meaninglessness) of those lifestyles. The lure of delivering packages (and the subculture that surrounds it) is not simply an example of Burawoy's (1979) manufactured consent. Instead, it is example of how everyday creativity—de Certeau's tactics—is an essential component of any sort of meaningful revolution (again, this matter will be more thoroughly discussed in the conclusion).

### **A Note on Data and Methods**

A complete discussion of my methodology can be found in appendix A. Before delving into the meat of the dissertation, though, a few words about my research are necessary. The data for this dissertation was gathered through over three

years of participant observation (spread over the course of five years). From June 2002 to June 2003, I worked as a bike messenger in New York City. From August 2006 through May 2007, I worked as a bike messenger in Seattle. In between these two extended periods of fieldwork, I regularly participated in messenger events and sporadically worked as a bike courier in San Diego. Additionally, I have traveled to Atlanta, Chicago, Milwaukee, San Francisco, and Washington, DC to discuss messenger work and life with local couriers. In the summer of 2007, I also revisited New York to gather new data from many of my key informants.

In New York, I worked for two companies. The first company, Sprint Courier,<sup>7</sup> is one of New York's largest, employing over 100 bikers in addition to a fleet of trucks and walkers. I worked at Sprint for seven months. The second company, Flying High Courier, is one of New York's smallest, employing two bikers. I worked at Flying High for five months. In Seattle, I worked for Choice Legal Services (CLS). CLS not only delivers packages, but provides a full array of legal services: process service, research, and investigation. With over ten riders, CLS is large by Seattle's standards. Whereas for Sprint and Flying High I was dispatched to pick up any number of odd things (e.g., a shopping bag filled with family portraits for Kathleen Turner or a blood sample for the Red Cross), with a few minor exceptions, CLS's couriers only deliver legal documents to law firms and courthouses. In San Diego, I worked for High Five Courier (an all-purpose bike messenger company).

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<sup>7</sup> I use pseudonyms when discussing the companies I worked for.

High Five is a small company with no more than three riders on the road at any one time.

In all places, working as a messenger (or being able to introduce myself as a former messenger) gave me entry into the social world. Far more important than work itself, is the non-work time I spent with messengers. It is during social gatherings and other off-work events that messengers discuss, contest, and represent their subculture. Therefore, I hung out with messengers after work in parks and bars, I went to messenger parties, I participated in races, and I went on group rides with other messengers. In other words, I attempted to integrate myself within each messenger community.

I rely primarily on informal discussions and questions asked *in the moment* of activity (or soon after). This is not only a less obtrusive form of data collection, but respondents are less likely to distort their actions or self-consciously manage their image when not awkwardly forced into an interview situation (see Mitchell 2002; Nelson 1969; Wacquant 2004). In nearly every social situation, couriers freely discussed various aspects of messenger life. As such, engaging couriers about their social world was remarkably easy and unobtrusive. I jotted down responses in private and compiled them in my field notes during the evening. Using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) approach to grounded theory, I analyzed and coded my field notes and interviews for recurring themes and trends. To protect the identity of my respondents, I use pseudonyms.

Not only have I asked couriers to describe what being a messenger is like, I have also experienced it myself. This emic approach not only gives me firsthand knowledge (see Rosaldo 1989a), but also allowed me to converse with messengers as an insider. As Mitchell (2002) claims, surveys and interviews—removed from the nuances of the lifeworld and devoid of personal relationships—result in caricatures of social groups (also see Wacquant 2004). Accepted as an insider, I conducted formal interviews with 31 current and former messengers in Seattle and San Diego. These interviews confirm (in elongated form) what my informal conversations with messengers already revealed.

In addition to active participation, informal discussions, and formal interviews, I supplement my ethnographic work with historical and contemporary documentation. In the course of my research, I read as much of the literature produced by the bike messenger subculture as I could find. The most notable of this literature are the New York Bike Messenger Association's ten issues of *Urban Death Maze*, a desktop-published magazine produced from 1998 to 2001. Likewise, the Courier Association of Seattle's short lived publication *CAOS* (2000-2001) and *Kickstand*, an intermittently self-published Seattle courier magazine, gave me a valuable historical perspective. Equally important are Travis Culley's (2002) and Rebecca "Lambchop" Reilly's (2000) memoirs about their lives as messengers. I also used books, articles, and documentaries produced by outsiders for mainstream audiences. *The New York Times*, for example, provides a wealth of historical data on how the public has viewed the occupation. Likewise, *Pedal* (Sutherland 2006) and *Red Light Go* (Barraud *et al.*

2002) are two excellent documentaries on the occupation and the subculture. However, it should be made clear that my data comes, first and foremost, from participant observation; quotations from other sources are used only to reinforce my findings.

### **Overview of Dissertation**

Having already provided a brief summation of my main theoretical orientations, the following chapters jump right into a description of the bike messenger world. Chapter two describes the occupation and chapter three describes the subculture. In chapter four I give the literature review. In this chapter, I explain my model for the theoretical synthesis of emotions and space based on the paradigm of structuration theory. The following four chapters comprise the analytical sections of the dissertation. Chapter five describes the emotional involvement made possible by messengering's creative potential. Chapter six looks at bike messenger races as collective effervescence-generating rituals. Chapter seven moves the analysis from the emotional to the spatial. Here, I connect the affective practices described in the previous two chapters directly to spatial theory. Chapter eight synthesizes both the emotional and spatial analyses into a practiced-based semiotics of messenger style. In the final chapter, I not only summarize my main arguments, but discuss, at some length, the grander implications of this research for the understanding of liberty (an issue directly related to the unending debates surrounding structure, agency, and meaning). Appendix A details my methodology. Appendix B addresses gender issues

in the messenger world. For those interested in more information on the messengers described in this study, Appendix C gives some brief biographical information on several of my key informants.

## CHAPTER 2: THE JOB

### **The Historical Context of Bike Messengers**

#### *Telegraph Bicycle Boys and the Post-Industrial Bike Courier*

Bike messengers provide on-demand delivery. During normal business hours (usually eight in the morning to six at night), messengers will deliver any item (barring obvious limits to physical size) anywhere within the downtown core of a city and its surrounding area in short spans of time. Many companies offer early-morning and late-night service and many even provide longer distance delivery. Some Seattle messengers, for example, make regular runs to Bellevue, Washington (over 10 miles from downtown Seattle). Size and weight are also negotiable. While not that common, some companies use cargo bikes that allow them to deliver hundreds of pounds in one trip. Even without a cargo bike, a messenger can fit at least one banker's box (i.e., a standard sized filing box) in her bag and balance one to two more on her handlebars.<sup>8</sup> Most bike messenger companies have delivery options ranging from same day service to deliveries completed in 15 minutes. It is this "on-demand" aspect of messengering that distinguishes it from the services offered by the US Postal Service, DHL, FedEx and UPS (all of whom follow set schedules and routes). FedEx, for example, can deliver something to Angola by tomorrow, but only a bike messenger can get something across town by lunchtime.

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<sup>8</sup> The point here is simply that bike messengers can be used to haul a substantial array of items (even items that may, at first glance, appear to be too big or going too far for a cyclist to handle). At the same time, stacking boxes on one's handlebars is not the safest practice, but as we will see below, much of the job defies common notions of safety.

Since their invention, bicycles have been used to make deliveries (see Perry 1995). At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western Union (along with American District Telegraph and Postal Telegraph) had “bicycle boys” working in every major US city (Downey 2002). While the automobile and urban sprawl drastically reduced the comparative efficiency of bicycle delivery, Western Union continued using bikes well into the mid-1900s. In 1962, for example, it was Western Union bicyclists mediating the missile crisis by delivering encoded messages from the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC to the White House (Oberdorfer 1989). Really, pedal-powered couriers never entirely disappeared from the occupational landscape, but for decades, the job appeared to be nearly extinct. But, then, at the end of the 20th century there was a major resurgence. New York, for example, went from only a handful of bike couriers working for the film industry in the 1970s to several thousand by the mid-1980s (McKillop 1985; Reilly 2000; Smith 1986).

The resurrection of bicycle delivery can only be understood within the context of global economic restructuring. As Downey (2002) shows, bicycle boys were a by-product of America’s first wave of industrial urbanism. These bikers provided the first and last steps in a nationwide system of communication by physically picking up and delivering telegrams from their original and final destinations. The telegrams themselves were transmitted across the country through wires, but the transmission and reception points were telegraph stations. It was the bicycle boys, therefore, who connected the telegraph with its users. In addition to these inter-city telegraphs, the boys also relayed intra-city messages as well. Early messengers, therefore, were part

of a complex flow of information. Even as the telephone became more common, bicycle boys served as errand runners and temporary workers for the telegraph companies' clients. By the early 1940s, however, telephones and cars made the bicycle boys' occupation largely redundant.

Today's bike messengers are not industrial, but post-industrial. That is, the bike messenger revival comes as a by-product of globalized international finance. Like their predecessors, they provide a crucial link between information nodes—a link that cannot currently be connected electronically (see below). The biggest difference between the past century's bicycle boy and the contemporary bike messenger revolves around labor relations (i.e., the relationship between riders and employers as well as riders and clients). After describing the new economic niche messengers fit into (and the technological threats to it), I will briefly contrast current and former labor relationships.

### *Keeping the Global City Rolling*

Since the 1980s, finance has superseded manufacturing as the backbone of the world economy (see Sassen 1991). Capital is now deterritorialized; it is highly mobile—shifting around the world. As such, the Fordist model of accumulation is superseded by a less stable, fluctuating model of flexible accumulation (Harvey 1990).<sup>9</sup> In a word, this reorganization of the economy is what is meant by the term

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<sup>9</sup> Harvey contrasts Fordism—mass production at the hands of a largely unionized blue collar work force (located in Europe and the United States)—with the contemporary

globalization. However, the deterritorialization of capital also comes with new forms of urban recentralization (Soja 1987). For Friedmann (1986), the management of the global economy occurs inside select cities. These alpha-cities function as the hubs for transnational corporate headquarters. “Global cities” are, thus, the control nodes of the worldwide economic system. Sassen (1991), in particular, emphasizes that the process of globalization requires the agglomeration of *services* utilized by international financial firms. According to Sassen, “producer services”—the companies ancillary to transnational trade (everything from financial and legal management to storage and cleaning)—cluster within central business districts because they must stay connected. Despite astronomically high rents, proximity improves communication within firms and facilitates contact between firms (see Scott *et al.* 2001). Advances in global telecommunication, therefore, have not produced a “death to distance” (see Cairncross 1997), but (in certain key areas) have actually enhanced the significance of place (Graham 1997).

The advertising industry provides an excellent example of why urban centralization still exists, and why post-industrial production still requires bike messengers. Advertising agencies, photographers, graphic designers, post-production companies, magazine publishers, clothing designers, fabric manufacturers, and printers are all part of a vast network (which spirals out into other networks as well).

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shifting of manufacturing sites based on a continual search for decreased production costs. Echoing Jameson (1984), Harvey contends that the flexible accumulation of global production intensifies and institutionalizes the problem of meaning and identity first identified with the shift to the *Gesellschaft*. That is, culture has changed to mirror the realities of a new, more schizophrenic, mode of production.

A photographer requires a dress for a photo shoot. The clothing designer requires fabric from a manufacturer. Obviously, these things cannot be emailed. Once developed (or in the case of digital photography, once the image has been toned), the photograph is sent on to the graphic designer. The designer, advertising agency, and printer are equally connected. Currently, there is no universal color calibration for computer monitors and printers. So, photographs and other color-sensitive items cannot be sent electronically. People within the network must be given a hard-copy proof in order to verify the exact colors being reproduced (and advertisers and their clients can be very specific about the *exact* color being reproduced). Within the network (and, in places like New York, there are a countless number of these networks), proofs (in various stages of development) are constantly circulating from firm to firm. And, it is the bike messenger making the connections.<sup>10</sup> As such, bicycle delivery—“the fastest known way through the morass of Manhattan traffic” (Geist 1983: B1)—is an essential (if not somewhat paradoxical) aspect of the Information Age.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The bulk of Flying High’s deliveries came from just one of these networks—between a graphic design firm, the three ad agencies they primarily worked with, a post-production company (i.e., a firm who prepares images for the actual process of printing and also makes touch-ups and alterations to images—like removing wrinkles from a model’s face or lightening shadows in a photograph), and a printing company. Five days a week, nine hours a day, information (which cannot be emailed or faxed) flowed between these firms via bike messengers).

<sup>11</sup> Legal firms comprise another major network messengers service (although it is a bit simpler: opposing counsels and courthouses). Like the advertising industry, legal work requires a continual flow of documents circulating throughout the city. In this case though, it is the need for personal signatures on documents and the desire to have physical proof of delivery hampering its transition to full digitalization.

In contrasting messengering now with messengering in the past, what needs to be stressed is that the occupation is similar but different. Telegraph companies used bicycles because it was the most efficient option. Companies today use messengers because it is the most efficient option. At the same time, technology has changed and the economy has shifted. In both cases, messengers are delivering what cannot be sent via electrical currents, but contemporary bike messengers are not delivering some sort of postmodern letters via bicycle (and thus making them futuristic telegraph messengers). They are using old technologies to aid an entirely new process—the workings of the global city. This is Sassen’s main point about globalization; it is not only high-tech button pushers driving the new economy. Post-industrial production equally requires low-tech, unskilled, and informal labor, not only in peripheral nations (i.e., in the maquiladoras and export processing zones), but in the very urban centers of wealth accumulation (i.e., prosperous cities in prosperous nations).

*A Python Squeezing its Prey*

Just as technological changes cut into the number of telegraph messengers (and eventually replaced them), improvements in telecommunications (most specifically, the wide spread use of fax machines and of the internet), coupled with the financial contractions of the late 1980s, late 1990s, and late 2000s have (again and again) reduced the need for bike deliveries (Hendershot 2007; Ho 2008; Tommasson 1991).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> While the example of the advertising industry show why bike couriers are still useful, it should be apparent that much of what messengers were delivering in the

For example, Breakaway Courier Systems, one of New York's largest messenger companies, claims that from 2001 to 2006 they cut over 60 percent of their riders (Green 2006). Regardless, the messenger industry continues to survive into the new millennium. Today, it is estimated that over 1000 bicycle messengers are still working in New York City. There are hundreds of messengers working in Chicago, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. Even after the dot-com fallout in the late 1990s, there are over 60 messengers working in Seattle's small downtown core. However, this number was much larger in years past. Boston and Philadelphia have comparable numbers to Seattle. Smaller cities (and cities with proportionally small central business districts) like Atlanta, Milwaukee and San Diego maintain messenger populations under twenty.<sup>13</sup>

As the example from the advertising industry shows, post-industrial production is not all virtual; it still requires physical materials. Beyond what I have already described, architectural blueprints, court filings and other legal documents, film, medicine, and model portfolios cannot currently be digitized. Or, even if they can be (e.g., court filings), many clients still prefer to send hard-copies.<sup>14</sup> In the not too

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early 1980s can now be digitized. Today, messengers are, more or less, delivering the table scraps remaining from a grand conversion to virtual data.

<sup>13</sup> There are no statistics specifically on bike messengers; only on the delivery industry more generally. Further, bike messenger companies are often secretive about their information. As such, there are no hard numbers on how many messengers are actually working in any city. For places such as Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC, where there are a large number of couriers (many working on a sporadic basis), it is nearly impossible to know exact numbers. The numbers I rely on come from estimates made by journalists, local couriers, and/or my own data.

<sup>14</sup> For legal work, couriers are given duplicate copies of what they are delivering.

distant future, however, much of this will change. As the president of Breakaway states, “There is a slow erosion in the business because of the growth of digital documents... It's like a python squeezing its prey” (Robert, quoted in Green 2006). Likewise, the manager of a Seattle legal messenger firm bluntly informed me in 2006, “Five years from now what we do will be gone.” This manager is currently trying to find new services for bicycle delivery. Among the possibilities is shifting away from the legal industry to the delivery of unalterably tangible consumer goods (e.g., cigarettes, clothes, food, or medicine).<sup>15</sup>

#### *And You Don't Wear a Tie Either*

In solving the puzzle of the messenger subculture (i.e., the lure of delivering packages), much of this dissertation is related to the issue of labor relations (at least indirectly). For now, in explaining how post-industrial messengers differ from the bicycle boys of old, a few simple points should be brought to light. First, in its heyday, telegraph messengers were literally boys. Hiring young workers allowed companies to severely suppress wages (Downey 2002). Changes in child labor laws prohibit messenger companies from employing youths today. Laws aside, social norms have also changed. Today, paid labor (of almost any sort) is viewed as

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These copies (called conform copies) are stamped on delivery, thereby providing proof that the court or opposing counsel received the documents.

<sup>15</sup> Kozmo, famously, attempted to capture this market (see Chin 2001). Kozmo went from a tiny startup to multi-million dollar company with operations in 11 cities to financial ruin in the span of a few short years. Many think, however, with proper management, the Kozmo model will work.

inappropriate for young children, and crisscrossing the city, darting in and out of traffic, sounds particularly unfit for the young. Second, and more importantly for this dissertation, Western Union (along with American District Telegraph and Postal Telegraph) was obsessed with control. As Downey details, Western Union believed its riders required supervision and surveillance. This was not only a matter of profits, but also moral fortitude. Further, Western Union considered uniformed and cordial riders integral to their business strategy.<sup>16</sup>

Contemporary messenger companies have little interest in their riders' appearance or demeanor. Small messenger companies purposely snub efforts at making rules (save making deliveries on time and getting a signature to verify it). Larger companies like Sprint and CLS do provide their new employees with handbooks filled with rules, but it is understood that these formal regulations will be routinely disregarded. My first day at Sprint, for example, I was told that to work for the company I needed a helmet. The company sold helmets (along with other messenger supplies, at a discount). The manager asked me if I wanted to buy a helmet. I told him no, and he made no effort to verify if I had brought my own (I had not). Further, after I declined to buy a helmet, he informed me, "You have to wear a helmet, but it's not like we're going to be out on the streets checking to see if you're wearing one." That was the one and only time rules were ever brought up with me

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<sup>16</sup> With the increasing presence of the telephone, telegraph companies worked to diversify the service that they offered (i.e., delivering more than telegrams). They also attempted to emphasize the human touch of sending and receiving messages via a dedicated individual (who should be dressed in military style garb to inspire confidence).

(aside from the one cardinal rule: deliver packages on time).<sup>17</sup> There are some messenger companies that require their riders to wear company-issued shirts or use company-issued bags. These practices, however, are both rare and roundly criticized by messengers; they are anathema to what attracts so many to the occupation (i.e., a lack of workplace control).

Messenger companies and their clients have come to expect that the men and women who deliver packages by bicycle will have an edgy (if not grubby or menacing) appearance.<sup>18</sup> And, some clients like it, with many smaller companies playing up their “alternative” image. Charles, the owner of Flying High, for instance, constantly swore over the radio because he felt that displaying a crass demeanor—a demeanor that was, by all means, authentic—endeared his clients to him.<sup>19</sup> Even clients who do not like it accept the iconoclasm of messenger style as a matter of fact. The point here is that the contemporary bike courier is thoroughly distinguishable from the bicycle boy. While the latter was part of industrial business (complete with

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<sup>17</sup> While many of CLS’s regulations were disregarded, the company made a much more concerted effort to see them enforced. For example, helmet wearing was mandatory and the policy was followed uniformly. CLS, however, is the exception that proves the rule. Most riders used CLS as an entry point for the occupation and “graduated” to companies that did not micro-manage their riders as soon as possible. In cities like Chicago and New York, one or two of the largest companies also have tighter regulations, but, just as with CLS, these companies stand out as deviations from the norm (by attempting to create and regulate norms).

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to contrast the accepted appearance of the bike messenger with the fully uniformed garb of almost all other types of delivery personnel.

<sup>19</sup> One of Charles’ favorite tactics was a pornographic alteration of the phonetic alphabet. When confirming delivery signatures, even when he heard the receiver’s name correctly, he would ask for a verification of the spelling: “Was that Chuck with a C? C as in cunt.”

Fordist methods of labor relations), the former is post-industrial (not only in economic function, but also in a shift away from moralizing control to an embracing of otherness). That is, not only do contemporary messengers deliver different things (with different purposes) from the bicycle boys, they are allowed to deliver them differently. The notion of standardizing and regulating the worker seems irrelevant (if not contradictory) to the business at hand.

### **Working as a Messenger**

#### *The Basic Structure of the Occupation*

Bike couriers work for messenger companies. Firms requiring deliveries contact messenger companies. Most firms have accounts with specific companies. Beyond simplifying bookkeeping, having specific accounts allows firms to negotiate individual deals with their delivery companies, reducing the actual amount they pay for services. In terms of services, messenger companies offer several time options: same day, two hour, one hour, half hour, and 15 minutes. The cost of each delivery is based on the client's requested time frame and the distance covered. Messenger companies divide the city into zones, and every zone a rider must enter in making their run increases the charge. Companies also charge extra for large or heavy items. Alternatively, firms that consistently send out a high volume of jobs may choose to

hire their own in-house riders. This bypasses the need for the messenger company altogether, but it is a rare situation.<sup>20</sup>

The biggest variation in the occupation's structure is whether the messenger company pays a piece-rate or an hourly wage and whether they consider their riders independent contractors or employees. A piece-rate versus an hourly wage (in theory, at least) drastically alters an employees' relationship to her labor. A commission rider is only paid when actually making a delivery. An hourly rider is paid regardless. From the company's perspective, a piece-rate provides a strong incentive for the rider to perform, and absolves them of financial responsibility for riders when they are not generating profit. Messengers tend to look at the issue in terms of compensation. The piece-rate system compensates riders for harder deliveries; an hourly wage does not. However, as we will see in chapter five, messenger behavior on the job (i.e., how *motivated* they are to perform their labor) extends far beyond monetary compensation for their efforts.

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<sup>20</sup> Less rare, is a messenger company hiring out riders as temporary workers. Messengers are hired out for an hourly wage, and often their assignments have nothing to do with bikes or packages. Messengers in Washington, DC, for example, are dispatched to stand in lines at government offices (and are paid by the hour for holding someone else's place in line). New Yorkers utilize the hourly option at Sprint for any number of random tasks (e.g., having a messenger wait in an apartment, while the resident is at work, to buzz a cable company employee into the building). It is this sort of labor that harkens most directly back to the telegraph messenger days (as Western Union sought new ways to use their boys after the telephone came into prominence). However, temporary work (and even more so for temporary work that does not involve bicycle delivery) makes up only a tiny fraction of the work post-industrial messengers perform.

Companies consider their hourly riders employees (unless, like many, they work off the books). Commission riders are often listed as independent contractors. The legality of such a listing is certainly debatable (Pfeiffer 2007). Riders do not generally have enough control over the terms of their labor to qualify for such a designation. Government agencies (e.g., the IRS and Social Security Administration) have, at various times, vigorously policed the industry, levying substantial fines for improperly listing riders as independent contractors (also see Tommasson 1991).<sup>21</sup> Messengers uninterested in legality sometimes view independent contractor status (or the non-status of working under the table) as a method of tax-free income. For those not wanting or willing to dodge taxation, however, filing as an independent contractor is a sizable economic burden. To explain, as independent contractors, riders are legally subject to self-employment tax. Alternatively, as employees, their company is responsible for a portion of these tax liabilities (which is why companies are eager to consider their riders contractors).

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<sup>21</sup> According to the IRS, a payer for the services of an independent contractor can only control or direct the result of work performed, not the method or means of its accomplishment. Clearly, bike couriers could fall into this category, which is why so many messengers companies do list their riders as such (or have done so in the past). However, independent contractors, by the IRS definition, have absolute impunity in turning down work they do not want, something most companies are unlikely to grant. As such, many riders (at least by auditors' assessments), fall under the criteria of employees.

*Payments and Benefits*

In New York, nearly all messengers are paid on commission. These messengers make between 40 and 60 percent of the price paid for a job. Most messengers average between three to five dollars per delivery, but on occasion a single package can be worth several times more than that (a late-night, oversize, double rush, for instance). A New York messenger averages 16 to 25 deliveries a day, but it is not uncommon for some messengers to complete fewer than 20 runs while others can do more than 40. In 2002, one hundred dollars a day was considered a respectable day's wage in New York, but it is worth noting that, in the early 1980s, some messengers also had this income. Today, while some messengers (some of the time) can make more than this, many riders are making far less. Since the golden age of the 1980s, a rider's real wages have been cut in half (Raab 1994)—if not more deeply (i.e., riders today are making about the same dollar amount as they were 20 years ago). In Seattle, many of the messenger companies pay hourly. The pay is between \$9.50 an hour and \$15 an hour. Commission riders make a comparable wage to New York, and make a similar number of deliveries. In San Diego, all messengers (aside from Kenny, who runs his own company) are paid between \$7.50 and \$15 hourly.

Across the country, business is usually slower in the summer and better in the winter (a fact uniformly recognized, but not understood). In my year of work in New York, I had days when I made less than \$30 and others when I made over \$150. In the course of ten months in Seattle, I started at \$10.50 an hour and finished making \$10.90

an hour (from a quarterly raise system based on relative performance across employees). In San Diego, I was paid \$10 an hour.

In all places, messengers shoulder their payments for bicycles, bike repair, courier bags, and traffic violations. Some companies offer funds (or discounts) for bike parts and maintenance, but most do not. For workers not counted as employees (because they are independent contractors or work off the books), injuries incurred on the job are not covered by workers' compensation. For individuals performing such dangerous labor (see below) and making very little in return, this represents a *serious* financial threat. Even for messengers who are considered employees, health insurance (for injuries sustained off the job, as well as, general sickness) is a rarity.<sup>22</sup> Companies may also fire (or, in the case of commission riders, refuse to allocate jobs to) employees who have gotten hurt.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> CLS and Sprint both offer health insurance to employees who have been with the company for a year or more (a rarity in itself for these companies). Many qualifying riders, however, opt out of coverage because they cannot afford to pay their portion of the plan.

<sup>23</sup> Companies, of course, must assess whether they want to keep a potentially reckless individual on the payroll. However, this practice also serves as a warning to other riders that their injuries (when possible) should be kept secret—lest they get labeled as reckless. Upon getting a job at one larger New York company, Christie was given a list of accidents that responsible couriers *never* have. The list consisted of the most common injuries an urban cyclist *does* have (see Hurst 2004). She was then informed that since responsible couriers do not have these accidents, if they did happen to her, she would be fired.

### *Job Allocation*

Regardless of how one is paid and one's status as an employee or independent contractor, a messenger spends her day roaming the city. The company's other riders are also dispersed throughout the city. Messengers keep in contact with their company through various means. In the 1980s, messengers used pay phones to call their companies to receive new jobs. Today, most messengers use two-way radios or, more commonly, Nextel cellular phones with direct connect (i.e., a walkie-talkie feature). Some use regular cell phones or pagers with text messaging. Based on where they are located (at a given moment) and what other deliveries they are holding, jobs are allocated among the company's riders. This process is known as dispatching. Depending on the number of riders working for a company, there may be only one person answering calls from clients and dispatching jobs to a rider. At very small companies, like High Five, Kenny does all his own administrative work while also making deliveries himself. Alternatively, companies like Sprint have separate order takers and several dispatchers (each assigned a set number of riders who they manage).

Dispatchers are almost always former messengers themselves. This is because an intimate knowledge of the city and a messenger's ability to travel through it is essential to handling the workflow of the company (see chapter five). Most companies (included all those I have worked for) practice direct dispatch. This means that it is the dispatcher who monitors all incoming work and decides (unilaterally)

which riders will do what jobs.<sup>24</sup> Efficient dispatching in this manner requires a rather astounding set of mental operations. Good dispatchers are able to calculate where each of their riders is (or should be) at *any* moment. As Cindy said of dispatching, “It is like playing an adult video game. You have to clear everything off the board [i.e., the computer screen listing jobs not completed]. It is multitasking, but in a fun way.” Beyond the sheer chance of who happens to be near jobs when they come in, dispatchers also make decisions based on rider seniority and their general disposition to them (at commission companies, therefore, a good relationship with the dispatcher is essential to making decent money).

Once a job is allocated, the messenger must first pick up the item and then make the delivery. Ideally, a messenger does not only do one job at a time (“pinballing”). Instead, a messenger wants his bag to always have multiple jobs in it. Dispatchers attempt to assign new pick-ups near drops for the work riders are already holding. On an ideal day, a messenger’s route is a series of circles around the city—picking up, dropping, repeating (without pause). An absolutely essential part of the delivery process is getting proof of delivery (usually a signature on a delivery manifest). Because messenger work is so time-sensitive, riders (and their companies) must be able to verify that the recipient (who is usually not the company’s client) did receive the package on time. In fact, *proof* of delivery is actually more important than the delivery itself. If a receiving firm loses a package (a rather common occurrence in

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<sup>24</sup> Another, less common, method of dispatching is the free call system. In free call, jobs are announced to the riders over an open radio channel, and the messengers decide what work to take themselves.

large offices) and the messenger company cannot verify that the item was delivered, it might as well not have been delivered. Alternatively, if a rider can make a late package appear to have been delivered on time, most messenger companies are quite satisfied with the outcome.<sup>25</sup>

### *Selling Speed*

Going back to the distinction between those who know about bike messengers and those who do not, the job may sound quaint, but in reality it is intense. Bike messengers exist because of the speed they can offer. Clearly, they are not selling velocity—even the fastest professional cyclists in the world max out around 40 miles per hour (and such an effort can only be sustained for a few short seconds). Instead, a bike messenger’s speed comes by traveling through the city *on average* far quicker than a motorized vehicle. This is possible because, bicycles are smaller and lighter than cars, and can be parked almost anywhere (all that is necessary is a stationary object which the rider can lock the bike to). They are also more maneuverable, allowing riders to weave in and out of grid-locked traffic. Further, unlike mopeds and motorcycles, the bicycle has an ambiguous legal position. This allows bike riders to travel on sidewalks and go the wrong way down one-way streets. For these same

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<sup>25</sup> A retired messenger, for example, described some of his past exploits as a “problem solver” for his company. Mainly, this involved surreptitiously rolling back date stamps at law offices and courthouses to make deliveries performed days late appear on time. An office worker for another messenger company also extolled the values of a former problem solver that worked for them. Among other things, this individual had supposedly procured an electronic time-stamp from the local courthouse, allowing the company unencumbered manipulations of delivery verification.

reasons, cyclists can run also red lights by skillfully maneuvering between the (relatively small) spaces separating moving vehicles.

As I will explain in detail in chapters five and seven, a talented messenger has an absolute understanding of her speed, the speed of surrounding objects, and the time which it will take her bike to travel between two points (also see Stewart 2004). The best messengers can slip through seemingly solid walls of moving traffic seamlessly. Andy called this “skills with spatial capacity.” An example from my November 14th, 2002 field notes is telling. “I saw [Vinny] in traffic today. I was stopped on 23rd Street at Broadway. The traffic coming down Broadway looked impenetrable, but then [Vinny] just appears between two moving buses, weaving out of pedestrian traffic. He wasn’t going fast or anything. He just slipped through it.” As such, bicycles really are the fastest known way through the morass of downtown traffic.

Much of what messengers do to make their deliveries is technically prohibited and clearly dangerous (see below). Courier work, therefore, exists on the margins of the law. One messenger, nervous about having his picture taken for this project, sarcastically expressed his reservation, “I don’t know, something about having to break laws every minute of the day.” In describing his job, Bill explained, “[W]e’re pretty much just paid outlaws.” As Reilly (2000) notes, “By merely dispatching jobs of that nature [i.e., 15 minute deliveries], there is the implied order to the courier to break the law” (29). At the same time, legal enforcement is inconsistent and minimal at best. Aside from police officers specifically assigned to write traffic citations (and places like New York have officers designated for such tasks), most cops do not

consider cyclists a priority.<sup>26</sup> For instance, Christy calculated that she ran more than 10,000 red lights before receiving her first (and only) ticket.

The need to break traffic laws is compounded by the method of job allocation. First, some jobs require fast delivery. Working as a messenger, I was often given jobs that could not possibly be completed within the confines of the law (or even commonsense). Take, for example, an excerpt from my field notes from June 5th, 2003: “[My dispatcher] radioed me and said he had a ‘super rush.’ He told me I had less than 15 minutes to go to Broadway Video [at 54th Street and Broadway], and make it down to Deutsche [at 15th Street and Eighth Avenue]. I did it in 12. I did the actual distance in seven (the other five minutes was lost inside Broadway Video).” This is only a distance of two miles, but in the congestion of midtown traffic, an average speed of 17 miles per hour can only be maintained by running red lights and traveling the wrong way down one way streets. Other, more cavalier messengers could cover this distance even quicker.

Second, for commission riders, the faster they make a delivery the more deliveries they can make. Third, courier companies (even those that pay hourly) give preferential treatment to their fastest riders when dispatching jobs (to keep them from looking for employment with other companies). One of the first things new messengers are told by the manager at Sprint is, “Don’t tell me you are a ‘pro

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<sup>26</sup> Strong enforcement tends to come after a serious accident involving a messenger (or a cyclist assumed to be a messenger) and a pedestrian (see below, for the role the media plays in this process). Culley (2002), for example, details the volatile nature of Chicago law enforcement—periods of police indifference punctuated by citation sprees and even arrests for minimal infractions.

messenger' and you deserve the sweet runs. Don't tell anyone that." His admonition was clear; the only way to get the "sweet runs" is to demonstrate that you deserved them. Rookie messengers, therefore, must constantly prove their mettle in order to someday receive preferential treatment. Working at CLS, a dispatcher asked a group of us, "Who is feeling fast today?" Marco answered, "I'm always fast," and such eager bravado was not lost on the management. As the vice-president of another courier company remarked, "Speed is the name of the game. [... Messengers] make as much money as they dare. [...] We don't want kamikazes, but we do hire risk takers. There is a macho element involved" (Kenneth, quoted in Geist 1983: B1). We will see in chapter five, however, that neither money nor client demands are entirely adequate explanations for this macho element.

It is worth mentioning that, while both messengers and the public at large focus on the speed at which bike couriers travel through the city's streets, much of messenger work (at least half of it) is spent inside of buildings—riding in elevators, standing in lobbies, waiting at front desks, traipsing up stairs. As many messenger company managers are quick to point out (and as many young messengers, in particular, are quick to ignore), a rider's paycheck has more to do with her speed in buildings than outside them. Primarily this sort of speed is about the messenger knowing building layouts and policies (e.g., whether security checks bags, if there are stairs in addition to elevators, etc.) and being able to resolve problems (e.g., sweet talking or circumventing security guards or deducing a mislabeled package's true destination). This issue will be discussed more in chapter five. However, as I will

also explain, such pragmatic, cognitive skills of building knowledge are given only cursory attention in the images put forth in the messenger subculture. As one messenger stated, “I could care less about who’s the best courier. I just want to know who’s the fastest” (Nesbit 2000: 20)—a speed that is all about the streets.

### *The Price of Speed*

One of the most notable aspects of messenger work is its danger. Dennerlein and Meeker (2002) report that bike couriers have an injury rate three times higher than meat-packers—an occupation long considered to be one of America’s most dangerous. The national average for injuries in the workplace is 3.0 lost days of work per year for 100 workers; meat-packers lose 15.6. Messengers were found to lose an average of 47. While Dennerlein and Meeker’s research lacks methodological rigor (they used a convenience sample and had no method for cross-checking the accuracy of their respondents), their findings (even if inflated) are sobering. A long-time messenger and dispatcher in New York City commented, “A messenger from the moment he hits Manhattan, and he’s on his bike, he’s in danger. I don’t recommend messenger work to anybody. [...] I’ve seen a lot of people, a lot of my friends, die doing this work” (Kid, quoted in Sutherland 2006).<sup>27</sup> Thankfully no messengers died during my time in New York, but two messengers were killed while working less than a month after I left the field (Mullen 2003). Just over a year later, another messenger was killed when

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<sup>27</sup> Since there are no bike courier specific statistics, there is no way to know actual fatality rates—especially in a city like New York where couriers do not know the majority of fellow riders.

he collided with a delivery truck's opening front door (Doyle, Messing, Cisi 2004). Of course, more messengers are injured than killed on the job. During my fieldwork, all of my key informants (in every city) had at least one minor collision with automobiles or pedestrians (and some were not so minor).

“You ride your bike enough, you're gonna wreck. Hopefully you're not going to get run over by a car, but you're going to have an accident. It's a fact. The more you ride your bike, *you will have an accident.*” This is Darren's outlook on urban cycling. He made this statement through a mouth missing several teeth. His orbital was broken, and his face was still swollen, discolored, and adorned with 57 fresh stitches. Darren acquired these ghastly wounds in a cycling accident after work, but the factuality of his point holds true for the workday as well. As an example, Marco, the messenger who claimed he was always fast, had two major collisions with automobiles in the ten months I worked with him. In one incident he slammed into a door while speeding down a hill in excess of 25 mph. His front wheel and fork were crushed, but he acquired only minimal injuries to his person. In the other, he made a left turn from the right side of a lane (assuming, incorrectly, that the car behind him was also turning). His front wheel was again demolished, but he survived (once more) with only minor scraps and bruises. Both accidents, while avoiding hospitalization, left him physically sore (to the point of riding difficultly for days) and also left him psychologically rattled (although, not enough to appreciably alter his future behavior). While never resulting in lost work, in both incidents, Marco came incredibly close to extreme bodily harm and his survival was largely a matter of luck. Further, Marco's

accidents not resulting in inoperable machinery go unrecorded in my field notes, but many more near catastrophes were cataloged in the flesh of his legs, arms, and face.

The injury of one rider can be a financial opportunity for another. When Buck severely sprained his ankle, his company quickly moved to replace him. Being a small company, they could not operate otherwise. Travis, working for Sprint Courier, was offered the job. The switch represented a substantial pay raise for Travis. Buck's company was small and paid a high commission (60 percent) under the table. Travis's good fortune, of course, was nothing but bad news for Buck. Not only was he injured (and not covered by either health insurance or worker's compensation), he was out of a job altogether. This story illustrates just how cutthroat the piece-rate system can be. According to Buck, upon hearing about the injury the owner simply replied, "If you don't want to ride for me I'll just find another rider." Moreover, the owner's behavior failed to raise the eyebrows of the New York messengers who heard the story (even those generally quite critical of their companies). For both riders and owners, there is an agreement that company loyalty begins and ends with a messenger's ability to perform (and conversely, employee loyalty ends the minute a better offer comes along).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> It should be stressed here that the letter of the law is totally irrelevant in these situations. There is no legal record of Buck's relationship with his company (and the company in question consists of one man answering phone calls from his tiny apartment). Whatever recourse Buck may possibly have (in the technical sense, if he could prove his relationship to the company) is, for all practical purposes, irrelevant. So much so, I never overheard messengers discuss the possibility of legal recourse for these situations. Buck and his employer both agree that he is just a guy that got hurt riding his bike (not an employee injured on the job).

The dangers of the occupation are apparent when one considers the realities of urban cycling. For starters, a bicycle is a simple two-wheeled machine usually weighing less than 25 pounds. It offers no protection to the rider; a fact compounded by the messengers' ambivalence about helmets. The main avenues of any city street are filled with cars whose drivers turn unexpectedly, make lane changes without looking, and speed up or slow down erratically. In New York, taxis are especially dangerous—making sudden stops and turns without signaling or checking their mirrors for cyclists. The biggest threat, however, are parked cars. The sides of city streets are lined with vehicles whose doors might fling open with no warning. Being “doored” is one of the most common causes of injury (Hurst 2004). People are another latent danger for the cyclist. Pedestrians look for cars, but often their attention passes over bicyclists as they step into the road. At speeds that can exceed 30 miles per hour, a cyclist (and also the pedestrian) can easily be injured or killed in such a collision. Back in the 1980s, for example, Calvin spent a week in a coma after colliding with a pedestrian. Weather conditions can increase these risks. Rain, snow, and ice reduce braking power, turn metal fixtures into slippery glass, and conceal potholes and other hazards (a danger greatly intensified by Seattle's hilly topography).

### *Discomfort, Dirt, and Disdain*

Beyond the mortal dangers, the work environment itself can be exceedingly uncomfortable for messengers. Winters can be painfully cold, summers can be insufferably hot, and even mildly cool days can be transformed in shivering

nightmares with the addition of rain. When it snows, there is nothing (and I mean *nothing*) can keep a rider's feet dry (because snow on the ground means slush on the roads). Messengers spend these days walking into buildings on little nubs of painful nerves throbbing beneath their ankles (from feet that are just not quite numb enough to totally disappear from consciousness). Regardless of the weather, riding in traffic all day exposes the cyclist to noxious fumes, roaring engines, honking horns, and black exhaust. My first few weeks as a New York messenger, I was shocked at how much dirt accumulated on my body throughout the day; after work, my legs and face were covered in a dark soot.

Worse than the environment itself are the other people in it. Inconsiderate and irresponsible drivers are a constant source of stress. Beyond the physical threat cars and trucks pose to cyclists, there is a pervasive indifference exhibited by drivers that infuriates and demeans bike riders. For example, on more than one occasion drivers in New York attempted to intimidate me by passing so close as to brush me with their vehicles (one passenger in a van actually leaned out of his vehicle and tried to push me over). Irate cab drivers are known to speed around messengers, swerve in front of them, and then slam on their brakes in an attempt cause a collision. Their thinking, I suppose, is to conceal (for legal purposes) who is at fault by having the cyclists rear-end the cab (a far more ambiguous event compared to the cab driver colliding into the cyclist from behind). Everyone, of course, experiences road rage, but cyclists (because of their exposure) are extremely vulnerable to such behavior, and messengers (because of the nature of their work), experience more of it than other bike riders.

After I expressed my disbelief at many of the driving practices I experienced firsthand, Henry replied, “Can’t believe it? Why not? This shit happens every day!” Months later, a delivery truck passed so close to Henry that his bag became snagged on the side of the vehicle, pulling him from his bike and dragging him for a block down Lexington Avenue before stopping. Henry survived with only minor injuries, but neither the truck’s occupants, nor the police arriving at the scene, believed that the driver had committed any violation of traffic law. Cyclists in general (and messengers in particular), therefore, see themselves as under siege and legal enforcement as biased against them.<sup>29</sup> Efen, commenting on this tension, explained, “That is one of the reasons I stopped being a messenger. I was getting stressed out all the time. Fighting everyone.”

Even the messengers’ own clients can be a source of frustration. Couriers riding for small companies usually have positive relationships with their clients. Firms that use larger companies like Sprint and CLS, however, generally treat messengers (messengers who are enduring numerous hardships in order to make deliveries for minimal compensation) as nuisances—often dumb nuisances. Recounting his experiences, Kugelmass (1981), an anthropologist who conducted the first ethnography of bike messengers, notes, “My own sense of resentment at being

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<sup>29</sup> There are, of course, many laws on the books meant to protect cyclists. Their enforcement, however, is almost entirely non-existent (see Culley 2002; Mionske 2007). At the same time, increased efforts to improve safety for cyclists are always tied to efforts to increase the cyclist’s compliance with traffic laws. As such, in many ways messengering is wedded to these dangers and tensions (see chapter seven; also see Fincham 2006).

treated as a messenger by clients made me all too ready to use my title, Dr., as a weapon, to shock the people I was serving” (72). This resentment is a common facet of both Culley’s (2002) and Reilly’s (2000) personal writings about messenger work. Leander (1984) writes of this treatment, “I discovered that the messenger is second to the bottom of the Manhattan pecking order [...]. As my work clothes got grubbier, people stood clear of me in elevators. I grew accustomed to rudeness [...]. I gave up making hopeful eyes at receptionists at agencies uptown because I looked as if I had just come through a war zone” (27).

### *The Labor Market*

It is not surprising that the messenger industry has an extremely high turn-over rate. This is especially true in New York. According to Sprint Courier, over 50 percent of their rookie messengers quit work within two months—a good portion do not make it past the first week. Cities like Seattle and San Diego have tighter messenger markets and tend to have more stable work forces. Regardless, five years is a long time to be a messenger, and ten is a rarity. Because of the high turnover, more seasoned couriers view rookie messengers negatively. “Real messengers” are measured against the assumed characteristics of rookies. Rookie messengers are perceived to lack knowledge of the city, not know how to handle themselves in traffic, lose packages, and stay home on cold and rainy days. Generally speaking, a messenger is no longer a rookie after a full year of work (Reilly 2000). A messenger who has spent several years on the road is considered a veteran. Veteran status

garners a high degree of respect among other messengers. In New York, a handful of couriers have ridden for several decades, and these “original messengers” are treated almost reverently by their peers.

In New York, a vast majority of messengers are minorities and immigrants. This is not true for Seattle (approximately 80 percent native-born whites) or San Diego (usually around 90 percent native-born whites). Most messengers are men in their early twenties to early thirties. In New York, women make up less than five percent of the population. In Seattle, females comprise around 20 percent of messengers, and in San Diego it is usually about 15 percent. In all places, though, for people with no formal education, criminal records, drug addictions, or undocumented work status, messengering is often the best job option. This is especially true in the loose labor market of New York. There, a courier who messes up at one company or gets in a dispute with his employer can easily move to another company. As one New York messenger told me about his company, “Every morning at eight, they’ll hire anybody who wants to work.” Such a structure allows people who cannot (or do not want to) keep regular work routines to use messengering as one method of many forms of income—in a larger system of hustling (see Wacquant 1998).

In part, because of this flexibility, the occupation attracts not only the disenfranchised, but also those disillusioned with more routinized forms of labor. It is the disillusioned, more than the disenfranchised, which comprise the messenger subculture. Which is to say, messengering in some places (e.g., Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC) can be a semi-formal occupation for the lumpen-proletariat (i.e.,

the marginally employable willing to face extreme risk for small rewards). At the same time, (in all places) it is also a job that attracts middle-class bohemians lured by a promise of freedom (specifically freedom from the watchful eyes of one's employer) and the potential thrills of dodging cars.

Couriers, even those paid hourly, for the most part, are on their own and left to their own devices. They are assigned work (through a communication device) and are expected to complete it by the deadline. As long as that is accomplished, nothing else is expected. In doing their work, therefore, messengers are given a high degree of independence (extremely high in comparison to other low-wage service jobs). In between deliveries (on "standby"), messengers have even more freedom. They can run errands, read books, people watch, get intoxicated (as long as they can successfully conceal their altered mental state from employers and clients), or any combination of these things.<sup>30</sup> Having described the job and hinted at its allure, in the next chapter we turn to the subculture itself.

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<sup>30</sup> At many smaller companies, intoxication (from marijuana, at least) is not even considered problematic (see Kugelmass 1981; Barraud *et al* 2002). For example, Flying High is a drug innuendo (the name I use is a pseudonym, but the real name has an equally obvious connotation). As the owner was proud to report, he and his riders (with the exception of myself) were stoned for significant portions of the day.

## CHAPTER 3: THE LIFESTYLE

### **Being a Bike Messenger**

#### *Bikes and Beer*

When asked, messengers most commonly cite money as their motivation for working. As one messenger sarcastically answered, “Did I mention rent? It could be that they like to eat” (Eric, quoted Sutherland 2006). Or, as one boisterous New York messenger often yelled (to other couriers) as he careened through traffic, “Gotta make that dollar!” Certainly, for some individuals, bicycle delivery may be their most lucrative job option. The actions and attitudes of many messengers (especially those in the subculture), however, cannot be reduced to simple economic necessity. As a case in point, no one was paid for the Warriors Fun Ride (not even the organizers who spent months planning it). Summing up the incongruence between her financial compensation and her psychological satisfaction, a Milwaukee messenger informed me, “I make shit, but I love my life.” Or, as a sticker made by a Seattle messenger (and proudly displayed by many more) stated, “It’s a quality of life issue.”

Some of this quality of life issue arises from the occupation’s flexibility and independence, but, in itself, it does not explain much. Nighttime security guards, for example, have a high level of independence, but they do not have a subculture surrounding (and expanding out of) their job. Likewise, workers may appreciate the implementation of flextime by many companies, but it has not resulted in the widespread fusion of work and leisure the way we see in the messenger world. But, we are getting ahead of ourselves. I will start to unravel the subcultural puzzle in

chapter five. For now, we need not be concerned with *why* the subculture exists, only *what* the lifestyle consists of.

At its most basic level, the messenger lifestyle is about bikes and beer. Or, more accurately (but losing the alliteration), the lifestyle revolves around urban cycling and various forms of intoxication (also see Fincham 2007). First and foremost, messengering is a bicycle subculture. Messengers love bikes and love biking. “Urban cycling” (as messengers use the term) can be characterized as a combination of ecologically minded views on alternative transportation and an aggressive assertion of one’s self within traffic. At the same time, the courier’s devotion to bicycles should not be mistaken as a devotion to athletic asceticism. Nothing could be further from the truth. Alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana (along with much harder drugs) are mainstays of any messenger gathering (also see Fincham 2008). Clearly, it takes a special sort of person to regularly intoxicate him or herself while riding in traffic. While the majority of messengers may remain sober during the workday, it is a rarity for a messenger to not drink after work (often quite heavily). One messenger I was about to interview demonstrated this mindset perfectly by asking, “Do you mind waiting for like five minutes? I just want to drink another beer and smoke some weed before we get started.” Another messenger proudly informed me, without the slightest hint of irony, that he had stopped drinking. He said this

while nursing a pint of Guinness. For this messenger, not drinking did not mean not ingesting alcohol; it just meant not ingesting alcohol until he blacked out.<sup>31</sup>

### *Alleycats*

For messengers subsumed in the subculture, there are two main forms of socializing: drinking after work and racing bicycles. Social drinking is far more common, but races are *the* main social event (see chapter six). Most messenger races are far less complex (and are far less cosmopolitan) than the Warriors Fun Ride, and most do not attempt to conceal that they are, in fact, *races* (i.e., they call themselves “races” not “fun rides”). These smaller events are called alleycats, and like the Warriors, they take place in open traffic (with no approval from city officials). Alleycats mimic the basic structure of the job. Race organizers, who are messengers themselves (or former messengers), give racers a manifest with a list of checkpoints. Some races require a specific order, but other races allow the courier to determine the best order (just as in the work day). At each checkpoint, the racer must have his manifest signed (just as in work). In some alleycats messengers must perform certain tasks (e.g., puncturing their own tire and replacing the tube or doing push-ups) before their manifests will be signed (again, as in work, this mimics the myriad of ways things may go wrong in the day: mechanical difficulties, mislabeled packages, clients

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<sup>31</sup> To really drive this point home, one of my first interactions with members of the messenger subculture involved Henry asking another courier what happened to him the previous night. The messenger replied, “I don’t remember. All I know is I woke up with bloody sheets and a wobbly front wheel.”

who are unavailable, trouble with security guards, etc.). In this regard, unlike traditional bike races, alleycats do not only test one's speed on the bike, but one's efficiency at solving problems, but this problem solving is altered and simplified (in an ideological way) in racing—when compared to the actual workday (see chapter six).

Competitive cycling events (e.g., the Tour de France) are generally about physical strength and endurance. They involve teamwork and strategy, but mainly they test human power (as transferred into the forward momentum of a machine). Routes are known and the conditions (more or less) standardized. Conversely, cardiovascular fitness is of small consequence in alleycats.<sup>32</sup> This is because messenger races are extremely short by cycling standards (usually less than 15 miles) and there are very few rules. Or, as several people have said, “There are no rules.” Alleycats are not intended to be athletic events in any usual sense of the term, and accomplished competitive cyclists are by no means particularly accomplished in

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<sup>32</sup> Aside from exercise and sport scientists, the majority of people tend to have a rather cursory understanding of physical fitness. Because messengers ride bikes, people incorrectly believe them to be the paragons of health. As a case in point, riding in an elevator that reeked of cigarette smoke, a woman turned to me and stated, “That can't be you. Messengers don't smoke.” She was right that the odor was not emanating from me, but sorely mistaken on the latter point. Good portions of messengers (perhaps even the majority) do smoke. Clearly, riding a bike for a living requires a greater expenditure of energy than sitting behind a desk or standing at a service counter (and consequently a greater use of one's heart, lungs, and leg muscles). However, the sort of physical conditioning required in most cycling competitions (even at the lowest levels of amateur racing) is not really promoted by messenger work and is not required in an alleycat. None of this is to deny the high degree of athleticism involved in the occupation or in courier races, but merely to stress that it requires a different skill-set.

messenger races. Alleycats are events of loosely controlled chaos—standardization runs counter to the very nature of the competition. Joan, for example, was an extremely fast messenger, but she had no interest in traditional cycling competitions. In those competitions, she stated, “It’s just you.” Instead, she relished the buzz of the traffic (and the uncertainty it brought to the competition). In alleycats, riders swarm the street, scream at pedestrians, and bully their way through intersections in a way that defies the expectations of the typical workday. That is, in a real workday, there are lots of slow deliveries and maybe one or two rushes (punctuated by pauses and lulls). An alleycat, though, is one long double rush (with no elevator rides to slow the rider down).

The difference between an alleycat and other forms of bicycle racing is apparent at first sight. Hardly any racers will be wearing spandex and many will not be wearing helmets. Baggy shorts or pants cut off above the ankle are much more common, and almost everyone will be wearing a huge messenger bag slung across their shoulder. The bicycles are not carbon fiber or titanium racing bikes with sixteen-spoke wheels. They are solid bikes (their frames often made of steel) used and abused every day at work. For couriers, there is a major distinction between a messenger’s bike and the bicycle a “weekend warrior” uses to go on training rides. Many messengers ride expensive machines, but the scene surrounding an alleycat looks like “a collision between the Tour de France field and the cast of Mad Max” (Wood 1994: 2). Some racers will be drunk or high long before the competition even starts. Some (even the intoxicated ones) embrace the competition with intensity, but others ride

with no interest in winning. As Arnold exclaimed at the 2002 New York City Halloween race, “I don’t want to win. I just want to get drunk and hopefully cause some damage to this city.” In other words, Arnold wanted to ride wild through the streets—the competition itself was irrelevant.

Races are always concluded (and often started) with a party. Like all aspects of courier life, drinking and other intoxicants are a major component of the race environment. Organizers of one New York race, for example, debated whether drug dealers should be formally invited to the event. In the end it was decided that “real drug dealers will know to be there anyway.” Many messengers come to races and do not even bother racing, choosing to enjoy the party-like atmosphere surrounding the event instead. As a group of Philadelphia messengers said to me after an alleycat in Boston, “We didn’t race, but we came for the party.” Almost all the New York entrants at a Montreal alleycat dropped out after the first checkpoint and rode to a strip club instead. In alleycats, like all races, prizes are awarded for the fastest riders; some races also have a prize for the messenger who finishes DFL (Dead Fucking Last). Two of the races I participated in even had alternative rides for messengers with no interest in competing—only in social drinking.

#### *A Note on the Prominent Races*

Messengers within a city organize any number of alleycats throughout the year. These may or may not draw riders from surrounding scenes. There are also races that are nationally and internationally recognized. First and foremost is the

Cycle Messenger World Championship (CMWC). The CMWC has been held annually since 1993. Hundreds of messengers (along with former messengers and those interested in the messenger lifestyle) attend. Several of my informants cited the CMWC as a life-changing event—as a realization that messengering was of profound importance to not only themselves but to countless others. As Rosie reflected, “I was pretty much a rookie. I’d been working for like three months. I was like, ‘Everyone here is wearing Sidis [a brand of cycling shoe] and looks weird. This is my community. I’m home.’” There are also annual continental championships: the European Cycle Messenger Championships (ECMC) and the North American Cycle Courier Championships (NAC3) and the Australian Cycle Messenger Championships (ACMC).

These world and continental championships are huge, formally organized alleycats. Messengers in various cities bid (amongst themselves at various gatherings) for the rights to hold the event. Cities are usually selected one to two years in advance. Because of their size, organizers must get permits and hold the races on closed courses (a large part of the selection process is based on would-be hosting cities convincing others that they will successfully conduct all the necessary planning). During the championships, there are helmet policies (due to legal issues) and qualifying heats (due to the sheer number of participants). The winners of these races are given bragging rights for a year: the world’s and continent’s fastest courier. They are prestigious titles. At the same time, many messengers are cynical of the races’ format; there is a certain disdain for their rules and formalities. As one New York

messenger quipped about the 2003 NAC3, “It has nothing to do with the skills of being a messenger.” However, despite their sanitation, the races do attempt to replicate the occupation. Riders make “deliveries” to various checkpoints, and “bike thieves” prowl the course to penalize racers who leave their machines unlocked at checkpoints.

Beyond the championships, several cities hold large annual races (specific to their city) that attract riders nationally and internationally. The most notable of these are New York’s Fourth of July Race, Halloween Race, and Monster Track (a track bike only race; see below); Minneapolis’s Stupor Bowl; Portland’s Westside Invite; and Seattle’s Dead Baby Downhill. There are also one-time events (like the Warriors) that can draw international participation. It is worth mentioning that cities like San Diego hold alleycats, but they attract no outside riders. However, messengers from these cities will often travel to the larger championships.

### *A Fixed Bike Won’t Brake*

Chapters six and eight will go into far greater depth in regards to the bicycles messengers ride. At this point, though, the reader needs to be introduced to a particular type of bicycle: the track bike. Couriers can ride any number of bikes. The three most common machines are mountain, road, and track bikes. Mountain and road bikes need no introduction. A track bike, on the other hand, is a more exotic piece of equipment (although, becoming less exotic). A track bike (also known as a fixed gear, fixed, fixie, or just fix) is a bicycle specifically designed for racing on a velodrome (an

oval race track with banked corners). Track bikes have a fixed gear, no brakes, and a rigid geometry (good for speed and quick handling, but harder on the rider's body).<sup>33</sup> A fixed gear means the bicycle does not have a freewheel (i.e., if the rear wheel is spinning so are the pedals). With fixes, therefore, there can be no coasting. The rider controls the bike's speed with the pedals, and (with a certain degree of skill) the bike can be made to skid to a stop. This requires the rider to lean forward, removing some of her body weight from the rear wheel and locking her legs, and thus forcing the rear wheel to stop moving (i.e., skid). This should not be confused with coaster brakes found on children's bikes and beach cruisers.

While only a minority of messengers actually ride track bikes, most, nonetheless, consider fixes *the* bike of choice among messengers. There are many reasons for the track bike's popularity among messengers. First, there is very little to steal from the bike. Second, being able to control the speed of the bike through the pedals (opposed to combining hand brakes with coasting) offers a huge degree of control in traffic and on wet or snowy roads. In hilly conditions, however, a fixed (without hand brakes) provides less control (even more so when it is wet or icy).

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<sup>33</sup> While this is a rather esoteric point, all track bikes are fixed gears, but not all fixed gears are track bikes. A track bike technically refers to frames and components that have been purposefully engineered for velodrome racing. Road bike and mountain bikes can be converted into fixed gears (by altering the retching mechanism connected to the rear hub, or by replacing the hub), but they cannot be made into real track bikes. There are also fixed gear specific frames that are not true road bikes (because they lack fittings for derailleurs), but they do not have track geometry. Fixed gears can also be fitted with brakes, but if a brake is installed on a track bike (most track bikes do not have holes to mount brakes) it is no longer a real track bike. Among messengers who ride fixed, having a "real track bike" (and not just a fixed gear) is often an issue of major social importance.

Third, unencumbered by additional components, track bikes are often lighter than similarly priced machines. Fourth, there is very little that can break or needs to be tuned up. Fifth, many cyclists believe that riding fixed is more enjoyable than riding freewheel bicycles. As Joan explained, “[A track bike] is like an extension of your body.” Sixth, tying in with point five, there is a mystique about riding a track bike, since it has no brakes and does not allow you to coast. This helps separate the initiated from the non-initiated. Track bikes are considered something that only a true “pro” can ride. As Rick explained, “People on track bikes know what they are doing. On a mountain bike, you can get a way with a lot more.”

#### *Occupational Messengers and Lifestyle Messengers*

It must be noted that not all couriers attend races and messenger parties. For some messengers, the occupation is not a lifestyle; it is only work. As Robin described it, “So many messengers are just job only kind of people.” These people may or may not find work enjoyable, but it does not overtly define who they are. The difference between job only kind of people (what I call “occupational messengers”) and those who are integrated into the bike courier subculture (what I call “lifestyle messengers”) is illustrated nicely by contrasting the comments of Robin and Lester. Robin, explaining why he participates in alleycats, answered, “I think that it’s mostly because I like what I do enough to want to do it again. And, if I’m not [racing] on Friday night, it is funny how much you find yourself talking about it. It’s ridiculous.” Conversely, Lester, a rider for Sprint Courier, when asked if he went to a messenger

party the previous weekend, replied, “I see these kids every day. Why would I want to party with them too?” Chapter six will go into why these variations in social integration exist, but for now I want to simply give a basic description of the variance.

In New York, only a small minority (fewer than 200 couriers) fully participates in the messenger lifestyle. Among this group, whites and females are over-represented (nearly every female messenger in New York and most of the whites are in the subculture). In larger messenger cities, there can be an unspoken tension between messengers involved in the subculture and those who are not. During the same conversation, Lester expressed his frustration with the lifestyle messengers’ integration of work and leisure by explaining that at these events attendees “all had their messenger clothes on, and their bags.” Malcolm, who had attended the party by coincidence (he happened to live next door to the party and saw faces he recognized from work), agreeing with Lester, exclaimed, “Can’t [they] be normal for just one day?” Within the subculture, the formal rhetoric states that there is no difference between messengers. As one New York messenger, irritated with my question on the issue, stated, “It doesn’t fucking matter.” However, in these large messenger cities, there is a practical divide that all messengers realize. A Chicago messengers explained it simply, “They don’t come to alleycats. Of course, because they don’t love riding their bikes.”<sup>34</sup> In smaller cities like Seattle and San Diego, however, there

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<sup>34</sup> This same messenger, however, believed that if Chicago hosts the NAC3, the event needs to include not only lifestyle messengers, but occupational messengers as well. This is because Chicago messengers are not fairly represented by the bike messenger subculture alone. As a veteran New York messenger criticized, “Some elements

is no clear divide between full participants in the lifestyle and occupational messengers. Which is to say, in smaller cities, all messengers are, at least partially, integrated into the subculture.

To summarize, bike messengers, as members of an occupation, are part of a social world. Within this world, however, is a subculture. This dissertation is primarily about those within the subculture—the lifestyle messengers. They are the ones who, by emphasizing certain aspects of the occupation, give the act of delivering packages avocational value and imbue urban cycling with grand meaning (i.e., they see delivering packages as an authentic form of action connected to their real self). The point of this dissertation, therefore, is to explain how and why this happens.

#### *The Local Scenes at My Research Sites*

During my time in Seattle, very few messengers regularly raced. Talking with older messengers I learned, the frequency of alleycats in the city has fluctuated over time. I was there in a lull, but, even during this dip in racing enthusiasm, there were at least five local alleycats held in the course of ten months. Many Seattle messengers traveled to Portland for the Westside Invite, to Philadelphia for the 2006 NAC3, and San Francisco for the 2007 NAC3. A few even traveled to Australia for the 2006 CMWC. The Dead Baby Downhill and an annual backyard-boxing event (where

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within the messenger scene only want to portray one part of it. I went to these people and said, ‘You’re not representing New York. You have to go all over.’ This courier, one of New York’s “original messengers,” felt excluded by the specific image many within the lifestyle portray to the outside world—the hip, bohemian aspect of the job over its working-class realism.

messengers box each other) were, as always, attended by virtually every messenger in the city (as well as many more former messengers). Moreover, up to 40 percent of the city's riders might have socialized together on any given Friday evening. During the workday, the Monorail, an outdoor coffee stand, functioned as the primary spot where messengers could socialize. Additionally, one Seattle messenger published a zine (on a very irregular basis), *Kickstand*. This same messenger also maintained a website<sup>35</sup> (on a far more regular basis) and produced shirts and stickers espousing subcultural views (e.g., a shirt depicting the evolution of humanity from our beginning as ape-like creatures to our zenith as messengers on bicycles) and insider knowledge (e.g., a shirt which, in a rather obscure way, asserts that the messengers riding for a particular company are alcoholics<sup>36</sup>—which is a matter of pride, not insult).

Alleycats are new to San Diego. Jimmy, a messenger originally from another city, introduced them. Prior to Jimmy's arrival, there were messengers, but no messenger subculture in San Diego. Remembering the days before Jimmy's influence, Kenny commented, "It never crossed my mind to hang out with other messengers. I thought all we had in common was low pay." Jimmy not only introduced alleycats, but other aspects of the messenger subculture too: Messenger Appreciation Day and self-published magazines detailing the local courier scene. Messenger Appreciation Day is October 9th ("10-9" is radio code for "repeat last message"). The zine Jimmy

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<sup>35</sup> Interested readers can go to: [www.pilderwasser.com](http://www.pilderwasser.com).

<sup>36</sup> The shirt reads: "Fleetfoot messengers cannot give alcoholics advice." It is a play off an earlier shirt that read, "Messengers cannot give legal advice." This first shirt is a spoof of a common sign in filing rooms at courthouses: "Clerks cannot give legal advice."

started was called *Chillowmode*. San Diego's first alleycat was in the fall of 2003. Jimmy has since left San Diego (and is working as a messenger elsewhere). His zine only made it an issue or two after his departure, but San Diego messengers still toasted to October 9th, and, more importantly, races were still going strong. Aside from Kenny, most of San Diego's veteran couriers did not race, but younger riders (along with couriers transplanted from other scenes) vigorously participated in local alleycats. Like Seattle, a coffee stand (Tony's Coffee Stand), functioned as a workday hangout, but Tony's, which closed in the early afternoon, was only a morning spot. Further, this budding messenger subculture had not established formal after-hours socializing, nor did they hold alleycats that attracted messengers from other cities (not even with Los Angeles just a short train ride away).

In New York, messengers involved in the subculture raced (or, at least, had the option to race) a lot. There were not only regular local races, but New Yorkers traveled up and down the Eastern Seaboard for alleycats. When I lived in New York, there was no functional messenger zine, but there were several messenger websites providing both editorial comments and information about upcoming (and past) events (namely, races). Currently, there are even more websites<sup>37</sup>—many with merchandise pages selling shirts and other bric-a-brac for insiders and outsiders alike. As for socializing, Tompkins Square Park and Sophie's (a bar in the East Village) were the two primary places for messengers to meet after work. Various cliques had their own haunts, but Tompkins and Sophie's were the primary places of congregation

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<sup>37</sup> The most notable site is [www.nybma.com](http://www.nybma.com).

(especially on Fridays). Perhaps because of New York's size, there was no main place for socializing during the day in the city. That is, in San Diego or Seattle, regardless of where a messenger just made a drop-off, they were usually just a short ride to Tony's or the Monorail. In Manhattan (divided between downtown, midtown, and uptown) there was no one central place to congregate. Unlike San Diego and Seattle, therefore, courier work in New York was very atomized. Riders may have constantly crossed paths with other messengers, but they rarely stopped to talk, and even when they did, it lacked the relaxed character accompanying the socialization that occurred at my other sites' designated meeting places.

### **The Subculture and Outsiders**

Like many subcultures, outsiders have appropriated various aspects of messenger style. For example, correctly or not, messengers have been credited with starting the 1990s hip-hop fad of rolling up one leg of one's pants (Graham 1998). Most noticeably, numerous backpack and bag makers (e.g., Eddie Bauer and the Gap) now produce "messenger bags" (Allam 1997). These products are, at best, only vaguely similar to the bags a working messenger would actually use (i.e., they are single shoulder strap bags whose main opening is closed by a large fabric flap over the top). But, cashing in on the urban mystique of the messenger image, these bags have become quite popular. A middle-aged businesswoman in an elevator, for instance, proudly displayed her "messenger bag" to me, but then for clarity's sake (which was certainly not necessary) informed me, "I only have the bag. I'm not an actual

messenger.” More recently, track bikes and alleycats have spread beyond the subculture.

Chapter six will touch on issues of subcultural authenticity, and it is an issue of great importance for many messengers. When I started messengering in New York, the biggest boundary was between rookie and veteran messengers (i.e., between experienced and inexperienced riders/workers). I began the job working on a track bike. This resulted in messengers either incorrectly assuming that I was not a rookie, or, if the messenger knew me to be a rookie, subtle (and sometime not so subtle) admonishments on the danger riding fixed posed for novices (but not “pros”). As the reader should remember from Rick’s comments, track bikes denote skill (because the machines require the rider to accept a smaller margin of error). At the same time, while alleycats were open to anyone, it was almost exclusively current and former messengers who competed. The small attendance of outsiders was not considered a threat to the subculture’s sovereignty. In other words, messengers focused on the border between rookie and veteran riders, not messengers and non-messengers (for the latter was considered inconsequential).

The popularity of track bikes has been creeping beyond the messenger’s world since the late 1990s, but starting in the mid-2000s, the trend exploded (see Weyland 2007). Bicycle retailers across the country now sell fixed gear products (even in places that do not have velodromes and where messengers have no cultural resonance). Concurrent with mainstreaming of fixes is the expansion of alleycats outside the subculture. While more obscure than track bikes, alleycats now occur in

cities with no messengers (e.g., Raleigh, NC and Saint Petersburg, FL—to name just two). And, in places like San Diego and Seattle, alleycats, while still considered messenger events, are attended by more non-messengers than messengers. This is part of a new (and different) cultural phenomenon—the bicycle hipster. Although the term hipster is rather vague (and clearly could apply to more than just those interested in bikes), non-messengers who ride track bikes and race in alleycats are commonly referred to as this (see Haddow 2008).

Having being initiated in New York before the influx of hipsters, I was originally blind to the threat many messengers believe outsiders pose. A dispute at a Boston race in 2003 illustrates how the matter of outsiders has changed. In this example, several veteran Boston messengers disputed the legitimacy of an alleycat being organized (in their estimation) by a rookie messenger. The organizer only worked part-time and was thus not a real messenger by Boston standards. In speaking about this conflict to other New Yorkers, Joan stood up for the organizer. “He’s fast as shit! What does it matter if he’s a messenger? He’s a fast urban cyclist.” For the New Yorkers at the race, the organizer’s credentials were based on his skills in urban cycling. Indeed, he had previously placed quite well in a New York race. His time working as an actual messenger was seen as secondary (or even irrelevant) to the matter. Further, even among the Boston couriers, the issue was not about insiders and complete outsiders. No one would have complained if the organizer attended a Boston race (as he had on numerous occasions). His offense was stepping too quickly into the

role of a veteran (i.e., someone who has earned the right to not only compete, but to organize). As such, the organizer was not so much an impostor as an upstart.

Increasingly, though, the appropriation of track bikes by non-messengers and the mere presence of outsiders at alleycats are viewed as problematic in the messenger subculture. Seattle messengers, in particular, have started policing their borders against outsiders. In interviews, I heard time and again variations of how hipsters made messengers look bad in the public eye. The validity of this claim is certainly debatable, but it was accepted as gospel. Seattle lore is also filled with stories about hipsters who try to pass themselves off as messengers to other outsiders. Again, the accuracy of these claims is questionable, but their acceptance is universal. Even the New York messengers, previously so indifferent to the presence of outsiders, have sought to place barriers between themselves and hipsters. Speaking to José (one of the New York messengers present at the disputed Boston race) in 2007, for example, I was told about his plans to organize a “messenger only” alleycat in order to return the event to its true roots (i.e., a competition between messengers). The boundary work messengers perform in maintaining their subculture against outsiders will be expanded on in chapter six.

### **Messengers and the Public Sphere**

I started this dissertation by claiming that outsiders (at least outsiders living in older metropolitan hubs) have a fascination with bike messengers. Their focus may be positive (“daredevils”) or negative (“maniacal and dangerous”). In familiarizing

oneself with messengers, it is instructive to look at how they have been portrayed in the media. *The New York Times*, in particular, offers a wonderful window into public opinion on messengers (and gives the reader some additional historical context to the occupation).

William Geist (1983) wrote *The New York Times*' first article on couriers. He portrays messengers in a lovable, outlaw fashion; they are presented as folk heroes. While acknowledging that couriers break laws, the behavior is, to a large extent, valorized. Kugelmass's ethnography equally paints an image of folk heroes. Regardless of any racial, class, age, or gender differences, Kugelmass writes, "all share a kinship with the heroes of the Wild West. They are romantic adventures who prefer the exhilaration of danger to civilization's deadening routine" (67). The portrayal of the messenger as ultimate urban men reached its zenith in 1986 with the release of *Quicksilver*, a Hollywood movie starring Kevin Bacon as a stockbroker turned free-spirited bike courier. In 1995, couriers would again be given the limelight in a briefly aired sitcom on CBS called *Double Rush*.<sup>38</sup>

The very quality that intrigued the public—the messenger as "romantic adventurer"—is also what demonized the messenger. In response to Geist's article, one *New Yorker* angrily wrote, "[The article] dealt with the problem of wild and dangerous bike-riding messengers as if it were some interesting and benign cultural

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<sup>38</sup> Not surprisingly, neither of these fiction vehicles even remotely captures what messenger life is like. For dialog purposes (as well as filming costs), messengers in these stories are almost always stationary. They don't make deliveries so much as they hang out at the company office or sit and chat in a diner (in the middle of the day).

phenomenon, glossing over the extreme hazards these self-styled entrepreneurs pose to the public at large” (Bozzo 1983: A34). *The New York Times* ran its own editorial piece slamming messengers one week after the publication of Geist’s article. “What motivates those cyclists who whiz along the blind side of traffic lanes, plunge through intersections against the light and otherwise terrorize New York City drivers and pedestrians? For the worst offenders, the answer is money.” The piece went on to say, “Are bike messengers capable of such contempt? You bet” (Worm and the Apple 1983: A34).

While occasionally depicted as heroes, from the mid-1980s on, messengers were quickly turned from folk heroes to villains (at least in New York).<sup>39</sup> They became “the speeding bane of New York’s pedestrians and motorists” (Lyall 1987: 1-58). For example, *The New York Times*’ review of *Quicksilver* started off stating, “You may need a soft spot for the bicycle messengers who bring such thrills, chills and spills to New York’s streets and sidewalks to get a bang out of [the movie]” (Goodman 1986: C12). Admittedly, the movie is so awful that the required soft spot would probably need to be in one’s skull to really appreciate the film, but the larger point remains; messengers were increasingly seen as a menace. Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward went as far as to claim that “What [messengers are] doing is scaring

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<sup>39</sup> Bob Levy, a columnist for the *Washington Post* (see introduction), perhaps worked the hardest to demonize messengers. Levy went so far as to accuse messengers of not only reckless riding, but also causing an epidemic of bicycle theft throughout the city (1987) and, with no humor intended, the killing of innocent squirrels (1991).

the public to death, and we've got to do something about it" (quoted in Finder 1987: A1).

In response to public outrage over messengers (fanned by the media), Mayor Ed Koch gradually started increasing police pressure on bicycle scofflaws throughout the 1980s. Police more than quadrupled their citations to cyclists between 1982 and 1983 (Worm and the Apple 1983). In 1984, a bill was passed requiring messengers to wear identifying vests and companies to keep logs of where messengers had been dispatched (Purnick 1984). The original version of this bill, which Koch refused to sign, actually included criminal penalties and possible jail time for offenders (the bill that went into law was civil, not criminal). Commenting on the original bill, a *New York Times* editorial stated, "Given the dangers posed by speeding bikes that defy the traffic law, jail is wholly appropriate in some cases" (Worm and the Apple 1984: A14). Three years later, in an effort to tame "the dangerous habits which threaten the safety of any New Yorker who is not blessed with eyes in the back of his or her head" (Koch, quoted in Finder 1987: A1), the mayor attempted to ban all bicycles on three midtown avenues (between the hours of 10 am to 4 pm). The proposed bike ban was blocked by a court order on the eve of its implementation (Johnson 1987).

Ten years after the failed bike ban, a pedestrian was killed in a collision with a food delivery biker, and New Yorkers reignited their moral condemnations of *all* bicycle delivery riders (Roane 1997).<sup>40</sup> Of course, motor vehicles represent a far

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<sup>40</sup> It should be mentioned that while *The New York Times* conflates food delivery and messenger work, they are not (even remotely) the same occupation. As a side note,

greater threat to pedestrian safety. In 1996, 256 pedestrians died from accidents with automobiles in New York; one died from a collision with a cyclist (Assault by Bicycle 1997). Regardless, it was the bicyclist drawing the greatest amount of public attention. In fact, Mayor Rudy Giuliani stated, “Bicycles are a very big quality-of-life problem. [...] It may be the thing that most mentioned to me when I was campaigning, particularly in Manhattan” (Cooper 1997). As the writer for *The New York Times* notes, “While the number of deaths is small, many pedestrians said [...] that the statistics did not take into account the daily close calls they had encountered on the city’s crowded streets” (Roane 1997: B1). While certainly true, this observation fails to account for why the daily close calls with automobiles are so easily ignored.<sup>41</sup>

Bad press is part of the reason messengers view themselves as outlaws. The good press is part of the reason messengers view their subculture as special. It is probably already apparent to the reader that I believe both—messengers are outlaws and their subculture is special. At the same time, while journalists have produced compelling stories, many filled with rich pieces of data, as products of the mass media (for all the obvious reasons) they do not provide an adequate theoretical analysis of

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food delivery may represent the future for individuals that want to make a living by bicycle (see chapter two). Several of my key New York informants have, in fact, started working nights in food delivery (where the money can actually be better). But, they do not consider it messenger work. However, they like it because it does involve riding bikes, independence, and a flexible schedule.

<sup>41</sup> That same year, a Boston bike courier put a pedestrian (who happened to be a vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank) into a weeklong coma (Daley and Pring 1997). A similar moral panic arose there too. It is worth noting that in this incident, the pedestrian was crossing *against* the light, but it was the courier who was both fined (legally) and blamed (publicly) for the event (Dowdy 1997).

bike messengers. I see my task in the chapters that follow to connect the pieces—the good and the bad—and construct an explanation for why couriers do what they do and how they do it. Not simply why they run red lights, but why those in the subculture spend so much time and effort in their non-work lives reproducing the very acts that vilify them in the press. In doing so, we will learn about how emotions and space (i.e., the affective appropriation of space) are integral to meaningful identity construction. Before starting my theoretical outline, however, it is worth looking at two competing sociological explanations for the messenger subculture: masculinity and dirty work.

### **Men and Work**

#### *There is a Macho Element Involved*

Without a doubt, bike messengering is a masculine occupation. Not only is the job overwhelmingly performed by men, but many of the skills it requires (e.g., an athletic negotiation of danger and the management of interpersonal hostility) exemplify a certain type of machismo—risk takers, ultimate urban men. Further, the courier subculture exaggerates the stereotypically male aspects of the job by turning workday practices into even more dangerous competitions. But, the reader should remember that the percentage of females is disproportionately higher in the subculture (i.e., most women who are messengers are subcultural members as well). Regardless, to write about the messengers, in a sense, is to write about men—even when one is including women in the discussion.

At the same time, any attempt to emphasize the gendered aspects of messengering is likely to make many couriers (both male and female) balk. What may be plain to social researchers goes largely unmentioned among messengers. This is because, as Kimmel (2005) notes, men have an invisible gender; its manifestations abound, but its ubiquitous nature leads to its elusiveness. Which is to say, messengers do not set out to create a fraternal association, nor do they *intentionally* erect barriers to female participation (the same, of course, could not be said of many other all-male workplaces). Women willing to do the work and willing to endure the tribulations of a male-dominated workplace are welcome members of the social world. Of course, these are rather large stipulations—stipulations that more or less explain why the job continues to be dominated by men. Like other male-controlled jobs, workplace socialization involves crass and sexual humor. These matters have been addressed elsewhere and will not be elaborated here (see Fine 2005; Kanter 1977).<sup>42</sup> The physicality of messenger work, however, is directly related to the arguments I make in this dissertation.

Male workers (even in very exploitative situations) use the difficulties of manual labor as a prop for greater self-esteem—often in explicit differentiation of themselves from females (presumed to be incapable of such work). Writing of arduous factory work, Willis (1979) states, “Manual labor is suffused with masculine qualities and given to sensual overtones. The toughness and awkwardness of physical

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<sup>42</sup> See appendix B for a discussion on some of the social difficulties women face in working as messengers.

work and effort [...] takes masculine lights and depths and assumes a significance beyond itself. [...] The brutality of the working situation is partially reinterpreted into a heroic exercise of manly confrontation with ‘the task’ (196). A researcher, so inclined, could use courier labor and the messenger subculture to sharpen such theories on masculinity.

More than anything else, messengering offers an escape from the feminization of post-industrial labor (see Adkins 2002; Kenway *et al.* 2006). Like other low-end jobs proliferating in the new economy, messengering is service oriented. Service jobs are characterized by typically feminine qualities. They are not about the rough and tumble production described by Willis, but about catering to the needs of others. However, the services provided by messengers *do* exemplify stereotypically male traits; it is dangerous, bodily labor. Messengers please their clients with feats of skill and strength (e.g., a last-minute filing, sprinted into the courthouse just in the nick of time). Social pleasantries may exist, but they are not part of the job description. These masculine aspects are why some journalists have constructed a romantic, cowboy-esque image of the occupation. These things said, the job is open to men and women alike (irrespective of the distribution of sexes in the job). Numerically under-represented, women are prominent in the occupation and the subculture. As such, messengering cannot be seen as a site of homosocial bonding. That is, men work with women performing the same tasks, and often the women are more successful than the men in doing them. Male messengers, therefore, cannot use their labor to valorize their gender in the way described by Willis.

Men may dominate the world enough to set the rules of the game, but the game itself is available to women as well.<sup>43</sup> And, most importantly, job tasks that contain male stereotypes do not, by default, lead to lifestyles built around occupations. Despite its masculine characteristics, therefore, it would be a mistake to take messengering's macho element as an explanation for *why* couriers identify with their occupation and find such meaning in its lifestyle. Gender is part of the puzzle, but it is not an answer to it. The affective appropriation of space to be discussed below is applicable to both genders.

#### *The Bottom of the Pecking Order*

Related to the masculine nature of courier work is the stigma associated with it. Messengering is, literally and figuratively, dirty. Dangerous, grimy, servile in nature, at times highly unpleasant, and often the focus of moral reprimand, bike messengering certainly qualifies as "dirty work" (see Hughes 1951). Sociologists have long studied how individuals working in stigmatized occupations maintain positive identities. For Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), dirty workers overcome the physical, social, and moral taint of their occupations by reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing the stigma of outsiders. In Thompson and Harred's (1992) study of exotic entertainers, for example, dancers rationalize and neutralize negative opinions by denying any moral wrongdoing, condemning the condemners, and appealing to higher

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<sup>43</sup> It must be noted that, it is not only women who are turned off or intimidated by the requirements of messenger work. The majority of men cannot hack it or have no interest in being a messenger in the first place, too.

moral issues (e.g., making money to support one's children). Absent from the dirty work approach, however, is an understanding of emotional involvement; identities are treated as entirely cognitive phenomena.

My point is not to deny that stigmatized individuals frame, calibrate, and focus condemnation in a way that does not threaten their assessments of themselves. Throughout the dissertation such processes will be apparent, but such explanations fall short of explaining the messenger subculture. In fact, dirty workers tend to separate their real selves from their work selves. Morticians wear bright cheery clothing when not on the job (Thompson 1991) and topless dancers (in addition to the techniques described above) construct fictional personas to act out on stage (Thompson *et al.* 2003). Even occupations with strong work identities and dense social networks—for example, typographical workers (Lipset *et al.* 1956) and underground miners (Sonnenstuhl and Trice 1987)—do not replicate their labor in their leisure lives the way couriers do in alleycats.<sup>44</sup>

In setting up the theoretical background for my argument, therefore, I am proposing that the existing literature does not provide an adequately clear picture of

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<sup>44</sup> One can think here of Salaman's (1974) study of occupational communities. None of the literature he surveys, nor his own research, indicates that other occupations (even those that could be considered communities) transpose their work and leisure lives the way messengers do. Instead, Salaman notes that architects belong to professional organizations and railway workers are fond of gardening. Moreover, the friendship ties described by Salaman are sparse when compared to messengers. Less than two percent of Salaman's architects have five or more friends in the same occupation. Less than 12 percent of railway men are friends with five or more other rail workers, and an even smaller percentage consider just one colleague a friend. As I have already hinted at, and will explain more in chapter five, messengers have a much stronger network of social relationships derived from their occupation.

the courier world. Certainly, masculinity is one of the materials from which much of the messenger puzzle is cut, and the reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing of stigma represents one piece of the more complex solution. Neither paradigm, however, resolves the question posed by the Seattle businessman in the introduction: what is the lure of delivering packages? As it stands, sociologists are constrained by a theoretical toolkit stocked with instruments ill-suited for analyzing the lived emotions of bike messengers as they manipulate the physical environment of the city. In order to understand the affective appropriation of space the next chapter is dedicated to staking out a somewhat eclectic intellectual territory—the territory necessary to fully assemble an accurate explanation of messengering’s allure. Chapter eight will address the theoretical and empirical matters involved in my practices-based semiotics of messenger style. In chapter four, however, I am simply concerned with explicating the sociological relevance of affect-meaning and emplacement. In doing so, the chapter will delve (at times), rather abstractly, into a set of issues (at this point) not explicitly connected to courier work or the messenger lifestyle. Chapters five, six, and seven, however, *will* provide this connection.

## CHAPTER 4: THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### **Identity and Meaning Revisited**

In the introduction to this dissertation, I claimed (following a long line of sociological research) that job tasks are generally disconnected from what can be considered authentic action (Gorz's distinction between autonomy and heteronomy). Despite occupational sociologists who continue to clamor about the importance of work in people's lives, it is taken for granted that, in contemporary times, most individuals (not just dirty workers) divest their real selves from their work roles (to at least some degree, and many to a very high degree). Generally speaking, work is a means to a paycheck that is a means to actualizing who one really is (e.g., a father, a husband, or a model airplane builder). That is, one endures work to finance avocational central life interests. The inauthentic quality most people find in their occupational roles contrasts sharply with the existence of the messenger subculture. While it is not surprising that messengers (like most people) find meaning in their lives, their fusion of work and leisure is most puzzling.

The first step toward resolving this puzzle involves a sociological analysis of emotions. To put it simply, feelings of authenticity are realized through emotional involvement (Dubin's central life interest). The conditions under which it is generated (e.g., doing Sudoku for pleasure or solving complex problems for pay) are irrelevant. Second, we will see that individual emotions can be transformed into affect-meaning through rituals. Third, emotions (both individual and collective) are always generated through the body. Therefore, they are always emplaced in the material world. By

including space in the analysis of emotions, the otherwise ethereally cerebral subject of social research is incarnated back into the physical setting from which all interaction actually occurs. This means that space itself is part of the sociological research agenda. It is not just the backdrop to action; it is dialectically connected to action. My goal in this theoretical outline, therefore, is to show the inclusion of affect and emplacement as an essential (but ignored) aspect of cultural analysis (i.e., they are an essential part of how actors construct meaning). And, more so, it is only by *combining* these divergent literatures that the lure of delivering packages can be explained and the puzzle of the messenger subculture solved.

### **Affect in Action**

#### *Emotions as Lived Experience*

Emotions present themselves as totally separate from cognitive thought. They appear as unmediated biological sensations arising from within a person's inner being. "The concept 'emotion' refers mainly to strips of experience in which there is no conflict between one and another aspect of self; the individual 'floods out,' is 'overcome.' The image that comes to mind is that of a sudden automatic reflex syndrome [...]" (Hochschild 1979: 553-554). Of course, appearances aside, emotions are neither unmediated nor purely biological; instead, cultural schemas inform them (see Averill 1980; Ratner 2000). Culture defines what we find offensive, frightening, or enjoyable, and emotions, once generated, are further managed through various techniques (from surface acting to more ingrained methods of redefining one's role

within the situation). Hochschild (1983), for example, details how individuals reflexively work with their emotions to meet social expectations.

Much of the sociological literature of emotions deals with specific emotions. Scheff (1990) has developed an entire micro-sociological model based on the experiences of pride and shame. Katz (1999) explores the interactional roots of anger, humor, and shame. Katz's approach is notable for its phenomenological orientation (see Merleau-Ponty 1945 [1962]). That is, while Katz focuses on certain emotional displays (e.g., laughing at reflections in a distorted mirror or crying in police interrogations), he provides a more general theory of how emotions (collectively as a set of phenomena) are experienced. Social research "is far from sensual and richly phenomenological because analysis ignores *how the person bodily lives* the matter being analyzed" (Katz 1999: 334). For Denzin (1984), emotions are a process of being-in-the-world (also see Sartre 1939 [1962]). Which is to say, emotions are lived experience. "What is phenomenologically decisive in these feelings is the uncovering and revealing of the person to herself. These feelings announce themselves and make their presence felt by the person" (Denzin 1984: 85). As Katz notes, "Instead of thinking about transcendent significance, the person registers the implications of the action in progress in a sensual appreciation. [...] One commonly *feels* situations" (332). Emotions are thus embodied experience—what Denzin calls self-feeling.

It is this embodiment that gives emotions an undoubted realness. As Denzin notes, "The emotional experience, in the form of embodied self-feeling, radiates through the person's inner and outer streams of experience. During its occurrence

emotional experience is lived as absolute reality” (59). Wacquant (2004) refers to these lived experiences as “sensual logic” (7), and it is what Crossley (1995) refers to as carnal sociology—the analysis of how sensations of the body are integral to social activity.<sup>45</sup> Bourdieu’s (1979 [1984]) understanding of class-based distinctions, for example, rests on the notion of habitus—a set of emotive bodily dispositions. The habitus is not a discursively organized map of the social world (Katz’s transcendent significance). Instead, it is the practical organization of self-feeling (which consistently reinforces social hierarchies).<sup>46</sup> Ultimately, affect defeats purely cognitive reason in the formation of the self and in the constitution of meaning. As Bourdieu (1980 [1990]) states, “Practical belief is not a ‘state of mind’ [...], but rather a state of body” (68). And, “The body believes in what it plays at” (73).

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<sup>45</sup> In Christena Turner’s (1995) ethnography of Japanese workers, for example, the rationally thought-out arguments of union leaders cannot be separated from the daily routines of factory life that ultimately ground worker consciousness. “In an unexamined and taken-for-granted way, the routines of daily life provided the counterpoint to the special events and collective actions of their ten-year struggle. It was cultural practice without the argument, the grounding of the occasional stirred-up emotions, and the source of assumptions about what was natural, desirable, inevitable, or real” (220-221).

<sup>46</sup> Collins (2004) provides an alternative emotional model for stratification. For Collins, individuals are emotional energy seekers. Age, class, gender, and race influence access to resources used for the generation of emotional bonds (e.g., the ability to afford access to a cricket match or the cultural capital to appreciate modern art), but an individual’s exclusion or inclusion is not based on these resources. It is based on their ability to competently perform in social situations that produce positive emotions among participants. This is why much of the larger public finds sociological explanations suspect. They know that they have not chosen their friends and lovers based on the researcher’s categories; they chose their friends and lovers because they get along with them. While very different, both Bourdieu’s and Collins’ models attempt to theorize past the impasse of an actor’s knowledge of their specific situation and the aggregated social reality of existing data.

*“I,” “Me,” and Flow*

It should be clear by now that affect, as I am using the term, is not about specific emotions, but about the embodiment of lived experience. All experience, of course, has an affective component, but some experiences are saturated in emotions (e.g., sex and skydiving) while others are less so (e.g., filing taxes or flossing teeth). In order to understand the emotional significance of certain activities, our discussion must go back to the sociological foundations of the self. For Durkheim (1893 [1984]), “Two consciousnesses exist within us: the one comprises only states that are personal to each of us, characteristics of us as individuals, whilst the other comprises states that are common to the whole of society” (61, also see 1914 [1973]). Mead (1934 [1964]) describes these two states as the “I” and the “me.” The “me” is the socialized aspect of the self. It is the internalization of the generalized other—the product of an internalized conversation between the self and the expectations of one’s community. Alternatively, the “I” exists only in the moment of action. It is the individual’s creative responses to situations. “The ‘I’ reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitude of others. Through taking those attitudes we have introduced the ‘me’ and we react to it as an ‘I’ (174).

Together, the “I” and “me” form the individual’s personality, but they exist as separate aspects of the mind. This is because the human mind is a reflexive entity that can be both subject and object. Self-consciousness is made possible by the ability to consider one’s self impersonally. For this reason, the “me” is absolutely essential to identity. However, it is the spontaneous action of the “I” which feels authentic to the

agent. It is the “I” that appears to be our true self. As Mead states, “It is there that novelty arises and it is there that our most important values are located. It is the realization in some sense of this self that we are continually seeking” (204). The “I,” therefore, is Denzin’s self-feeling. It is the “I” which threatens to flood out the “me” in interaction.

To actualize the “I” is to be subsumed in the moment of activity—to (momentarily) halt the self-reflexive process. This is what Csikszentmihalyi (1975) refers to as flow. In flow, the tasks an individual must perform are perfectly matched by her skills. In a game of tennis, for example, playing against an opponent far below one’s skill level is boring. Alternatively, playing against an opponent of far superior skill is stressful. In either case, the players are consciously aware of themselves and the game. Matched against someone of equal talent, however, the game takes on an entirely different character. It is at the threshold of boredom and anxiety that the player can truly focus their attention in the moment, and—unlike normal, reflexive thought—*only* in the moment. Under these conditions, the individual becomes *engrossed*. Csikszentmihalyi refers to flow as optimal experience, and it tends to be discussed as a joyful, positive state. But, arguably, moments of blind rage are equally engrossing (e.g., see Katz 1988)—although far less positive. In either case (positive or negative), flow appears as optimal because, lost in the movements of the “I,” actions appears utterly authentic (i.e., instinctual).<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> It should go without saying, the “instinctual” quality of flow—like the seeming biological determination emotions, more generally—is merely an illusion. Flow is

Going back to the occupational literature, individuals fail to identify with their labor precisely because it lacks flow. It is this lack of flow that makes the workplace a site of alienation (i.e., a place of boredom and indifference). As Aronowitz passionately asserts, capitalist (or in Gorz's terms heteronomous) labor does not engross; it estranges. Of course, there are varying degrees of alienation in the workplace (see Blauner 1964), and even seemingly monotonous factory work can be made enjoyable (Burawoy 1979; Roy 1953, 1959; Thompson 1983). Regardless, outside the workplace is where we tend to find flow. In Aronowitz's terms, leisure is where individuals can play, and play is the antithesis of alienated labor (also see Caillois 1958 [1961]; Gecas 1994). Flow is the very essence of play (which is why, as many observe, young children will modify games to keep the tasks and skills of players balanced). Play can take many forms, but what distinguishes it from other activities is its creative, spontaneous character (i.e., the prominence of the "I"). In Burawoy's (1979) ethnography of factory workers, for example, the exploitation of workers loses the veneer of alienation, precisely because the labor process is turned into a game—work is transformed into play (also see chapter nine). Likewise, as we will see in the next chapter, it is the play of courier work that points to the allure of messengering.

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not, in reality, pre-social; it is completely dependent on the "me" for informing the possible options of the "I." This point is more thoroughly elaborated (in non-Meadian terms) in Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration.

*Rituals as Collective Flow*

At this point, the discussion of flow has been discussed as if it is entirely individualistic. Following Mead, though, an individual's ability to experience flow is *not* individualistic. For example, a lone woman kayaking through the rapids may be engrossed in optimal experience, but the "I" which overcomes her is still inseparably tethered to her "me." As such, even solo experiences of flow result from sociological processes (see Lyng 1990; Mitchell 1983). However, as we will now see, the most profound experiences of flow are thoroughly collective. As explained in chapter one, the sociological significance of emotions goes back to Durkheim. For Durkheim, emotions are at the very core of social organization. Studying the religious practices of Australian aborigines (but extracting out to industrial society), Durkheim argues that interpersonally generated emotions—what he calls collective effervescence—produce social solidarity. It is in solidarity that the social state of the self becomes privileged—bonding the community together. The linchpin to Durkheim's model is ritual; rituals produce collective effervescence, and it is, therefore, rituals that maintain society. Less abstractly, in chapter six, we will see how alleycats function as rituals.

Rituals (regardless if they are bike races or funeral rites) stand in stark contrast to the activities of everyday life; individuals congregate together and are focused on the performance of the rite. The ritual, therefore, transports the participants beyond the mundane world. More importantly, rituals involve collective action, and in acting collectively the individual becomes subsumed by the group. "It is by shouting the same cry, saying the same words, and performing the same action in regard to the

same object that they arrive at and experience agreement” (232). This experienced agreement—what Durkheim calls “religious force” (223)—is not felt as coercion, but as individual nature. The source of this force is entirely social, but is obscured by the ritual process and is felt as something supernatural. “Because social pressure makes itself felt through mental channels, it was bound to give man the idea that outside him there are one or several powers, moral yet mighty to which he is subject” (211). It is in ritual, therefore, that the sacred is distinguished from the profane.

It is essential to note that Durkheim’s theory of ritual is both collective *and* effervescent. In contrast to the modern, pejorative use of the term, Durkheim’s rituals are ecstatic events. “The very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation” (217). Just as with play, therefore, flow is the essence of rituals too (Turner 1984). This point may sound counter-intuitive. Play is creative and spontaneous; rituals are structured and predetermined. However, when individuals play together (no matter how creatively or spontaneously) there are always some rules and boundaries or else the game would devolve into atomized nonsense (see Caillois 1958 [1961]). Of course, rituals are not the same thing as play precisely because they have a preordained quality—the rules of a game can be understood as arbitrary, the rules of a ritual cannot. But, the remarkable characteristic of a successful ritual is its ability to take the formulaic and make it appear as the product of spontaneous performance (Rappaport 1999).

The musical performances of the Grateful Dead (or any number of other rock concerts) illustrate this point. On the one hand, the event is completely formulaic. With only minor variations, the band performs songs already written and those in attendance behave in equally predictable ways (singing along, dancing, and spinning to the music). However, engrossed in the concert, all these actions (even when acknowledged by the participants as more or less interchangeable with activities of previous shows and future ones) appear as something generated afresh, in *that* moment.<sup>48</sup> The ultimate power of ritual, therefore, is to take the individual experience of flow and transform it into a collective effervescence that is at once trans-situational, but thoroughly rooted in immediate perceptions. Of course, there is no guarantee that rituals succeed—especially in modern times (Douglas 1970). Alexander (2004) has developed an entire model (incorporating Csikszentmihalyi’s flow) for analyzing the successes and failures of rituals. Success is dependent on engrossment; failure comes from never stepping beyond reflexive awareness of the performance. To merely attend a Grateful Dead concert, therefore, does not ensure that one will be launched into extraordinary heights of exaltation, but under the right circumstances it is possible.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> MacAloon (1984a), for example, stresses that rituals must follow preexisting scripts, but at the same time they “are anything but routine” (9).

<sup>49</sup> Collins (2004) provides a model for the structural factors promoting the successful generation of collective effervescence: bodily co-presence, a barrier to outsiders, a mutual focus of attention, and a shared mood. To these, one could also add Jonathan Turner’s (1999) emphasis on expectations. In order to have a similar focus of attention and shared mood, people must enter a situation with certain expectations. Expectations and co-presence build upon each other, increasing both the crowd’s

From the Durkheimian perspective, the most significant consequence of rituals is the transmutation of emotions. Collectively generated emotions are moved from inside the body of the individual (as self-feelings) onto the objects used in the ritual. This is to say, rituals not only designate the sacred from the profane (by collectivizing lived experience); they denote certain materials (what Durkheim calls totems) as sacred symbols—physical embodiments of the exaltation generated during rituals. These sacred symbols become containers of collective effervescence. In a tangible form, the emotions of the ritual can be transported into mundane daily life. That is, sacred symbols serve as markers, continuously reminding the individual of the power of the collective. To continue with the Grateful Dead example, t-shirts and stickers serve as reminders of the experience of the concert. That is, they not only mark individuals as Deadheads; they invest non-concert life with memories of more remarkable times. This symbolic power is located not only in physical objects, but also in ideas. Ideas, of course, form the myths around which religious doctrines are based. However, for Durkheim rituals precede belief (also see Bellah 1970b; Douglas 1970; Geertz 1966 [1973]; Rappaport 1999).

Together, sacred objects, ideas, and ritual practices that sustain them constitute religion. Which is to say, religion generates its power, not from its ideological

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focus and their mood. This is why even bad jokes can get good laughs from an audience. One can think here of Michael Richards' (most famous from his character Kramer on the TV show *Seinfeld*) meltdown, during a standup comedy performance, into racist diatribes. There was a substantial lag-time between his first outburst and the audience's realization that he was not making jokes (or, at least, not making jokes that they should find funny).

content, but from the communal emotions of ritual activity.<sup>50</sup> It is by acting in unison (regardless of the discursive justifications of those actions) that the embodied experience—that which feels most real—is connected to the group. The desires of the ego are subsumed by the group, but the individual does not consciously bend to the will of the community. Instead, the individual and the community become one. This does not deny the significance of discursive explanations. However, rituals communicate far more than what is contained in myths or written in scriptures (Rappaport 1999). For example, a rite of passage may mark a person's change in status, but any cognitive shift is preceded by a collective emotional experience. In modern times, the hollowness of many rites of passage (a high school graduation, for instance) arises precisely from a failure of the ritual to generate effervescence. As such, the “ritual” is nothing but its discursive explanation (i.e., a transition from childhood to adulthood), and the event, so often lacking in communal ecstasy, feels (for many participants) utterly empty.

Alternatively, in successful rituals, flow becomes *affect-meaning* by connecting otherwise individual self-feeling to the larger collective. In this process the individual feels energized—not only in rituals, but in mundane life fortified with sacred symbols. “The man who has obeyed his god, and who for this reason thinks he

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<sup>50</sup> The reader should remember from chapter one that a Durkheimian perspective of religion is totally removed from issues of divinity and the content of scriptures. Instead, religion is the most elementary form of social solidarity (i.e., the bond that directs individuals egos to the assumed needs of the collective). I use the term “religion” throughout this dissertation only to the extent that I am surmising Durkheim's theories on rituals (and those influenced by him). These are theories that, in their last resort, are about modern, secular societies.

has his god with him, approaches the world with confidence and a sense of heightened energy” (211). Most importantly, “This stimulating action of society is not felt in exceptional circumstances alone. There is virtually no instant of our lives in which a certain rush of energy fails to come to us from outside ourselves. In all kinds of acts that express the understanding, esteem, and affection of his neighbor, there is a lift that the man who does his duty feels, usually without being aware of it” (213). This solidarity is *the* source of meaning for humanity (Rappaport 1999). It is only by connecting with the collective—that which is greater than the individual—that the agent can feel purpose in action and belief.

Durkheim’s understanding of ritual directly connects to Mead’s theory of the self. For both theorists, there is a tension between an actor’s personal desires and her required social roles. Following Mead, the self arises (in part) from internalizing the role of the other, but ego’s behavior is always a process of *mediation* between individual spontaneity and extra-individual norms (also see Durkheim 1914 [1973]). There are times, however, when the “I” and “me” can reach perfect agreement.<sup>51</sup> This is what rituals achieve by collectivizing flow. As Mead explains, “[T]here is a sense of common effort in which one is stimulated by the others to do the same thing they are doing. In those situations one has a sense of being identified with all because the reaction is essentially an identical reaction” (273). In such situations, the “I” and “me” fuse. Like Durkheim’s description of religion, Mead, refers to this state as

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<sup>51</sup> In Turner’s (1967) phrasing, ritual “periodically converts the obligatory into the desirable” (30).

“exaltation” (273). This exalting fusion of the “I” and “me” gives action an *absolute purpose*.<sup>52</sup> “This, we feel, is the meaning of life” (Mead 1934 [1964]: 274). For Bellah (1970a), this meaning comes from the fact that, cognitive reason represents only part of the human experience. The glue of society is not logical reason (i.e., sense-meaning) it is affect-meaning. This is what Geertz (1966 [1973]) calls the “really real” (112)—the lived experience of emotion, generated in collective action.

## **Emplacing Emotion**

### *Spatial Structuration*

Having discussed the affect-meaning, we must now move to the physical context in which it occurs (i.e., the space it is generated)—the emplacement of lived experience. Most of social theory is thoroughly aspatial. To paraphrase Geertz (1973), sociologists don’t study cities; they study *in* cities.<sup>53</sup> Which is to say, researchers tend to treat the environments of social activity as inconsequential. As Gans (1969) explains, “Bad design can interfere with what goes on inside a building, of course, and good design can aid it, but design *per se* does not significantly shape human behaviour” (37-38). Reacting against what he considers to be myopic professional training and class bias on the part of urban planners, Gans insists that the

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<sup>52</sup> To explain this a bit further, private emotions feel authentic; collective emotions feel supernatural. They grip the individual as something moral yet mighty precisely because what is felt so intimately is simultaneously expressed by the larger group.

<sup>53</sup> “The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don’t study villages (tribes, towns, or neighborhoods...); they study *in* villages. You can study different things in different places [...]. But that doesn’t make the place what it is you are studying” (Geertz 1973: 22).

environment cannot overcome the *social* structures shaping one's life. "What affects people, then, is not the raw physical environment, but the social and economic environment in which that physical environment is used." (39; also see Gans 2002).

At the same time, over the last three decades, a growing number of sociologists have shown an increasing interest in space. At its heart, a sociological interest in the raw physical environment revolves around questions of structure and agency. Giddens' (1979, 1984) work, in particular, has spurred interest in socio-spatial theorizing (see Friedland and Boden 1994; Pred 1986; Soja 1980 [1989], 1989a; Werlen 1988 [1993]).<sup>54</sup> For Giddens, agency and structure presuppose one another—what he calls the duality of structure. As a duality, structures are rules (i.e., meaningful schema) and resources (i.e., physical materials) used by systems of social interaction. As such, structures are virtual—they do not exist in time and space. It is systems that have an actual presence. This is a major deviation from typical sociological models. Structural properties organize systems, but structures themselves only exist in the instance of their reproduction by acting individuals.

Giddens calls this process of mediation—between agents and structures (realized in systems of interaction)—structuration. "To say that structure is a 'virtual order' of transformative relations means that social systems, as reproduced social

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<sup>54</sup> Alternatively, Foucault's (1975 [1979]) understanding of the panopticon has also served as a theoretical sounding board for spatialized social theory (also see Foucault 1976 [1980]). However, Foucault's genealogical approach—which removes the subjective from history, leaving only docile bodies subjected to power and knowledge—it antithetical to the hermeneutic approach used in my argument (see Giddens 1981, 1984 for responses to Foucault).

practices, do not have ‘structures’ but rather exhibit ‘structural properties’ and that structure exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations in such practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents” (1984: 17). That is, structures allow for the institutionalization of social practices (i.e., systems) across time and space, but structure itself is an absent totality. “[P]ractices are the situated doings of a subject [...]; structures, on the other hand, have no specific socio-temporal location, are characterized by the ‘absence of a subject,’ and cannot be framed in terms of a subject-object dialectic” (1976: 119). In this way, social structures function like a language. Speakers draw upon the rules of language. “But the very process of drawing upon those rules, or structural properties, serves only to reproduce the overall totality which is the language” (1986: 534). Further, language (like structures more generally) does not exist outside its production and reproduction by social agents.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Sewell (1992) criticizes Giddens’ claim that resources can be virtual. By definition, they are physical materials. Giddens (1984) attempts to stymie this critique by stating, “Some [...] resources (such as raw materials, land, etc.) might appear to have a ‘real existence’ in a way which I have claimed structural properties as a whole do not. [...] But their ‘materiality’ does not affect the fact that such phenomena becomes a resource [...] only when incorporated within the process of structuration” (33). For example, gold is physically real, but the uses for gold are contingent on the maintenance of specific systems of human relations. As a *resource*, therefore, gold is virtual; its value has very little connection to its pre-social properties (i.e., its molecular make-up). In fact, structuration theory is derived, in part, from time-geography (see Hägerstrand 1975). Time-geography is an effort to incorporate human contingencies into urban planning. Which is to say, an acknowledgment that the built environment is utilized by thinking individuals whose behavior cannot (and should not) be perfectly predictable (see below; also see Pred 1981).

If agency and structure presuppose one another, the environment of social activity is anything but inconsequential. Like all other structures, the raw physical environment is “both the medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices” (Giddens 1979: 5). In fact, in a very literal sense, the material world is series of structural forms—buildings and streets, rooms and doors—but these forms are only sociologically relevant when they are utilized in systems of interaction. That is, the obdurate existence of four walls and a roof does not make a building a home. Such a structure becomes a home (and not an office or a prison) because of the social designation of those who use it (or do not use it). As such, the physical environment is a set of “rules and resources.” A place is defined by rules—rules that designate it as different from other sites (e.g., eating in a dining room and sleeping in a bedroom). Resources also define places (e.g., not all dwellings have dining rooms or bedrooms, and even those that do vary in the size and the “quality” of these spaces). In the praxis of daily life, therefore, individuals draw upon the structural properties of a place. This is wonderfully illustrated in Gieryn’s (2002) study of the Cornell Biotechnology Building. From its design, to its occupation, to its reinterpretation (from a site of applied science to a site of educational instruction), actors are not merely constrained; they are enabled by the rules and resources of the building. Richardson (1982) provides similar insights by analyzing how people utilize various parts of the city. The plaza and market, for example, are differing stages with differing norms and objects from which to construct social identities.

*Lived Space*

Giddens' duality of structure is related to what Lefebvre (1976 [1991]) calls the production of space. For Lefebvre, physical, mental, and social spaces must be conceived together; the environment in which we think and act is a product of our thoughts and actions. On one level, this is an obvious point, given the biological limits of our species. If nothing else, what makes us human is our need to alter the world in order to survive in it (Berger and Luckmann 1966). But, the world we build also acts back on us. In Bourdieu's (1970 [1990]) analysis of the Kabyle house, for instance, structural oppositions between male and female—as realized through each sex's logical associations with wet and dry, dark and light, culture and nature—help transfer cultural beliefs into cultural practices (and vice versa). That is, the physical organization of the home is intertwined with the maintenance of a specific Kabyle habitus—one that appreciates a certain type of naturalized oppositions of men and women. As Lefebvre states, "Space is at once the result and the cause, product and producer [...]" (142).

The production of space has three dimensions; space is perceived, conceived and lived. Space is an experienced set of material practices—a mother cooking in the family kitchen, for example. Meanings are also given to these practices—the mother becomes the nurturer while the father becomes the wage earner. It is important to remember here that these practices exist in a space—a house divided into sex-segregated roles (for Western examples, see Hayden 1984; Spain 1992). The first two dimensions offer themselves to a rather static reading; conceptions of space simply

become the perceptions of space—giving the cultural order a naturalized appearance. However, because space is not only determining, but can also be determined, space—as it is lived—can be appropriated by the user (against intended conceptions). That is, the architect cannot predict use. As Borden (2001) explains, skateboarders visualize the city in ways far removed from ordinary perceptions and official conceptions. Rolling, grinding, and ollieing across otherwise utilitarian surfaces, skaters turn handrails, curbs, and steps into play things. As Borden writes, “In the case of the handrail, the skateboarder’s reuse of the handrail—ollieing onto the rail and, balanced perilously on the skateboard deck, sliding down the fulcrum line of the metal bar—targets something to do with safety and turns it into an object of risk” (192). In chapter seven, we will see a similar process with regards to messengers.

Given the theoretical misgivings between Gans and Lefebvre (see Gans 2002), it is more than somewhat surprising to note that Lefebvre’s focus on lived space is (in fact) analogous to Gans’ attack on urban planners. Both theorists understand that space can be appropriated in unintended ways. As Lefebvre writes, “The user’s space is *lived*—not represented (or conceived). When compared with the abstract space of the experts (architects, urbanists, planners), the space of everyday activities of users is a concrete one, one which is to say, subjective” (362). This is precisely Gans’ point about urban reform. The projects of urban planners (i.e., those who conceive city neighborhoods) are often too far removed from the social realities of those who use their creations. Which is to say, building youth outreach centers (or libraries or parks) cannot, by their mere presence, appreciably alter the social life of a neighborhood—in

the ways that planners intend. That is, the projects rarely result in decreased crime or increased cultural capital (also see Small 2004). But, the failure of such projects to produce *intended* results is not the same as thing as the projects having *no* effect.

The difference comes from Lefebvre—attending to the duality of structure—conceptualizing physical space as part of the social world. That is, class, race, gender, and age influence how space is lived, but the place itself cannot be disconnected from this process. “Social relations [...] have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial*” (1976 [1991]: 404). Which is why Gieryn (2000) works to remind sociologists that, “Everything we study is emplaced; it happens somewhere and involves material stuff” (466, also see 2002b). In Pred’s (1986) study of southern Sweden, for example, alterations of land-use patterns precipitated by the 19th century enclosure movement directly relate to concurrent changes in social relationships. That is, emplacement means more than pointing out the obvious: all action exists in space. Instead, it means that spatial and social relationships are intertwined. To exist in space means that alterations to space alter the rules and resources individuals can draw upon in their lives. In Gans’ (1962) research, the youth center in Boston’s West End, instead of inoculating teens from their mischievous ways, simply became a proving ground for working class values (over the stated bourgeois ethic of the center). In the case of Sweden, enclosure dispersed townships and changed farming techniques that completely transformed the distribution of power within communities (e.g., communal organizations became less effective while some landed peasants became direct overseers of village labor).

Following Gans (and other hard-nosed social scientists), the playground or the road to the supermarket are nothing but a physical limit to human agency. Beyond what physics prohibits, people, it is assumed, go about their lives unencumbered. With Giddens and Lefebvre, however, all structures (social and physical) function as rules and resources utilized in interaction. The raw physical environment does not only encumber our lives (or aid in the ease of movement); it also enables us. This is the essential point of Bourdieu's analysis of the Kabyle house; the material world (perceived, conceived, and lived) is part of the habitus (inscribed as it inscribes a cultural values). Soja (1980 [1989]) refers to this as the socio-spatial dialectic—"that social relations of production are both space-forming and space-contingent" (81).

### *Affective Appropriation*

If sociologists have been ambivalent about giving space a chance, geographers have been militant about it. Most famously, Harvey (1973) advocates for a geographical imagination—the connection between individual biographies and geographical positioning (also Gregory 1994; Massey 1984). But, research into the socio-spatial dialectic (regardless of the discipline: anthropological, geographical, or sociological) tends to be derived from aggregate, historical data. One can think here of three very notable examples: Pred's work on Sweden, Soja's (1986) analysis of Los Angeles, and Harvey's (2003) case study of Paris. Pred's specific concern is with the unintended outcomes of spatial organization (also see 1981; 1990b), and Soja (1989b)

refers to “affective geographies” (7), but large scale, historical projects (by their very nature) can only make abstract reference to lived experience.

Alternatively, Bell (1994) uses ethnographic data to understand the moral boundaries residents of an English exurb establish between nature and society. In no small part, these boundaries are marked by emotional attachments to specific places—Soja’s affective geographies—and these emotions are no doubt lived through material space (often against institutional conceptions and presumed perceptions). At the same time, Bell’s analysis is theoretically disconnected from any concern with the socio-spatial dialectic. In fact, most ethnographies that are place-sensitive address neither emotions nor structuration. For example, Fusco’s (2005) study of locker rooms takes great pains to detail the built environment (she even interviewed the locker room’s architect), but there is no attempt to explicate how agency and structure are mediated through space (also see Manzo 2005; Nippert-Eng 2005).

If social interaction is intertwined with the material environment, emotions and space (*ipso facto*) are connected, and this connection must become a focus of sociological analysis. This is not an assertion of the blatantly obvious: individuals become attached to their homes, their hometowns, or their favorite places away from home (see Bell 1997). Instead, I am claiming that affect-meaning—Geertz’s really real—not only happens *at* some place, but is produced *through* space. That is, emotions involve not only the embodiment of lived experience, they also involve lived space (in Lefebvre’s sense of the term). With Borden, for example, we see that skateboarding is not only the reinterpretation of space. The skater’s lived experience

can only happen through an engagement with the space being used. As such, skaters are not unfettered agency, ollieing on top of the city's structure. Instead, skateboarding is realized *within* such space. "In terms of skateboarding's relations to architecture, its production of space is not purely bodily or sensorial; instead, the skater's body produces its space dialectically with the production of architectural space" (101). The skater reads the surface of space to find lines of movement and the body *interfaces* with the physical structure—"a dynamic intersection of body, board, and terrain" (96). It is at this interaction (and only at this intersection) that skaters can produce space on their own terms (terms that have been, in part, constructed by previous conceptions of space). "Above all, it is the engagement with architecture that is important [...], such that the moving body treats architecture as but one projector of space to be interpolated with the projection of space from itself" (107). Again, we will see a similar process with messengers in chapter seven.

The implications of the affective appropriation of space for cultural analysis are potentially profound. In the case of bike messengers, sense-meaning explanations are plausible (i.e., reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing their dirty labor), but fail to explain why messengers have such strong subcultural identities. Aspatial but affect-oriented explanations of messengers (i.e., analyzing messengers solely in terms of flow and ritual) are informative, but miss one of the most distinctive aspects of both the job and the lifestyle—that it is *urban*. In the following three chapters, I will provide empirical data on how messenger labor requires flow, how alleycats function as rituals, and how urban cycling appropriates the city. It is my primary contention

that the messenger subculture cannot be adequately understood without the inclusion of both emotions and space. Chapter eight will demonstrate this point by providing a practiced-based semiotics of messenger style. In this analysis, we will see the interconnection of emotions, space, and culture. In other words, how affect-meaning—generated through the appropriation of the material environment—dialectically informs courier symbols (i.e., the argot, demeanor, and image of messenger style).

At this point in the discussion, a caveat is necessary. Messengers, like Borden's skateboarders, generate emotions (*specifically*) by manipulating the space of the city. In this sense, they are "space workers;" they are paid because they can efficiently travel through urban gridlock. As such, analyzing emotions through the appropriation of physical space is far more relevant for bike couriers than, for example, stamp collectors (who generate emotions, I presume, by researching the history of various forms of postage and diligently collecting and cataloging rare stamps). Therefore, one of the aspects making messengers sociologically valuable—their unique relationship to the city—also makes them less representative. However, because all social activity is emplaced, the affective appropriation of space is a generalizable aspect of the human condition. Messengers may do it uniquely (in a risky, masculine manner), but there are obvious cultural lessons to be learned from how they do it and the significance they attribute to their practices. It anchors sociological analysis concretely back in the material world. The beliefs and practices of social worlds—so often treated as purely arbitrary in research—can be incorporated

into a socio-spatial dialectic, and, thus, account for the power of culture more thoroughly. These things said, with the next chapter, we begin our empirical analysis of the flow of messenger work.

## CHAPTER 5: MESSENGERS AND FLOW (AFFECT, PART 1)

### **Playing in Traffic**

#### *Reciting Scripts and Writing Scripts*

As mentioned in the last chapter, contemporary job tasks rarely engross workers. This is especially true of low-end service occupations (see Dubin 1992). As Sennett (1998) demonstrates, the strength, dexterity, and thought formerly required in much of industrial work is replaced by deskilled button pushing. At least since the times of Marx, theorists have emphasized the monotony of labor. Leidner's (1993) ethnography of McDonald's employees illustrates this point perfectly. Through semi-automated food preparation and computerized cash registers, non-scripted encounters with customers are not possible. Which is to say, workers at McDonald's are shielded from nearly every possible contingency (save, perhaps, robbery or natural disaster). There is nothing to solve—no creative thought is required (or even allowed)—because everything in the establishment (including interactions with customers) have been scripted. The more a workplace is scripted, the more contingency is replaced by predictability, and the less engrossing labor can be. With no doubt, Burawoy's labor process as a game is more the exception than the norm.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> As a point of comparison, the reader can think of the difference between Roy's (1953) description of working as a piece-rate machinist and as an hourly wage machinist (1959). While the hourly machinist had methods for overcoming monotony, these methods were antithetical to the actual work at hand. In other words, whatever enjoyment was to be found came at the expense of production (also see Thompson 1983). Which, of course, is why managers try so hard to keep workers on script.

Parts of the messenger's job, like numerous aspects of all daily life, are semi-scripted. For example, messengers and clients normally behave in rather formalized (and institutionalized) ways when picking up and dropping off packages. Typically, there is a polite, but curt, exchange of simple pleasantries followed by the short conveyance of any necessary information (e.g., where a package is going and who needs to sign for it). Both parties follow a script meant to facilitate the courier's quick departure from the building. In traffic (the true workplace of the bike courier), however, nothing is (or can be) pre-scripted. Instead, messengers must write their story anew each moment. The point of the story, of course, is entirely predictable; messengers want to get where they are going as fast as possible. But, their plot, by necessity, is in continual revision. There are unexpected twists and turns as new problems arise (and are continually compounded). As I will explain below, to go from the Empire State Building to Washington Square Park, for example, involves more than riding a straight line down Fifth Avenue; it requires an infinite series of adjustments (adjustments that get trickier and trickier as the rider's speed increases). It is in these moment-to-moment adjustments that messengers flow. Labor becomes a game for the bike courier, but unlike Burawoy's description of factory work, such play is not ancillary to the occupation—a sugarcoating to an otherwise miserable job. To the contrary, messengering cannot exist without this spontaneous, creative action.

While it is doubtful that any of my respondents are familiar with the work of Csikszentmihalyi, it is remarkable how many used the word “flow” in describing their

work.<sup>57</sup> Good messengers, it is said, are able to flow with, through, and around other traffic. And, of course, as we saw in chapter two, it is this ability to negotiate the urban morass that makes bicycle delivery a valuable part of post-industrial production. The flow that bike couriers have in traffic relates directly to the emotional flow of optimally lived experience. Messengering requires an engagement of both mind and body. That is, unlike routinized forms of labor, urban cycling requires constant adaptations to new challenges. Instead of following scripts, bike couriers (by necessity) must play—*play in traffic*. As one messenger commented, “I dodge cars for money!” (Silver, quoted in Bialobos 2000: 10).

### *Routing Through the Urban Maze*

For the bike messenger, traffic is an ever-shifting puzzle. To borrow the title of the New York Bike Messenger Association’s former publication, the city’s streets are an “urban death maze.” The first step in unraveling the puzzle of the messenger subculture, therefore, is to understand that the job itself is an endless series of puzzles that messengers solve. Talented messengers do this with an air of inevitability. That is, they appear to flawlessly make their way through seemingly impervious traffic as if they choreographed their movements with the other users of the road. Less talented messengers also work their way through the maze, but in a less efficient manner. Their movements appear less choreographed and reveal a process of trial and error.

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<sup>57</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, in fact, calls flow a native category. That is, he uses the term because his informants—chess players, rock climbers, dancers, and surgeons—repeatedly used the word to describe their activities.

The connection between the puzzle of traffic and the cultural significance of physical space will be addressed in chapter seven. In this chapter, however, the focus will be solely on how urban cycling requires flow (i.e., an engrossment of the rider's senses).

In thinking about traffic as a puzzle and the flow it can generate, my field notes for May 29, 2003 are illustrative. "I rode behind [Clinton] this morning. He is such a smooth rider. It was like the seas were parting for him. Following in his wake everything just cleared out of our way. As soon as he turned off, the tide of cars poured back in, and I was once again drowning within them." Riding behind him, it honestly appeared that cars were moving out of Clinton's way. I wrote in my field notes that it was "eerie." Clinton, an experienced New York messenger, had intimate knowledge of how pedestrians and vehicles move. In comparison, I had nowhere near the same skill-set. When our paths diverted, I was left to make my own choices, and those choices were far less efficient.

The eeriness of Clinton's riding deserves greater explanation. To quote one messenger, "Let me tell you something about being the best in New York. It's not about being this fast [...]. It's about having a sense of direction and [knowing] where you're going. If you know where you're going, and you know how to get there, that's the most important thing. You ain't got to be fast." (Kid, quoted in Sutherland 2006). In other words, as discussed in chapter two, it is not a rider's velocity that matters; it is how she *routes* herself. But, routing has two components. There is the typical use of the word, what I will call a macro-component—the roads and shortcuts a courier uses. Then, there is a micro-component—the small choices a rider makes within his larger

course of travel (i.e., moment-to-moment adjustments). This micro-routing is about whether a cyclist goes left or right around a slowing car, or if they should take the left, middle, or right of a lane going into a turn. Urban cycling involves a countless number of such tacit decision-making. Taken together, these choices can shave minutes (not just seconds) off a rider's traveling time. In other words, knowing where you're going and knowing how to get there involves far more than having a cognitive map of the city (e.g., knowing Washington Square Park is due south from the Empire State Building).

Sarah, in describing the tacit knowledge of urban cycling stated, "I think people look at us when we're riding and they think we're being reckless. But, actually, our eyes and our ears, and everything are in touch with what is going on around [us]. You know that door is going to open before it opens. [...] Doing it everyday, you learn things that other people don't." In fact, almost all experienced couriers highlight their ability to foresee the future of traffic. Jordan claimed, "You totally see two seconds into the future at all times." To this Robin added that riding in the city is, "Less reacting and more predicting." As Rhonda expanded, "You know those situations where you're riding behind a car, and you just go to the left, and you don't know why, and all of the sudden they swerve off to the right. Had you been there you would have been killed, but something in you said, 'Don't go there.' It's just a sense that you build up from being on your bike ten hours a day." None of this, however, is to assert that couriers believe they are invincible. These riders are equally quick to point out that there is not always something in them warning them of danger.

As Robin added, “You can’t predict everything.” But, the more time they spend on their bikes, the more riders hone their senses and build up a reserve of knowledge that allows the experienced messenger to really flow (in both senses of the term) in traffic.

Conversely, when I asked Annabel, a rookie, if she liked her job she replied, “Overall it’s fun, but some days it’s frustrating.” When I ask why, she answered, “Pedestrians and cars get in my way and I can’t flow.” At the same time, Annabel realized that with more training she could flow. “I realize that you can always have flow. When a car pulls out in front of me, I don’t have to hit my brakes.” Months later, Annabel proudly (and somewhat sarcastically) referred to herself as an “artist” after Max, a veteran messenger, complimented her increasing skills at urban cycling (i.e., in keeping her flow). In describing the riding knowledge he had obtained since working as a messenger, Bill explained, that now he can “flow through traffic. [...] Whereas before I probably would have either given the pedestrian the right of way or let the car go the right of way. But, finding those ways to absolutely get myself out of anybody’s way and still keep moving, it’s something I never really did before.”

Beyond moving around and between pedestrians and other vehicles going in the same direction, messengers also use their micro-routing talents to get through cross-traffic. Which is to say, couriers run red lights (often times, *a lot* of red lights). As explained in chapter two, the best bike messengers have an exceptional understanding of time and space. The reader will remember my description of Vinny traversing what I believed to be impenetrable traffic on Broadway. Andreas, in describing riding styles, said of Vinny, “Have you ever seen [him] ride? It is not that

he rides that fast, but he can get through traffic [...]. He can use every little space between cars.” Of all their behaviors, running red lights and stop signs is what makes messengers seem the most reckless to outsiders (this issue will be discussed more in chapter seven). Of course, many (if not most) commuters and recreational cyclists will do little more than a “rolling stop” through intersections when no clear danger is present. For messengers, though, what constitutes a clear danger can be vastly different, and the speeds at which they assess situations often far quicker. Which is why Sarah notes that outsiders view messengers as reckless. Steve, venting against what he considers the foolhardy practices of other cyclists, stated:

[Bicycle commuters] will pass you from here to that poll, which is not more than 12 or 14 feet away, and they’ll pass you at a high rate of speed going to a red light, and they’ll stop at that red light right in front of you. I’ve already been looking at that red light for like 10 seconds. I already know what I’m going to do when I get to that red light. And, those people are like jamming past you just to hit on their fucking brakes and have no idea what’s coming at them. Ok, you want to do that? I’m already looking at three different directions coming at me, and I’m just going to keep riding my bike at the same speed. You just blew past me to get to that red light and stop. I’m going to keep riding my bike right through that thing and not disrupt the flow of traffic or anything like that.

At the most basic level, messengers tend to have a confidence that they can fit between cars that other riders might balk at. As Andy explained, “When you’ve been on the road a long time with cars, you know how it goes, when you see that opening, and you know if you can make it or not. And, anybody else who looked at it would be like, ‘You’re fucking insane,’ but you’re not. You just know exactly how fast you’re going and how fast they’re going and you can do the math.” At the more advanced levels, running red lights is more than a progressively greater faith that one can dart

straight across an intersection. No matter how well one can do the math, there is a point where it will no longer add up—especially on roads with more than one lane of cars. Instead, messengers learn to keep their speed coming into an intersection, turn to go with the cross traffic and then swerve—lane by lane—to the other side. While done in a relatively short span of time and space (an intersection is only but so wide), this technique allows the rider to make various adjustments to her speed to allow cars to pass or to pass cars, as she sees fit.

### **Messengering as a Game**

#### *The Labor Process as a Game*

Under any circumstances, bicycling in city traffic requires a dedication of one's senses; there are too many variables for the rider to not be attentive to their surroundings. The micro-routing decisions messengers make require that the rider's mind must be even more focused. Urban cycling for messengers, therefore, often necessitates a rider to be fully engrossed in their action. As Bill stated, "It's not necessarily a logical thing. You're not sitting there analyzing. You don't know why you're doing these things, but your mind is occupied and kind of taking in the fact that there is a car with its left turn signal on over here, there is a pedestrian right there [...]." Or as Howie indicated, "I don't know how the mind works. I'm not consciously saying, 'Should I go?' or 'Should I stop?' I'm making decisions really fast." This is precisely the sort of instinctual quality of the "I" that makes creative, spontaneous action appear authentic. As Rhonda said, "[It is] a natural thing that your

body just does, without even really thinking about it.” At the same time, this “natural” action occurs within the framework of an occupation. Which is to say, it is in making deliveries that bike couriers feel authentic. This is a major observation and will be discussed throughout the dissertation. To begin, if messengers play in traffic, their games must have boundaries to give their actions purpose. For messengers, the constraints of their play (e.g., having fixed pick-up and drop-off points) relate directly to their paychecks. This provides an interesting combination of the skillful leisure pursuits paramount to identity formation with what might otherwise be considered a dangerous, demeaning, and strenuous job.<sup>58</sup>

The game messengers play is delivering packages. The macro- and micro-routing decisions couriers make are only relevant to the degree that they facilitate more deliveries (and, of course, not getting the rider injured or killed in the process). In explaining their work (to insiders, not to outsiders), messengers will occasionally liken their labor to other forms of delivery (to emphasize that what they do is, in fact, very mundane). As Kyle noted, “By far, I am a glorified mailman.” But, while at its most abstract level, bike couriers are just moving paper from one place to another (a task that hardly seems entertaining) the glory, so to speak, comes from the game. Instead of drudgery, every package is an opportunity. The workday is the game day, and the tally of one’s deliveries is the score. It is a game played largely against one’s

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<sup>58</sup> To reiterate what was stated in chapters one and four: “[T]he declining possibilities for creative self-realizing action in the economic and other institutional spheres in modern society, can be compensated for in skillful leisure-time pursuits of play, particularly those forms of play that involve skill” (Gecas 1994: 146).

self, but one's employer and one's peers do take note of both over- and underachievers. In the next chapter, we will see how the game of delivery (specifically, the danger of playing the game at high speeds) is sanctified in alleycats.

For Burawoy, factory production can become a game when workers are paid a piece-rate and are, thus, unsure of the day's outcome. Conducting participant observation, Burawoy became as immersed in the game of factory production as the workers he studied (also see Roy 1953). Like Burawoy, working as a messenger in New York, I quickly found myself enraptured by the game. As a commission rider, the better I played the game, the more money I could make. However, I was more concerned with the symbolic importance of the game. The more deliveries I completed in a day, the more I demonstrated to myself and to others that I was less a rookie and more a "real messenger." As Burawoy writes, "The differences between making out and not was thus not measured in the few pennies of bonus they earned but in their prestige, sense of accomplishment, and pride" (89).<sup>59</sup>

For Henry the piece-rate system not only provides enjoyment, but a chance to realize one's full earning potential. In talking about why he would not want to be a dispatcher, Henry explained, "The money is not as good [...]. You're on a salary [...]. Being a messenger you can earn as much money as you want to make, or as much money as you *can* make." Here, Henry emphasizes the importance of uncertainty.

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<sup>59</sup> Prestige, of course, is an extrinsic reward, but the essential point here is that the prestige is not measured in monetary units. Instead it is measured in the non-monetary goals of the game—being skilled at urban cycling (or in Burawoy's case, being adapt at machining various components).

Working as a dispatcher, an individual knows what he will make. Working as a commission messenger, there is always the chance to make out better (and the threat of making out worse). The issue here goes deeper than pay. Many people can and do make more money as dispatchers (and are less likely to incur job related injuries and receive traffic citations). Instead, the issue is self-sufficiency—of making as much money as one’s individual talents permit. Henry’s comments about dispatching are echoed in Culley’s (2002) frustrations at a daily guarantee. “Sure I was riding my bike, sure I was free to navigate my own way through the city without any boss or manager telling me how to do my job, but I didn’t feel that I had a chance to succeed. No matter how hard I worked, I could never significantly compete with their guarantee pay. Every check would be a statement of what I couldn’t accomplish” (97).

Commonsense, of course, concurs with Culley and Henry’s assessment of commission riders. Messengers risk their lives and terrorize other users of the road to make *more* money. As the reader should remember from chapter one, an editorial from *The New York Times* asks, “What motivates those cyclists who whiz along the blind side of traffic lanes, plunge through intersections against the light and otherwise terrorize New York City drivers and pedestrians? For the worst offenders, the answer is money.” However, the prestige and pride of the game hold true even when money is removed from the equation. This is another major point; the authenticity of messenger work (i.e., its flow) is separate from purely monetary concerns. Which is to say, for the worst offenders it is not money at all—it is flow (played for its own

sake). Only a tiny portion of the Warriors' participants, the reader should remember, left the event with more money; most returned home with far less.

Negating the importance of his commission, Bob stated, "No matter how bad my day is, if I get a direct rush then I just go [makes the motions of riding fast]. [...] This job isn't about money. It is about having fun anyway." Scott, paid by the hour, explained, "There are actually real times when there are [extremely hard-to-meet deadlines], where, if you wait at red lights, you are not going to make the job. But, almost 90 percent of the time it's not like that. I want to get it done as fast as possible. Even if I have like an hour or something to get eight blocks, it is like I want to be there in one second. So, I'll just run every red light. It's funner to go way faster." To understand why messengers work harder (and, consequently, make a dangerous job more dangerous) for non-financial rewards is to rethink much of how sociologists (and non-sociologists) conceptualize work, and goes a long way in describing the lure of delivering packages (also see chapter nine). As Sarah, in explaining why she does not like slow days, said, "For me, at least, it's not even because of commission, but because I don't want to sit here anymore, and I don't want to ride in circles for no reason."

So far, the discussion of messengers in traffic has only covered what I call the micro-components of routing—the tacit dimension of negotiating the city. At the discursive level, however, there are the macro-components of routing—which streets a rider takes and what order she does her deliveries. These cognitive issues of routing are a major part of the messenger game, and constitute a popular subject of discussion

(especially in Seattle where, because of the hills downtown, a change of one block can have a noticeable effect on one's ride). Routing at this level means, first, knowing one's current location, the various locations one needs to get to, and what streets provide the most direct route (i.e., basic map knowledge). Second, it can involve shortcuts—alleyways, parking lots, or sidewalks that provide even more direct connections between places. Third, it involves knowing the buildings one will be entering—elevator and entrance locations, floor numbers, security measures, staircases, etc. Finally, previous experience with clients can influence what order packages should be picked up (e.g., if a client regularly calls in jobs before they are ready, the rider may want to make another pick-up or drop before going to that office).

I have focused on the micro-routing because it is the less obvious component of urban cycling and a more difficult concept to grasp (for insiders and outsiders alike). The macro component of routing, however, is a major part of the game. When riders are busy, they are not just holding one or two packages; they may be juggling well over ten jobs. Deciding one's macro-route (i.e., the order in which they will make their picks and drops and the streets they will take to do them) is a substantial cognitive challenge (and one that is enjoyable in its own right). As we saw with the Warriors Fun Ride, both macro- and micro-routing are part of alleycats. That is, riders must figure out how (at both levels) to get from one checkpoint to the next. This will be discussed more in chapter six.

*From Flow to Edgework*

The creative, spontaneous actions required in urban cycling allow messengers to achieve optimal experience in their labor. Which is to say, in messengering, the rider is engrossed in the spontaneity of the “I.” Of course, messengers are not always flowing. There are times that the job is slow and boring. But, as Scott said, there are also times when, unless riders push their skills to the very limit, the deadline will not be met. It is at these times when the messengers not only act without conscious reflection (as Bill and Howie explained), but willfully risk their bodily safety to make a delivery. In these situations, the flow of the game becomes what Lyng (1990) calls edgework. Lyng uses edgework to describe intense mental and physical engagement brought about by individuals intentionally placing themselves in extremely dangerous situations (e.g., drug binging, motorcycle racing, or skydiving). Edgeworkers take the optimal experience of flow and raise the stakes by inserting their own corporeal safety into the equation. As Marco described, “You get that kind of adrenaline rush, and you kind of look back and say, ‘Whoa, man, I could have been killed by this car and this and that.’ It’s shit you don’t realize when you’re riding because you kind of zone everything out except for the cars within a couple of inches from you.”

Lyng attempts to draw a strong distinction between his theory of edgework and Csikszentmihalyi’s flow. If flow is at the threshold of boredom and anxiety, Lyng posits edgework as crossing well into the territory of anxiety (for that is what pushing the edge means). On one level, Lyng is certainly right; the flow generated in a challenging game of chess or a tense match of tennis should be differentiated from

activities in which a person is flirting with their own death. However, this is a difference of degree not kind. The “experiential anarchy” (864) described by Lyng is simply a more extreme version of flow’s instinctual character (which the reader should remember is also an illusion). Therefore, I subsume edgework within the larger concept of flow. Lyng is correct to draw attention to the fact that edgeworkers find release in what outsiders would find as highly stressful, if not terrifying (i.e., far beyond the happy of medium of flow). But, again, this is a matter of degree. While Lyng’s respondents use adjectives like “stress” and “anxiety” to describe their experiences, their ability to both survive and desire its repetition belie the fact that, edgeworkers are, in fact, simply engrossed in tasks perfectly matched by their skills (i.e., in flow).

The value of denoting edgework as a distinct type of flow is to acknowledge that flow is a generic process of optimal experience (one that is generally enjoyable, and always authentic), but, at the same time, to observe that when a person’s mortal self is on the line, the successful completion of the experience becomes more than optimal—it is essential. As Lyng writes, “In contrast to the aims of normal, day-to-day behavior, the immediate goal of one’s actions in edgework cannot be regarded as trivial. The point is survival, and most people feel no ambivalence about the value of this goal” (881). There is, perhaps, a seeming contradiction here. Scott’s claim that, even when he is not technically rushed, he still feels compelled to take risks seems to imply that messengers are, in fact, ambivalent about the goal of survival. The same, of course, can be said for the edgeworkers in Lyng’s study. If they were so serious about

survival, they would not pop pills, race motorcycles, or jump out of airplanes. However, the risks (regardless of how outsiders would assess them) are calculated (with insider knowledge). Individuals weigh their talents with the tasks ahead and plan accordingly. As Sarah stated, “I don’t think I’m reckless, I guess. And, I mean, sometimes the nature of it is, you have to pull moves. Because, your life depends on cutting that turn the right way. Maybe it was a reckless turn, but maybe the alternative would have been worse.” Messengers put their skills to the test because it is what they are paid to do (whether it is piece-rate or hourly), and (more importantly) because it is more fun to go fast. When I asked Max, for example, what his favorite part of being a messenger was, he replied that it was the same as his favorite part of riding bicycles: “dipping into corners at about 30 miles an hour.” He went on to claim, “If there is one thing that gets me high, gets my rocks [off], everything, my adrenaline, [it is] flying through traffic. [...] I do it because I love working. *I love to ride my bike.*”

## **Creative Work**

### *Alienation and Engrossment*

As described in chapter four, work (generally) is alienating because it lacks flow; it does not engross. As Aronowitz (1973) states, “While clock-watching is a characteristic disease of those burdened with alienated labor, those engrossed creatively are oblivious of the passage of social time or the dimensions of physical space. We ‘lose ourselves’ and cease to measure our activities in so many units of

minutes and hours [...]” (62).<sup>60</sup> This is why the workers in Burawoy’s study consent to higher levels of exploitation. As he explains, “Playing the game eliminated much of the drudgery and boredom associated with industrial work” (89). The non-reflexivity described by Aronowitz is intensified by the extreme flow found at the edge of survival. As Jordan stated:

The job is sort of like a game anyway. You claim like six jobs in like six different parts of town. You’re exercising and you’re breathing heavy, and you’re next to dead because you haven’t had time to get lunch or whatever, but then you have to exercise your head as well, to keep you upright, to keep you from getting doored or getting sideswiped or getting hit or whatever, and you also have to totally be able to route yourself and plan where you’re going. It is like totally a game. It is the most fun job I will *ever have in my life*, without a doubt.

In my own field notes, I often described the joys I found during the workday. For example, on July 3, 2002, I wrote, “Despite the heat [...] it was a fun day. I got three sweet little runs at the end of the day [...]. It was fun because I was just rushing to get the jobs dropped off as close to five as I could. It was like 4:40, 4:55, and 5:20 (I feel like that could have been faster, but I was flying as best I could).” Or, as I wrote almost a year later on June 5, 2003, “I had one crazy [...] rush at the start of the day. It was sort of stressful, but it was also fun.” At CLS when I would ask fellow riders how their days were going, their answers were almost always couched in terms of how many rush jobs they were assigned. Bill, in particular, would explain his day

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<sup>60</sup> Clearly, the game of messengering requires attentiveness to time—the packages must be delivered by their deadlines. The messenger’s attention to time, though—like a basketball player attending to the shot clock—is tacit. It is not clock-*watching*. It is an embodied sense of time, distinct from the very disembodied cognition of impatiently waiting for empty time to pass. It is, instead, filled time—flooded with one’s subjective being (see Thompson 1967).

in these terms: “I got some good jobs, some ten minute, double rushes.” This sort of answer is especially remarkable from CLS (and other hourly) riders because they make no extra money for doing rushes. Still, they are the most coveted jobs. Marco, at a loss for words, described it as a “runners high.”

For most people, the mental and physical engagements required in their workplace are (at best) marginally, and only rarely, flow-like. In contrast, the ways in which messengers describe their busy and slow times denote just how significant (in an almost spiritual sense) the flow of messengering can be. Conversations I had with Stan are telling in this regard. A messenger of several years in the Midwest, Stan moved to New York and got an hourly job requiring very little riding. I saw Stan waiting around one day for another delivery, and he commented, “I hate this. You do a job and then just sit around. You don’t really do the job.” The point being, “the job” is speeding through traffic, not standing still. Not only did Stan assume his work should not be dull, but he felt cheated that he was not given more work. Stan only did around eight jobs a day, and had the rest of the time free. Although he had a guaranteed wage and could travel anywhere in the city when not on a delivery, Stan constantly complained of boredom. He clearly missed the excitement of making rushed deliveries.

As explained in chapter two, there are major differences between messenger work and other forms of employment. Most workers, if they are to get paid, must stay at their workplace. Stan, however, could go anywhere he desired in Manhattan while on standby. As a case in point, Henry and Rob (who were both paid commission)

reminisced about a summer where they made no money because they stopped working around noon every day to get drinks and eat chicken wings in Times Square. As Rob explained, “It would be like noon and I’d be like I want to stick around and make some money, and [Henry would] be like, ‘There isn’t going to be any more work, lets go drink.’” Beyond chicken wings and drinks, when on standby, messengers can run errands, make phone calls, and read. As a case in point, I was able to do a bulk of the readings (and even some of the writing) for my graduate field exams during the slow spells at CLS. One Seattle courier, tired of listening to other riders complain, summed up messenger work as follows: “You’re either hanging out getting drunk or you’re delivering a package.” His point being, slow or not, there is nothing to complain about. However, while messengers cherish the freedom to do what they want when not making a delivery, most cherish the thrill of the game far more.

To fully understand why the thrill is so desirable, we must again turn to Lyng. In pushing the edge, individuals experience a sort of “hyperreality” (861). That is, by focusing attention only on the factors necessary for survival, actors feel “a sense of cognitive control over the essential ‘objects’ in the environment or a feeling of identity with these objects” (861). At the extremes reaches of flow, therefore, individuals are not only engrossed; they actually feel omnipotent. An article in *Urban Death Maze* wonderfully captured these sensations:

The line is not an easy thing to describe.<sup>61</sup> [...] The line demands one hundred percent of my attention. I’m in complete harmony with my

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<sup>61</sup> A line is a common cycling term used to denote one’s micro-route of travel. A rider must find her line through a turn or his line through an intersection. In my earlier

bicycle. The red lights are not an issue; the line [goes] right through the cross-town traffic. [...] A feeling of omnipotence washes over me and all fear and hesitation is gone. [...] The line knows nothing of traffic regulations, it just burns before me commanding I follow. Everything except me and my bicycle moves in slow motion, spinning out of our way whether they see us or not. It's musical the way everything flows together, as if orchestrated by some unseen conductor. [...] I've achieved perpetual motion, and I'm not stopping for shit. [...] All extraneous thoughts have left me. My mind is in a state of such absolute clarity that I don't even have to think of my next move. My bike moves by itself perfectly in tune with my instincts. [...] The moment ends rather abruptly [...]. So I go back to the grind, turning around to grab the packages I missed, but I don't lose sight of the fact that for a few brief moments I was the center of the universe. And none of you motherfuckers could touch me (Jason 1999: 9).

Likewise, Scott, reacting to another messenger's comment that when in the right zone you are invincible, said, "I don't know how true it actually is that when you're in a zone you're invincible, but for the most part you feel invincible downtown." Or as Kyle explained, "I love [...] riding in traffic and the feeling of knowing that pretty much nothing is going to get in my way anymore, and I can just flow. It's skilled riding, too. It uses every skill I have on the bike and uses them all. It takes everything I can do to make it all happen, and make it happen quickly and smoothly."

The messengers' game, therefore, not only eliminates drudgery (as Burawoy describes it), but draws the courier into a world in which her "instincts" appear perfectly attuned to the environment. This is an immensely enjoyable state. Whereas many people struggle to find this sensation even in leisure (see Csikszentmihalyi

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description of Clinton's riding, I was following his line (and not making my own). In this case, however, the author is using the term to describe something more unique. He is telling of what might be thought of as a super-line—moments when the rider perfectly pilots a course through seemingly unpredictable traffic.

1975), messengers are able to actualize this optimal experience in their paid labor. For this reason, Scott described messengering as “the biggest non-job I’ve ever had.” Or, to use Howie’s analogy, “the urban equivalent of mountain biking is bike messengering.” Which is to say, the joys of mountain biking, which is a popular leisure time activity, can be had for pay by working as a bike courier.

### *Identification with the Occupation*

Thinking about messengering in terms of flow, the lure of delivering packages is less mysterious. While by no means always enjoyable, messengering, far more than most occupations, involves elements of play and at times can become edgework. As we have seen, Scott barely considered it work. Similarly, Rick claimed, “I’m going to work, but I love it!” and Margot, thinking back to her first week as a messenger, recounted, “[The dispatcher] sent me out to 1100 Dexter North [an address just outside Seattle’s downtown core], and it was sunny out. I’m like, ‘I cannot believe I get paid for this shit.’” Sarah, in her characteristically thoughtful and articulate manner explained:

Some days I think, ‘Where would I be without this job?’ And some days, I’m like you know what, it’s a nine to five, I’m working for the Man just as much as anyone else is working for the Man. [...] I’m still working for the Man, but I think that there is also... I’m also doing it for me. I think if I was still working at [a coffee shop], what about that is doing it for me? I can’t imagine. Or, if I had a job as a receptionist or somewhere else downtown, I don’t know how that would be giving me as much as I feel this job gives me. [...] There is a satisfaction and a joy that I get out of this job, even if my face may not be showing it most of the time. There is a joy that I get out of this that I don’t get out of any other job. When I was working with kids, it was satisfying because education is an amazing thing. But, it’s not like that *joy*. Most

days I actually enjoy coming to work, you know. To me that's huge. I don't like getting up in the morning *ever*, but I don't dread coming into work. [...] Most [non-messengers] can see that I get something out of this, but they don't get it. People tell me I should quit messengering, and, to me, you know, I can't. I just can't. One day I will. I'm not going to do this until I'm, whatever, I don't know how old. One day I will quit. And, that's the kind of weird thing about this job. Everybody who does it knows they can't do it for the rest of their lives. Most jobs, if you want to keep doing for the rest of your life, you probably could. But, this job, you physically can't, you know. There is going to come a time when you can't do this job anymore.

Unlike typical workers, who make a compromise between the satisfactions they find in leisure activities and the pay offered in non-gratifying paid labor, messengers emphasize that they are paid to play (although, admittedly, they are not paid much).

The story of Jordan is illustrative here. When I met Jordan he was no longer working as a messenger. After a serious bicycle accident (which occurred when while working), he got a job at a successful independent record label. Originally from the Midwest, it was actually the job he had moved to Seattle hoping to get. By most people's standards (or even by his own earlier standards), Jordan had moved on to a far better occupation. He now had a career (in the typical sense of the term) with financial security, benefits, and a fair amount of social prestige (at least among those who follow Seattle's revered independent music scene). In fact, Jordan was featured in a Seattle weekly newspaper's column about people with dream jobs. Despite this Jordan, now healed from his injuries, wants back on the road. "I always think about coming back. I just went and talked to [company name] the other day in hopes that, 'When a spot opens up, I want it.' That is what I told them. It is weird because, I have a good job now, but I wasn't ready to quit when [the accident] happened."

Jordan has stayed connected to his friends in the occupation. In fact, I met Jordan because he had come to the Monorail to socialize with other messengers after work. The surprising part is, Jordan still kept up with the social minutiae of Seattle courier life. “Most of the people I’m really good friends with now are messengers or ex-messengers, but even after a year of being out of being a bike messenger, I still kind of keep tabs on who’s new. It is really, really weird. ‘Who do they work for?’ ‘How much are [company name] riders making these days?’ [...] For whatever reason, I totally care about it still. It is completely insane.” Jordan conceded that these questions should have no bearing on his current life, but (regardless) he felt compelled (even when employed elsewhere) to stay connected to the most fun job he will ever have in his life.

Even when physical injuries are removed from the equation, leaving the occupation does not necessarily mean leaving the subculture. Few people actually schlep packages for more than five years, but lifestyle messengers continue to race and party long after they have “retired.” As one dispatcher remarked pejoratively, “They don’t want to leave this life. It’s all they want to do.” Just as with Jordan, these messengers reminisce about their days on the road. Tony, for example, worked as a messenger for two years. When his girlfriend became pregnant he decided he needed a safer job that paid more money. Working in the mailroom of an advertising agency, Tony was miserable. I ran into him one day after he had gotten off work. He was elated to be out of the office and wanted to ride. He simply shouted, “Lets go play!” and darted off into traffic. While his new job provided security (on many levels), he

now found himself in a job that lacked the joy described by Sarah. In talking about messengering, Tony commented, “It’s tearing me up not doing it.” Likewise, the owner of a New York courier company lamented, “When I started the messenger service I thought, ‘OK, great. I’m finally going to be making the boss’s end.’ And I tell you, after all this time, I wish I was a messenger, still. Out of everything I’ve done in my life, that’s what I wish I was still doing. So enjoy it while you’ve got it” (Steve, quoted in Sutherland 2006).

Despite the fact that quitting the job does not mean abandoning the subculture, many messengers feel guilt and apprehension over the prospect of moving on. With six years under his belt, Adam stated, “I can’t take another winter.” But, he sounded dejected telling me about looking for a job in graphic design. As one New York messenger explained, “It’s a subculture. It’s more than just a career. It’s like you feel that if you leave you will be dissing your subculture by leaving” (Eric, quoted in Sutherland 2006). But, as Sarah noted, whether mental or physical, there is a point past which few can remain. The reality of this fact, though, can be a source of tension. Alternatively, when I returned to New York in 2007, Henry had nothing positive to say about messengers. Once a regular attendant at CMWCs around the globe and a staple supporter of local alleycats, Henry now claimed, “I’m over that scene.” However, he said this at a barbecue being held at his house where nearly everyone present was a current or former messenger. Moreover, he even invited a traveling messenger (in town on his way back to the West Coast after attending the CWMC in Dublin) to the barbecue. Henry did not know him, but felt compelled to treat this

messenger with hospitality. The reader should remember from the description of the Warriors Fun Ride that, the messenger subculture dictates accommodating traveling couriers. The point being, even though he professed to be no longer interested in the subculture, Henry is too thoroughly enmeshed in it to actually leave.

There are two types of occupational identifications at stake here. First, as Sarah and Tony show, messengers identify with the flow found in the job—they do not want to leave it, and they lament it if they do. With Henry, the attachment appears to be largely social—he is enmeshed in the subculture. As Jordan shows, loving to play the game and caring about its players are two sides of the same coin. Sidelined by injury, Jordan’s attachment to flow is manifested by keeping up with the social aspects of the scene—who’s working where and who’s earning what. The next chapter will discuss more explicitly how the flow of the job relates to a social attachment to the subculture. For now, though, we will turn to the flow-producing alternatives couriers turn to when (and if) they “retire” from messengering.

### *Alternatives*

Because of my position in the field—at first a rookie New York messenger and later a semi-experienced but new to the area San Diego and Seattle messenger—I do not have systematic data on what occupations people leave messengering to go into. I only got a chance to briefly know the vast majority of messengers who I came into contact with—to ask them a few questions about their life before we parted ways. Moreover, in a city like New York, I only had the chance to directly speak with a

small portion of the city's vast courier population. As such, I've only been able to track the lives of my key informants, and many of those have disappeared over the years since the research started. I cannot speak for messengers as a whole, but for the more dedicated subcultural participants—those truly wedded to the thrills of the game. For them, leaving is often decided for them by injury (like Jordan) or circumstance (like Tony). Alternatively, some riders are incorporated into the messenger company's administrative structure. Dispatching as was mentioned in chapter two, can, like riding, be a satisfying game (the cognitive game of macro-routing a series of riders, but without the mortal tribulations of urban cycling). Many messengers view dispatching as a respectable job in which to "retire." However, only a tiny portion of messengers can actually become dispatchers (there are far more riders than dispatchers at any given time, and the turnover rate among the former is far higher than the latter). If not to dispatch, riders that willingly leave messengering seem to do it for an occupation that (in theory, at least) promises to offer some sort of flow. For example, I have met several former messengers now involved in the commercial arts. Numerous bike messengers are aspiring graphic artists, and many come off the road when they have a chance to pursue this career. Similarly, Kyle worked part-time as an audio engineer, and claimed he would happily make it full-time (once he built up a large enough client base).

While by no means representative, some messengers chose to move into jobs that not only offer mental flow, but jobs that are still physically engaged as well. Rob, for example, left messengering to work as an EMT. When I asked him why he chose

the job, he cited “being outside and moving around.” Helping people was not mentioned. He was drawn to the job for its promise of action. Henry applied to become a firefighter, but eventually did not make the selection. Like Rob he wanted a job with more financial security than being a bike messenger, but he still wanted a job that would be exciting. Arnold attempted to become a Navy S.E.A.L. (He did not make the selection, but did enlist in the military). Like Rob and Henry, he craved excitement and adventure; he cited neither duty nor chivalry in his motivations. For Arnold the military offered the potential of a steady paycheck for thrilling, dangerous work—work that would give him stories to tell his children. At the time I knew him, Howie split his year between working as a forest firefighter in the summer and a bike messenger in the winter.

Xander’s life history is particularly notable in this regard. He had lived an adventurous life worthy of a novel. His first stint as a messenger only lasted a few months because after reading Kerouac’s *On the Road*, he felt compelled to hop freight trains across the country. When he finally made it back to Seattle, he returned to his courier job (which he had kept for over five years when I met him). Before hopping trains, Xander worked for many years as an Alaskan fisherman. He says of this time, “It’s a wild lifestyle. You work 18 hours shifts, sleep for six. Then you go into port and party.” He said of the actual fishing, “I like the adventure, being out in the wilderness, hunting the prey.” A fishing hook to the eye required Xander to wear glasses (and he cannot wear contacts or have corrective surgery for the injury). Boat captains, he claimed, refuse to hire people with glasses (for fear that if their glasses

break, the crew will be saddled with a lame duck for the rest of the journey). Messengering, therefore, is a compromise for Xander—it is a tame adventure compared to his hard partying and hard working life on the frigid seas. Still, being a courier does offer parallels to Xander’s beloved fisherman lifestyle.

In contrast to the novelty of Xander’s life, most of the messengers I met were working in other service industry jobs before becoming bike couriers (e.g., bank tellers, department store clerks, kitchen workers, and waiters). Some came to the job as a stopgap after college or as part-time work to make ends meet in college. Andreas, for example, was an articulate and bright individual with a degree from a prestigious liberal arts college. When I asked him why he continued to work as a messenger he first gave me a platitude: “I wanted to be a messenger. What else was I going to do? Go to grad school?” When I pried more, he quickly grew frustrated and exclaimed, “I don’t want a career!” Andreas had options and, like Rob, became an EMT. At the time, however, messengering was a quality-of-life issue for him. Mitch is another well-educated and perceptive messenger. In Mitch’s case, a summer job before graduate school has lasted over a decade. In his words, “Every time I think about working in an office, or doing so many other jobs that pays way more money, I don’t regret it. I don’t feel sad. I don’t feel like I’m wasting my life away. I’d much rather be outside, riding than working in a law firm, doing research, or whatever. I don’t do this job because I’m not qualified to do other jobs [...]”

Some people came to the job because they already knew about couriers, and like the *Toronto Star* writer, felt that the job offered the life they only dreamed of.

Max, for example, grew up in a small town in the Pacific Northwest, and as a teenager saw a bike messenger working in Portland. From that moment, he knew what he wanted to be. Connecting his current occupation with his childhood job as a paper boy, “Right off the bat, it was almost destiny to deliver shit. It is what I know.” Rhonda, who grew up in Seattle, talked of having her mom drive circles around downtown so she could watch the messengers work. Alternatively, Jack worked as a car messenger and became a bike courier only after his car broke down and he could not afford to fix it. However, that was six years before I met him, and Jack has been an active member of the Seattle bike messenger scene for many years. In New York, I met a messenger who moved to the city from the South as a teenager. Totally destitute, living in a housing project, he got the best job that he could—working as a runner for a local drug dealer. The dealer had his workers use bicycles (a practice supposedly common in New York). This individual enjoyed the biking far more than the dealing, and soon found employment at a legitimate courier company.

Of course, messengering is not for everyone. As we saw in chapter two, even among those foolish enough to try it (to borrow from the *Toronto Star* again), most do not stay long (especially in New York). For example, a reporter attempting to spend a week working as a messenger stopped on his fourth day. “I’m scared. I want to do 5 days, but I’ve made it through 4 without a mishap. The odds are against me” (Cuerdon 1990: 84). However, for those that can handle the danger, the discomfort, and the disdain, messengering offers a chance to turn the workday into an enrapturing game. When I asked Margot to compare her positive experiences working as a cook

(she had previously attended culinary school) and her positive experiences working as a messenger, she stated that while both cooking and messengering gave her satisfaction, the joys cooking offered were to “a lot lesser extent.” She went on to explain that while working in a restaurant can be enjoyable in a similar way to messengering, it is less so. “Working at a restaurant and being super busy and you get through the rush and you do a good job and you didn’t fuck up anything, it is just like that, but not as pronounced.”

Thinking back to her time as a messenger, Jane, now working in the messenger company’s office (but not as a dispatcher), said, “I felt very alive.” Comparatively, she described her current job as being “trapped in this box.” For this reason Darren, the messenger with the broken orbital, missing teeth, and 57 facial stitches, refused to turn his part-time job as a waiter into a full-time one. By his own admission, he is a great waiter and could make more money in restaurants, but does not want to come off the bike. Instead, he waits tables solely as a means to supplement his courier income. As a point of fact, Darren’s previous messenger company mandated that he work part-time as a driving courier. While that job paid more, Darren wanted none of it. “I worked at [company name] for about two months. They wanted me to drive. I was driving half the time and they kept me on my bike about half the time—just enough to keep me there. Finally one day, I was like, ‘Fuck this. *Fuck this.*’ [...] Fuck driving. [...] I really wanted to be a bike messenger.” So, he left and found employment at a company that let him stay on his bike (even though they initially only hired him part-time—so he took a severe pay cut just to stay as a bike-only messenger).

## **Conclusion**

Liberation will be discussed in much greater detail in chapter nine, but at this point a few words are in order. A critical approach can be taken towards messenger work. After all, it is an extremely dangerous job that pays little and rarely provides its workers with other tangible benefits (e.g., health insurance or pension plans). Messenger companies, as the saying goes, get rich off the backs of workers. Messenger bodies are used, abused, and discarded with only minimal compensation for their labor. As Burawoy observes, the piece-rate—regardless if workers find the game enjoyable—benefits the owning class (at the expense of labor). At the same time, it would be a mistake to ignore the positive benefits of flow—even the flow generated at the edge of disaster. The playful quality of messenger labor is the first major piece to the puzzle of the messenger subculture. As we have seen, many messengers sincerely love their jobs and many that leave look for ways to keep some aspects of its flow in their lives, and will stay connected to the subculture even after leaving the occupation.

Against the alienation of paid labor is play—intrinsically enjoyable, non-instrumental action. For Aronowitz, it is in play that the potential for liberation resides. Hidden between the recesses of work and sleep, play provides another side to the one-dimensionality of capitalist logic (see Marcuse 1964). At the same time, estrangement from the self cannot be resolved solely in leisure time activities. The alienation of production must be addressed. “[T]he soul cannot be healed unless

divided labor is reintegrated, unless the lost ‘instinct of workmanship’ is found within the sphere of ordinary labor rather than becoming an ‘avocation’ (Aronowitz 1973: 132). Despite its low status and low pay, therefore, messengering is a form of what Aronowitz calls “creative work.” While not the harbingers of a class revolution, the game messengers play represents a subterranean challenge (de Certeau’s tactics) to the alienating rationality (Weber’s iron cage) upon which modern capitalism is based.

As we will see in the following chapter, the flow of courier labor is only the first part of the messenger puzzle. Engrossment generates emotions, but in isolation, they do not explain the subculture. The next major piece of the puzzle, therefore, is rituals. We will see how flow and rituals work together to create the highly integrated lives of the bike messenger. It is the sanctification of flow that really explains why Sarah cannot just leave her job and why the ever-cynical Henry is still inviting unknown messengers over to his house.

This chapter is derived from “It’s the Job I love:’ Bike Messengers and Edgework” (*Sociological Forum* vol. 21 no. 1).

## CHAPTER 6: ALLEYCATS AS RITUALS (AFFECT, PART 2)

### **The Power of the Collective**

#### *Putting Meaning to Flow*

In the last chapter, we saw how urban cycling requires the rider to be engrossed in the task—what Csikszentmihalyi calls flow. We also saw how, at times, messengers push this flow to the very edge—what Lyng calls edgework. Actions produced in these states appear unquestioningly natural (i.e., instinctual) and innately enjoyable. This is why Mitchell’s (1983) analysis of mountain climbers hinges on an application of flow. For Mitchell, mountaineers invest their time, and money to endure immense risks because mountains offer challenges absent in daily life. Against what he considers to be a “fundamental malaise” of contemporary time, Mitchell writes, “There are rewards in the act of climbing that participants anticipate and that color subsequent experience. The key concept, the desirable condition, the sought-after goal of climbing is the social-psychological condition of flow” (207-208). Both Lyng and Mitchell assert the sociological significance of the creative, spontaneous action of the “I.” Which is to say, both researchers (along with Csikszentmihalyi) see non-reflexive action as an antidote to increasing alienation in the workplace. Neither, however, explicitly connects the optimally lived experience of the individual to the *rituals* of the social worlds they study. But, Durkheim and Mead both emphasize it is when an actor’s behaviors and thoughts are spontaneous *and* synchronized with the collective that meaning is generated.

The flow of messengering should not be studied in isolation—as the self-feelings of atomized riders. Most of the time, of course, bike couriers are isolated, and the emotions they experience alone are enjoyable. As Lyng’s edgeworkers and Mitchell’s mountaineers show, the authenticity of the “I” is, in and of itself, a motivation for action. The lure of delivering packages, however, comes from more than the individualistic thrills of solving the urban maze. As we have seen, bike messengers are in a subculture, and to be in a subculture the feelings of the individual must be connected to the group. Alleycats, as collective gatherings, are (more than anything else) what turn the emotions of urban cycling into affect-meaning. Alternatively, not all messengers are part of the subculture (or have varying degrees of commitment to it). It is in alleycats, therefore, where we see how couriers become more thoroughly (or less thoroughly) bonded to the messenger lifestyle. In looking at alleycats as rituals, I trace the creation of affect-meaning (Geertz’s really real). I also connect this reduced reflexivity (i.e., flow) to the consecration of objects and ideas into sacred totems. These symbols, in turn, allow for the power of the alleycat to be transported beyond the ritual event, and, thus, reinforce messenger identity beyond the race environment into everyday life.

### *Anatomy of the Race*

Rituals (in the Durkheimian sense) require bodily co-presence, a barrier to outsiders, a mutual focus of attention, and shared mood (Collins 2004). As Durkheim notes, the very act of congregating is a powerful stimulant. Moreover, pre-existing

social bonds, foreknowledge of what to expect, and excitement over the coming ritual, facilitates the generation of collective effervescence. As Jonathan Turner (1999) states, “In all situations, individuals have expectations about what is likely to occur; and these expectations influence not only their own behavior but their reactions to others” (134). In Collins’ (2004) description of New Year’s Eve celebrations, for example, assumptions about what is acceptable behavior allow certain social gatherings to disregard usual norms of social decorum, encouraging interactions that focus attention and synchronizes moods. “A theory of interaction ritual [...] is above all a theory of situations. It is a theory of momentary encounters among human bodies charged up with emotions and consciousness because they have gone through the chains of previous encounters” (3). As I explain below, alleycats meet all of the requirements needed to “charge up” the emotions of participants.

Lifestyle messengers associate largely among themselves (i.e., they have pre-existing social bonds). After-hour relaxation, parties, and weekends are often spent with other messengers. When I ask Eva how often she socializes with messengers outside the workday she stated, “A lot. A lot. My boyfriend’s a messenger. A lot of my best friends are messengers. We’re taking a camping trip for three days next weekend: [courier’s name], me, my boyfriend, [courier’s name], [courier’s name], all bike messengers.” Similarly, Kyle explained:

During the day, I hang out with other messengers *a lot*. Whether it is popping in [wherever other messengers might be at] saying something for five or ten minutes, or if there is nothing going on so I’m sitting at the [Mono]rail for an hour, hour and a half [...]. Quite often, you’re hanging out with other messengers who also aren’t working at that time. And, then, after work, now, two or three days a week I go [rock]

climbing with other messengers. I [traditional bicycle] race with a lot of other messengers as well [on a team comprised specifically of current and former messengers].

What makes someone a lifestyle messenger, of course, is that one's job and the rest of one's life blur together. This is perhaps most exemplified in the last chapter by Henry's inability to extricate himself from the subculture even though he claimed that he was finished with it.

When messengers hang out they spend a great deal of time discussing urban cycling—specifically the edgework of riding. Accidents, amazing feats, and wild behavior are common topics. This talk generates foreknowledge of what to expect and excitement over what is to come. For example, the numerous head injuries Vinny sustained while racing over the years were a popular source of good-natured ribbing among his friends. And, as a rookie, they introduced me to not only the dangers of alleycats, but also how injuries were framed by the subculture—as long as the rider can walk away from it, it is all just fun and games. Likewise, messengers who performed in some special (or exceedingly dangerous) way were often brought up in discussion. For example, during the final sprint of a 1998 New York race, the second position rider reached forward grabbing the seatpost of the leader and pulled him back as he propelled himself to the lead. At the time, the rider was disqualified,<sup>62</sup> but five years later, when I heard the story, it was told to valorize the rider for displaying a sort of unbridled fortitude. Likewise, a messenger who pedaled, full speed, down one of

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<sup>62</sup> Even though alleycats have few to no rules, disqualifications are common. “DQed” is a standard category in race results. It generally results from a rider skipping checkpoints, but attempting to hand in their manifest as if it was complete.

Seattle's steepest hills—a hill punctuated by numerous traffic lights—on his track bike during an alleycat has earned his place in the oral history of the local scene.<sup>63</sup>

During an alleycat, racers, without a doubt, are focused on the event. As described in chapter three, messengers push the edge during work, but they push it further and sustain it longer in a race. At the same time, riders are engrossed not only because of the competition. The biggest issue is simply their own corporeal safety; everyone knows the stakes are high. Conversely, other competitors are almost always in sight (i.e., bodily co-presence). As such, racers are not riding against a clock (as in work); they are riding against each other. An alleycat, therefore, is a series of double rushes, but those double rushes are not measured against an abstraction of time. They are measured against other racers. To this end, the rider's focus is not only on her own speed; it is on the practices of others trying to outpace them. Alternatively, those outside the race are ignored or treated simply as obstacles to be overcome. Even extremely polite couriers can take on fierce personas during a race. Cars are cut off and pedestrians are yelled at—whatever it takes to keep one's speed (see below).

Overall, the mood of an alleycat is festive competition. Many racers have no intentions of winning. Remember that Arnold only desired a chance to ride wild in the streets. In Rob's words, "Winning doesn't matter. It is about having fun. No one remembers or cares who wins." This statement is not entirely true, but it captures a

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<sup>63</sup> As explained in chapter three, a track bike (because of the force of gravity) is very hard to stop on a hill, especially a steep hill. As such, this messenger's behavior meant that he willingly conceded any ability to stop (or even appreciably slow down) during his descent—despite the fact that he would be crossing multiple intersections.

dominant sentiment of the subculture. An alleycat is more about having fun with fellow messengers and demonstrating your skills in urban cycling. This is why the organizers of the Warrior Fun Ride called it a “fun ride.” During my time in New York, one of these organizers set up several alleycats that he labeled fun rides. After one of the “rides” (i.e., races), there was a dispute about whether a competitor should be disqualified. As one racer screamed at another, the organizer calmly asked, “Did you have fun? Then what are you worried about? The point was to have fun.” Similarly, at the 2003 NAC3, one messenger raised his voice over what he felt was unfair treatment by the organizers. He believed his time had been incorrectly marked. Others in attendance voiced their own disapproval at this racer’s overt focus on the technicalities of competition (instead of the festive atmosphere).

Messengers treat prizes somewhat ambivalently. On one hand, like a rider’s wage, prizes serve as a discursive motivation to race. That is, racers often mention the potential of winning something as the reason to race. For example, during the 2003 NAC3, the several Washington, DC, messengers organized a separate alleycat to be held in conjunction with the national championship. The purse was \$500. The possibility of winning this large payout provided lively discussion throughout the day. Equally so, a group of New Yorkers spent several weeks training for a team race in Boston because they wanted the first prize—a \$400 wheelset for each rider on the team. There were hard feelings when they did not take first place. Conversely, prizes are mentioned far less than antics when messengers recount past races. Moreover, unlike the examples listed above, most races offer far smaller material rewards. Often,

riders are competing for little more than bicycle bric-a-brac donated to the organizer by a sympathetic shop owner. By and large, few racers who enter alleycats believe they have a chance of winning, but this does not necessarily alter their dedication to the event. As Kenny explained, “Just riding around as fast as I can. That’s what I get out of it. I don’t care if I finish first, second, or last, as long as I get to go all out. I get mad at myself for mistakes I make, but that lasts all of like five minutes. I have fun.”

The start and finish of an alleycat is crowded with messengers, bikes, and bags. People mill about drinking and socializing. So, even for people not racing (and many messengers, it should be remembered, come to party and not to race), alleycats still offer an environment with the ritual components. For these people, however, the flow of the ritual is, obviously, less intense than for those engaged in the edgework of the race itself. For messengers, whether they are racing or merely socializing, pre-race and after-race events offer bookends to the race itself. There is anticipation of the race about to start, and a recounting of the race that just finished.

## **Rituals and Meaning**

### *Monster Track IV*

For Durkheim, rituals instill the voice of god in those who engage in them. That is, they make one’s actions and beliefs appear supra-natural and beyond question. As we saw in chapter four, the reflexive nature of ordinary human thought stands as a barrier to such faith. Collins (2004), for example, states, “Action itself always reduces reflexivity, and induces a belief in the symbols and symbolically frames objects that

fill out attention at that moment” (97). In the last chapter, we saw how the flow of urban cycling reduces reflexivity and results in (seemingly) instinctual actions that are enjoyable, and (at times) even lead riders to feelings of omnipotence. Compounding this individual experience, however, are the social interactions in which they are produced. In alleycats, flow does not occur in isolation. It takes place within a group of one’s peers. And, even for those not racing, they are still part of a collective gathering focused on racing. As Durkheim notes, shouting the same cry and performing the same action produces agreement. In Durkheim’s words, “But religion is first and foremost a system of ideas by which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it” (227). It must be asked, then, what agreement are messengers experiencing; how are messengers imagining their subculture?

Before coming to an answer for these questions, consider some scenes from Monster Track IV (an annual track bike only race held in New York). It was a cold Saturday afternoon in February. Remnants of snow still clung to the shady pockets around the trees Tompkins Square Park. Even by messenger standards, the event organizers arrived late (when not working, bike couriers are rarely punctual). They showed up a full two hours after the scheduled start time. An hour later, everyone is finally registered. Strewn across the park were over 120 track bikes. The racers were lined up about fifty feet from the collection of bicycles. Separating them and their machines was a three-foot iron fence that divides the park. The race would be started LeMans-style, with the competitors running to their bikes. Moments before the final

countdown, some competitors were joking and talking; others stared straight ahead (their minds in deep concentration). At this point, I had participated in several alleycats, but it would be the first time I really planned to race—my stomach was thoroughly planted in my throat.

As usual, the countdown began at three and ended just before two. People sprinted towards the fence, jumping or vaulting over it. People were shouting and people were tripping. On their bikes, they pedaled off in different directions. There were only four checkpoints for the race (an Upper East Side and Upper West Side stop and a Lower East Side and Lower West Side stop). The riders could do them in any order, but there were only two logical choices. Whoever made it back to the park first would win. I headed north up Avenue A. There were about 30 riders in my immediate sight. When we turned left onto 14th Street and then right onto First Avenue, bystanders stopped dead in their tracks. We were swarming through the East Village. We did not even slow down for the coming red lights, and we wove in and out of cars, screaming at pedestrians to get out of our way. By the time I hit 80th Street, I was starting to get fatigued. By cycling standards this was an extremely short distance, but, like most messengers, I was not rationing my energy; I had been riding all out from the start. At this point, the pack was starting to thin. Stronger riders were well ahead of me, and weaker riders just behind me. However, I could still see some racers to the front of me, and I could hear the churning of chains beside me.

When I got to the first checkpoint, bikes were strewn across the ground. People crowded around an organizer signing the manifests. As it goes, there was no

queue (in the orderly sense of the term) for the manifest signing, and there was very little courtesy. It was not about who arrived at the checkpoint first, but who could *leave* the checkpoint first. Manifest signed, I hopped back on my bike. Three checkpoints later, racing from the Financial District back to Tompkins, I felt downright delirious. I stopped thinking about anything—save for finishing. A messenger from Washington, DC, lost in Manhattan, was riding behind me. Not from the area, he followed my route to find his way through Chinatown and the Lower East Side. Unfortunately, for him, I was not the best messenger to follow. Still, I tried my best. Only a few blocks from the finish, I saw a Boston courier just ahead of me. I strained that much more, wanting to overtake him. I flew up Avenue B and tried to slow as little as possible crossing (almost blindly) through intersections against the light. I never caught the Boston courier, and long before reaching the park, I knew that many riders were far ahead of me. I had no promise of prizes, and I never considered myself a contender for them anyway. Still, for over an hour, I willingly embraced far more risks than I would on any given workday. At the finish line there were no cheers, and I rolled in unceremoniously. People were already relaxing and drinking beers. The DC messenger who finished just behind me would later tell me that it was the most fun he ever had at an alleycat.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> I have heard messengers say this a lot. I have either had the good fortune of going to some of the world's best races (which are only getting progressively better), or (more likely) in the festive mood of many alleycats, participants are so caught up in their immediate experience that the past is swallowed by the reality of the present.

*Deep Play*

Geertz (1972 [1973]) proposes that cultural practices should be analyzed as texts. That is, events (whether they are religious rituals, sporting contests, or theatrical plays) say something about the culture in which they are produced. In his famous example, Geertz argues that Balinese cockfights represent a “sentimental education” (449) for those who witness them. Cockfights are only marginally about avian combat; the fights are ultimately physical metaphors for the life of Balinese men. “Like any art form [...] the cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or, if you prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearance, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived” (443). Geertz goes on to state that what a Balinese man learns at a cockfight “is what his culture’s ethos and his private sensibilities (or, anyway, certain aspects of them) look like when spelled out externally in the symbolics of a single text [...]” (449).

The cockfight, however, is not just any single text. All practices are open to semiotic analysis, but some activities say more about a culture than others. Geertz refers to cockfighting as deep play. Deep play extends beyond instrumental rationalization. That is, the potential consequences of the act appear to outweigh its material rewards. Cockfighting is a sport of gambling. Betting on most matches is relatively trivial, but in deep matches there are significant sums of money at stake. The money, however, is a surrogate for status. Men are not betting for financial

reward; they bet for their own pride and the honor of their relatives and village. “What makes Balinese cockfighting deep is thus not money in itself, but what, the more of it that is involved the more so, money causes to happen: the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight” (436).

Alleycats, like cockfight, are a form of sentimental education. Races, for competitors and onlookers alike, enact and display what messengering means. As Edward, in justifying the actions of couriers to outsiders exclaimed, “You don’t know about our life and how we live. [...] This is our life.” As I have stated, alleycats are an extended double rush. In terms of the flow, therefore, messenger racers represent the perfection of flow. Alleycats provide all the excitement of urban cycling with none of the boredom or frustration. There is no being put on standby; there is no waiting on clients, or haggling with security guards. There is only the urban maze for the messenger to solve (using both macro- and micro-routing). As Jordan explained, “[A]n alleycat boils down your job, like the game aspect of your job, and it is fun to be good at a game [...]”

Clearly, the generally small material rewards offered to the top placers in alleycats do not exceed the risks (and arguably, even the larger material rewards do not either). Further, traveling messengers take time off from their paid labor to compete in events that cannot possibly reimburse them for lost wages. In this sense, alleycats are deep play. More importantly, the value placed on racing (whether the focus is on winning or merely having fun) is deep because the race, like the cockfight, is a stand-in for something else. The organizer of the first Monster Track event

explained, “This is what we do for a living, you know. We make deliveries out riding our bikes everyday doing deliveries. So, in the scene, in the messenger scene, we always talk about who is the fastest guy, you know. So, now, here we determine who is the fastest guy, who is the best on the track bike” (Johnny, quoted in Sutherland 2006). Somewhat more cynically, Andy described alleycats as “a king of the shit pile kind of competition.” However, placing well in a race is not an objective measure of one’s ability to be a good earner on the road (alleycats test the routing skills of urban cycling far more than they test the problem solving skills discussed in chapter two). Further, being deemed the fastest guy (the king of the shit pile) does not move one up the ranks of her company (only workday performances can do that). These points aside, to place well in an alleycat is taken by those in the subculture (and only those in the subculture) as indicative of a messenger’s overall ability.

### *Alleycats as Objective Reality*

As we have seen, alleycats emphasize the excitement of urban cycling—flow which pushes the edge. Performed collectively, the otherwise individual self-feelings of flow move beyond the realm of the subjective. As Durkheim states, “It is in these effervescent social milieux, and indeed from that very effervescence, that the religious idea seems to have been born” (220). Which is to say, behaving in unison with a group, an individual feels her actions and thoughts as transcendental. The instinctual quality of flow, therefore, is not merely the property of the actor, but the actor experiences them as part of something greater. In other words, actions are reduced to

instinct and those instincts are mobilized by a set of conditions that, because of their social context, seem objectively real (Berger and Luckmann 1966). This is what Durkheim calls the “demon of oratorical inspiration” (212). Building from the collective effervescence of the group, the individual feels the weight of society. While this weight is the product of individual minds, the actor feels the weight as a force located outside of the self. “It is then no longer a mere individual who speaks but a group incarnated and personified” (212).

The objective power of the alleycat is most clearly illustrated in how messengers describe their attendance at large races, especially the CMWC. As we saw in chapter three, Rosie described her first championship as coming home (a home she had never been to before, but immediately felt connected to). At the time of my interview with her, Rosie had been working in her company’s office for several years (sometimes as a dispatcher, but mostly doing other administrative work). She described a rather protracted process of removing herself from the messenger lifestyle—a lifestyle that, after years of involvement, she felt was too concentrated on intoxication. However, when I asked her to elaborate on her experiences at her first CMWC, Rosie stated, “It was really exciting.” In simply saying these words, her tone changed. Almost gushing, she further recollected the event:

It was so exciting. I didn’t know how big of a thing it was. I wasn’t very urban at the time. I grew up in the suburbs and didn’t go into the city very much, and I started to know a lot of people who did it in Seattle, but I didn’t realize that it was all over the world. Seeing people from Japan was like really cool. The guys from New York... It was just really exciting. There was just so much energy, bright colors, awesome bicycles, and crazy skills of these guys. It was like nothing I’d ever seen before, and it was awesome. [...] I’m sure I stayed in this

job for years longer than I should have because of that. For sure, I was very impressionable at the time.

Rosie is not alone in these feelings of awe. As Steve explained of his first CMWC, “That was like my big messenger experience, right there. Going out there and fucking seeing like 700 people lining up to race bikes and do messenger work. That was cool. [...] That was fun shit, man.” More than simply being cool or fun, Steve located the relevance of the race in its connection to the work and the universal qualities of those that do it. “It’s just the community. It doesn’t matter. Works the same, everywhere you go. It doesn’t matter who you work for, what company you work for. Whatever you do, it’s work. Everybody’s riding their bike, and it is just as dangerous as anybody else. Everybody has a job that they have to do, and it’s fucking dangerous. But, that stuff, there’s a community.” Or, as Eva pointed it, “It totally changed my perspective. I just thought it was this small group of people, you know, but then there were thousands of people that were messengers from everywhere. I was completely overwhelmed. You want to meet everyone. [...] It’s like a family.”

To a greater or lesser extent, these feelings are present at all alleycats. For they all collect messengers together and emphasize (certain aspects of) the job. Further, while disconnected from the edgework of the race, a messenger’s mere presence at an alleycat still connects them to the deep play of the ritual. As Steve went on to explain:

It was eye opening. It was a good scale, just the amount of people that were there. [...] Aside from [the] racers, there were another 400 spectators watching that shit, cheering them on, giving them water, [...] some of those people have been messenger from way back when, some have been boyfriend or girlfriend to a bike messenger, or just knew somebody that was a bike messenger. That’s the great thing about it,

you go to those events and you cover every aspect of what could possibly be bike messengering.

Steve's last comment, that championships are about more than the actual competitors, underscores the subcultural depth of the ritual. The event is an outward expression of (or in Geertz's terms, a model of) the thrills of urban cycling, and that is the ritual's focus. But, the ritual itself encompasses not only those who race, but those who simply party. It is a mistake to consider non-racers "spectators" because there is very little of the race to see at an alleycat (aside from the start and finish). Instead, those that come only to socialize are an integral aspect of the ritual itself—not at onlookers, but as participants in a festival celebrating the messenger lifestyle.<sup>65</sup> And, this lifestyle, through its collective enactments is not understood as a set of loosely collected eccentrics. Instead, it becomes a worldwide community<sup>66</sup>—an objective reality above and beyond any one individual (Eva's point about realizing that messengers consisted of more than just a small group).

On a personal level, I was at once enveloped by the emotions of the group, but equally disconnected from them. Spending my days working as a messenger and weekends riding, partying, and racing, I found myself utterly inspired at events like the Warrior and Monster Track. Like the title of Culley's (2002) book about his life as

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<sup>65</sup> It can be useful here to think about MacAloon's (1984b) distinction between festivals and spectacles. In festivals there is no clear distinction between participants and spectators and there is a unifying mood among those gathered. Spectacles (of which the Olympics is MacAloon's key interest), in contrast, have clearly defined spectators and no guarantee of emotional agreement (aside from an awe of the spectacle itself).

<sup>66</sup> Fincham (2008) draws a connection between the worldwide messenger community and Anderson's (1991) concept of "imagined communities."

a messenger, I felt like I was part of an “immortal class.” It seemed as though we understood a secret about the city. We could travel faster than anyone around us. We flew through red lights while others cowered before them. We did not fear traffic; we played in it. Clearly, I was in the throes of what Durkheim considered social solidarity. Conversely, as a sociologist, I was forced to step outside the reality of the bike messenger subculture. Beyond the collective, so much of what seems unquestionably valid was uniformly rejected. This is why Sarah’s non-messenger friends do not understand what she gets out of her job. At the finish of Monster Track, for example, I listened to outsiders as they strolled past us in the park. It was clear that they did not see us as immortals. Instead, we were strangely dressed men and women playing with children’s toys. Our skills were useless to them, and what messengers called bravery was understood as simple fool-heartedness. These non-messengers were disconnected from the collective effervescence of the ritual, and, consequently, they did not share in the reality messengers create. Which is to say, the subculture’s meanings (rooted in affect) appeared meaningless to those removed from the flow of the alleycat.

### **Designating the Sacred**

#### *From Objectivation to Objects*

The discrepancy between outsiders’ views and the image messengers hold for themselves comes from more than the emotions generated in the sheer moments of collective action. More importantly, the objective reality created by the ritual is taken

as something separate and special from normal, mundane activities (Geertz's model for). This is Durkheim's designation of the sacred from the profane—the moral yet might forces that seem to come from outside the individual. As we saw in chapter four, for Durkheim, the sacred force of the ritual, however, does not stay confined to the collection of individuals who (unwittingly) produce it. Instead, the effervescence of the collectivity is transferred to the objects and ideas surrounding the ritual. As he writes, “Religious force is none other than the feeling that the collectivity inspires in its members, but projected outside the minds that experience them, and objectified. To be objectified, it fixes on a thing that thereby becomes sacred; any object can play this role” (230). Further, actors can comprehend this religious force “only in connection with a concrete object whose reality we feel intensely” (221). Ultimately, it is sacred symbols (i.e., totems) that carry the emotions of the ritual into everyday life. By recalling the lived experience of the individual engrossed in the actions of the collective, symbols keep the objectifications of the group “perpetually alive and fresh” (222). In mundane life, therefore, the individual is given small (and sometimes not so small) reminders of the sacred.

Bicycles, messenger bags, clothing, radios, and more have symbolic value to messengers. At the most basic level, they designate insiders from outsiders; they are membership symbols (Collins 2004). Not surprisingly, bicycles (especially track bikes) serve as the most important of these totems. As stated in chapter three, I started working in New York on a track bike, and this confused many messengers who would have otherwise (and rightly) labeled me a rookie. On several occasions, couriers did a

double-take when they discovered I was on a track bike. As one messenger I'd been talking to remarked, "You're a rookie? But, that's your fixed outside, isn't?" This messenger, a mountain bike rider, had trouble believing a neophyte could handle himself on a fixed. As described in chapter three, track bikes have grown in popularity among non-messengers. For over twenty years, though, messengers could claim a near exclusivity on this object. As Adam snidely commented one day, "Track bikes are trendy now." For Adam, track bikes were a distinguishing feature of a messenger, and their use among outsiders was mildly irritating. Or, as Audrey told me, "Every time I see someone on a track bike I feel like I should know them." With the exponentially increasing popularity of track bikes, it is doubtful that Audrey would still feel this way. In 2003, however, messenger could still claim ownership rights for using the machine. One evening after work, for example, I was with a group of messengers at Columbus Circle. A man on a sparkling new track bike rode by. He looked uncomfortable and unconfident on the bike. Several people in the group laughed as he passed. Mike smirked, "Maybe we should ask him if he wants to ride with some *real* messengers."

Because of the growing popularity, messengers have had to, at least partially, relinquish the symbol of the track bike. Far more non-messengers are riding fixes today than there are messengers and ex-messengers combined. However, couriers have not fully given up their claims to it. Now the focus is on how one rides the bike—not in simply displaying the symbol, but in the nuances of how one uses it. Specifically, messengers tend to claim that they are the only people capable of safely

riding fixed (and, thus, are, in fact, the only legitimate users of the symbol). One evening in Seattle, a large group of messengers were hanging out after work. A hipster on a track bike rode by at a rather high rate of speed. Approaching an intersection with a red light, he appeared as if he was intending to run it, but then at the last moment, put the bike into a skid and stopped. Upon seeing this, most messengers in the group burst into laughter. One yelled to the cyclist, “Way to almost get popped by a car!” followed by more laughter from the group. There was nothing good-natured about the laughs or the comment—they were meant to ridicule the rider (who was outnumbered and had no choice but to wait at the light while being openly mocked). By my own estimates, the cyclist demonstrated perfect control of his machine, and had not almost gotten “popped” by a car. However, by riding a fixed (around messengers), he opened himself to severe criticism.

In trying to justify his disapproval of hipsters Jordan stated:

It’s a fashionable thing, and it’s rad that it’s on bikes, but at the same time, it’s kind of patronizing. It’s like, “What’s up? What’s going on? You know, you’re kind of dressing like ’em. You’re doing a little fronting here [i.e., pretending to be something one is not]. What’s going on? You’ve been biking for like eight months and your bombing [i.e., speeding down] Madison [a street on a very steep hill] on your brakeless track bike, and it’s like ‘What’s going on upstairs there, buddy?’” [...] I don’t want to have negative thoughts, but at the same time, it’s a co-opting of our counterculture, of our subculture. [...] It’s like a co-opting that is just unsettling. [...] I’m trying to articulate it better. [...] It’s difficult to articulate. [...] People I know [that are not messengers] will be like, “So, what’s your deal with these ‘possengers’ [a person “posing” as a messenger]? Why do you have such a problem [with them]?” It’s like, I don’t have a *problem* with it. It’s just a matter of like... Their argument is that, “So anyone with a messenger bag and a fixed gear bike is kind of trying to be like you?” It’s like, “No, but yeah.”

Jordan has difficulty expressing his point. He wants to be supportive of people riding bicycles. Like most lifestyle messengers, he believes that bikes improve people's lives. Which, of course, is an integral part of the subculture's sacred ideal. At the same time, he feels that by wearing certain items and riding a fixed, non-messengers are transgressing into a symbolic territory in which they do not belong. Which is to say, beyond the ideal of having more people on bikes, messengers feel the need to protect the sacredness of their objects from the pollution of outsiders. Thinking rationally, Jordan had a hard time sustaining his stance, but it is clear that emotionally, he had a stake in these objects and he wanted them protected. In fact, everyone of my respondents who addressed the subject of hipsters couched their complaints with an initial disclaimer that it is great people are on bikes. However, they immediately followed this with a firm and unconditional "but" statement, just like Jordan.

Of course, it is not only track bikes that are sacred. While track bikes serve (or, at least, once served) as membership symbols, bikes, more generally, have a profound importance to messengers. For example, eight messengers and myself had met in Central Park for a day of riding. On our way up to the Bronx, we rode to a large statue of Buddha for a picture. We all hung our bikes across a fence surrounding the statue. The sight of our nine bikes, clinging to the iron fence, dangling over our heads resulted in a moment of contemplation from each of us. We crossed the street and gazed upon the impromptu art. José simply remarked, "Beautiful." We were not looking at profane things: welded steel, spokes, and wheels. We were staring at something that seemed far bigger. An issue of *Urban Death Maze* (2000), for

example, offers “The Biker’s Creed.” “My bicycle is my best friend. It is my life [...]. Me and my bicycle are defenders of our freedom. We are the saviors of my life [...].” (Biker’s Creed 2000: 11). Bicycles, particularly track bikes, therefore, are objects set apart from the world of more mundane things. Messengers would not, for example, ride to a statue to hang their t-shirts over it, and if they did, it would certainly not prompt such reverence as the sight of the hanging bicycles. Likewise, the offense and humor that experienced messengers exude toward neophytes (and even highly skilled hipsters) on track bikes is an effort to protect the object from the desecration of outsiders. As Henry huffed upon hearing that several rookies would be traveling to a swap meet at the Trexlertown velodrome, “All these new jacks doing all this shit.”

As with track bikes, veteran messengers speak negatively about rookies who too quickly adapt other symbols of the messenger. For instance, at a party Henry jokingly commented to several other veteran messengers that two rookies had arrived with their bags and radios on. Henry himself was wearing his bag and his radio and so was nearly everyone in attendance. In other words, the joke was not about radios and bags, but about undeserving messengers wearing two hallmarks of messenger style. In another instance, Henry trained his ire on another rookie, “He’s the guy that wants to *look* like a messenger: wearing the little hat [i.e., a cycling cap], but can’t remember to roll up his pant leg [to keep it from getting caught in the bike’s gears]. And, he can’t ride a fixed.” This is analogous to Donnelly and Young’s (1988) comments on “overt displays” made by rookies. Neophytes yearn to distinguish themselves as members, but in doing so often only highlight their naïveté. More importantly for the present

discussion, such symbolic overstatements tarnish the sacredness of the totem. That is, the objects that messengers hold dear lose their charms if rookies can easily appropriate the style.

### *Sacred Ideas*

It is not only certain objects that are sacred to messengers. More importantly, the effervescence of alleycats spills over onto ideas as well (like bicycles improving one's life). For example, speed and a disregard for traffic laws can be thought of as a purely economic matter during the workday. As we saw above, alleycats were ostensibly created to settle arguments over bragging right—to determine the fastest guy. But, races do not really determine who's the best at the job. Nathan broke down the basic difference between work and racing: "One, you rarely ever actually pick up anything. Two, you rarely ever lock and go into a building. You do sometimes, but it's very rare." Further, "If you pick up something you just smash the shit out of it." That is, racing is about finishing the urban maze, not the finesse of actual delivery work. But, as we have seen repeatedly, the thrills of urban cycling are a value unto themselves, and it is the ritual that sanctifies it. This is optimized in chapter three by the messenger who wrote, "I could care less about who's the best courier. I just want to know who's the fastest."

More than anything, what alleycats sanctify is the notion of messenger work itself. We can see this in the quotes about the CMWC. Respondents repeatedly mention that messengers—across the globe—are all doing the same job. The validity

of these statements is apparent; its significance is somewhat more obscure. Janitors and waitresses the world over are also doing the same jobs, and so are dentists and heart surgeons. The difference is that lifestyle messengers see themselves as part of a family (citywide, nationally, and internationally). It is the existence of the rituals, by bringing couriers together that (just as Durkheim insists), allows messengers to identify themselves as a family. That is, to conceptualize themselves as part of a (global) subculture. Moreover, it must be remembered that, at races, no one is actually working. There is, in fact, no verification offered at alleycats or at the larger championships that everyone (or anyone) does the same job. Instead, what is verified is that everyone present has an interest in pushing the flow of urban cycling to the edge (or at least socializing while others do so). While messengers couch their explanations in terms of their work, what is really eye opening about alleycats is not their paid labor, but values attributed to flow (i.e., that the flow of the race becomes proof positive that messengers are part of a family).

### **Rituals and the Permeation of Boundaries**

#### *Bring the Sacred into the Profane*

Alleycats represent the institutionalization of flow.<sup>67</sup> That is, what would otherwise be subjective (and, therefore, ethereal) ideals about messengering are

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<sup>67</sup> For Berger and Luckmann (1966), institutionalization is the typification of actors and actions across time. Actions are institutionalized to the extent that they have occurred before (and will presumably occur again) and the individuals performing them fall into specified roles. Moreover, institutionalization is a process where

dramatized (collectively) as an objective (i.e., undeniable) reality. It is this courier reality that gives birth to the messenger subculture—a lifestyle that spirals beyond the workday. For Geertz (1966 [1973]), it is through rituals that the world as it is actually lived and the world as it is religiously imagined become one. That is, rituals are models *of* and models *for* reality. By performing in the ritual, the individual is brought into contact with the divine conceptions of their culture. Alleycats are a perfect example of this duality. They are modeled after work, but they become models for work. For example, Rick, described the informal races he would have against a fellow messenger (a rider he did not like). “I never say anything to him. I hate people that talk like that, but whenever I see him, I race him. I’m sure he used to be fast, but he’s not willing to take the risks I’ll take. His time has passed.” For Rick, taking additional risks during an already dangerous workday is logical. Clearly this is deep play; Rick receives no material compensation. Further, these races have no audience or scorekeeper, and, thus, offer no increase in social prestige. Instead, it is simply the value of the race (i.e., who’s the fastest) superseding the value of the occupation (i.e., who’s the best courier).

The essential point here is that the value of the alleycat—which, by extension, is the value of the subculture—is not produced simply through cognition. In fact,

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habitual activities take on an objective character. “This means that the institutions that have now been crystallized [...] are experienced as existing over and beyond the individuals who ‘happen to’ embody them at the moment. [...] They are] experienced as possessing a reality of their own, a reality that confronts the individual as an external and coercive fact” (55).

discursive explanations provide rather inadequate answers. To claim that the work is internationally undifferentiated, for example, or that older riders are more cautious does not explain anything. These replies say nothing about why couriers recreate (in partial form) their labor in their free time, or why couriers recreate the risks of racing in their labor. What explains such behavior is looking at the workday as a flow-generating game and alleycats as the ritualized perfections of this flow. As such, alleycats are models *of* the world, but (more importantly) models *for* the world. Further, rituals transmute the flow of urban cycling onto sacred objects and ideas that reaffirm the emotions of the group even after the group has dispersed. Riding like one is racing (when not actually racing), for example, brings the effervescence of the alleycat into mundane life. Speeding through streets, the messenger reaffirms to himself that he is part of the group. Just as Christians reading the bible in isolation recall the power of the congregation, the messenger swerving between cars inserts these actions into the schema of her social world. Produced collectively, and reaffirmed individually, the messenger can thus feel confident that her actions have meanings that are in no need of conscious introspection. As Durkheim states, “When a belief is shared unanimously by a people, to touch it—that is, to deny or question it—is forbidden” (215).

### *The Authenticity of the Lifestyle*

For Nippert-Eng (1996), there is not an intrinsic boundary between the sphere labor and sphere of leisure. Instead, individuals construct mental categories of how

home and work should be separated. Some people lead highly integrated lives, others highly segmented lives. To some degree class determines this—professionals tend to blend their lives; manual laborers tend not to. In Nippert-Eng’s terms, lifestyle messengers (as the name implies) are extreme integrators. The existence of alleycats alone is a testament to this. However, the fusion of leisure and work goes much further than races—it goes to the core of the self. As Tanya, bemused at my use of the term “occupation” in an interview, explained, “Yeah, when you say ‘occupation’ that makes me laugh. Like ‘bike messengers?’ When I did my tax returns this year it said ‘occupation.’ I was like, ‘Do I put bike messenger?’” To this Kyle added, “It doesn’t seem like a job, I know,” and Tanya expanded, “I think it is more like a lifestyle. I know that sounds really cheesy, but it is *your lifestyle*. It’s not what you do. Well, I guess it is what you do.” Tanya is using “do” here to mean “do for work,” and it is a description of messengering which seems to strip the word of its larger significance as an all-encompassing lifestyle. As Kyle elaborated:

It’s what you do for a living, but it’s not *just* what you do for a living. It becomes way more than that. It comes to the point where you see us outside work and we still have our workbag on [...] we’re riding our work bike. You’re transferring from work into social life and there’s not really much of a change. You’re still riding your bike around the same, you’re still carrying the same shit in your bag, you just don’t have deliveries to pick up and drop. You’ve replaced it with a six pack of beer [...]. The distinction between job and hanging out is very blurred in the end of this occupation.

A conversation I had with Joan was equally insightful. We were going to take a bus up to Boston for a race. Joan asked why my bag was so full. I explained that I would be visiting old friends, and we would be going out to dinner. In addition to my

courier clothing—which were all rather worn, tattered, and covered in patches—I also brought along what messengers in the subculture call “civilian clothes” (see chapter eight). When I explained to Joan that I would not want to go out in what I was currently wearing, she looked at me rather confused and stated, “Just be yourself.” For Joan, there was no distinction between her work clothes and her leisure clothes. She always dressed like a courier because she was a courier. It was not just something she did; it was who she was—her *self*.

Perhaps the best indication of how messengers blur the line between leisure and work is in how messengers ride when neither racing nor working. This issue will be discussed in much greater detail in the next chapter. For now, however, it should be made clear that lifestyle messengers rarely tone down their riding. As Jordan stated, “Bike messengers generally don’t take the slow way anywhere.” More importantly, Robin conceded, “I am terrible. When I am in no hurry, I am more impatient because I feel that I can get away with it.” Which is to say, even when money and prizes, or even the personal pride of outpacing another cyclist, are removed from the equation, Robin still feels compelled to ride like a messenger. That is, Robin, for no particularly rational reason, pushes the edge in traffic. In doing so, he brings the values of the alleycat into his mundane life (and, thus, reminds himself of the sacred). In Durkheim’s words, “The man who has obeyed his god, and who for this reason thinks he has his god with him, approaches the world with confidence and a sense of heightened energy” (211). My field notes from September 6, 2002 are illustrative:

I rode back to Brooklyn with [Los Corredores, a crew of Latino messengers] and [Henry at midnight]. We took over the whole road. We didn't stop at a single red light—all the way from 14th and 9th Avenue [in Manhattan's Greenwich Village] to Broadway and Montrose [in Bushwick, Brooklyn]. The [Corredores] did not care. They just rode right out in front of cars and expected them to stop. Several times [Henry] commented, "These guys are crazy."

We had no deadline to make, and nowhere in particular to be, but this is simply how the Corredores acted. Henry's comment was not directed at the Corredores' sentiment. He did not think we should stop at the lights either, but the flamboyance in which they carried it out was startling. Much of this ride lacked the finesse discussed in the last chapter and instead looked more like a game of chicken. Regardless, it affirmed our intentions of handling ourselves in a particular way in traffic—that nothing should stop our flow.

Conversely, as I have explained, not all messengers are part of the subculture, and even those that are have varying levels of commitment. Marco and Max provided two surprising examples. Marco, it should be remembered, claimed he was always fast, and Max not only loved to ride his bike, but saw the occupation as his destiny. While both men lavish praise on the joys of the job, they also have starker boundaries between their work selves and their leisure selves than many of the other messengers I have discussed. Riding with Marco to get food after work one evening, for example, he chastised me for riding too fast. "We can slow down. We're not working. I've decided I hate going fast when I'm not working." In a similar vein, Max, criticizing other messengers, explained to me that when he is at home, he does not dress like he does for work. "I'm dressed to ride my bicycle professionally. When I get home and

all this shit comes off, I put on a pair of, this is really funny, I put on a pair of super nice Born clogs, and a pair of loose fitting Levi's, a t-shirt, and a sweatshirt. That's me at night."

Despite his veteran status, Max has never raced in an alleycat. He claimed that racing, in any capacity, is not fun. Marco, at the time of our evening ride, had only attended one alleycat. Conversely, the Corredores, Joan, Kyle, and Tanya are regulars at messenger races. Alleycats, of course, are not the only events that could qualify as messenger rituals, but they provide the clearest division between those that optimize the lifestyle (i.e., those that are extreme integrators) and those divergent from it. More than drinking after work (and other forms of socializing), alleycats sanctify the flow of urban cycling. It is not surprising, therefore, that those who have not attended races or have not raced in a longtime are more disconnected from the lifestyle. We can see this in the division Marco and Max make between leisure and work. However, it would be incorrect to claim that Marco and Max were not part of the subculture. They are, but less so. Unlike Lester and Malcolm (from chapter two), they do socialize with messengers after work and talk about the job as more than just a paycheck. Alternatively, cutoff from the transforming experience of alleycats (especially the CMWC), we can see how messengering is less of a lifestyle to them.

At the risk of pointing out the obvious, I should make clear, lifestyle messengers are not one-dimensional machines always racing through the city. Clearly, there are times when they slow down, take the long way around, and even stop at an intersection when they don't absolutely have to. The messenger subculture,

however, extols the virtues of urban cycling on the edge. What makes messengering a lifestyle, and not just an occupation, is the degree that messengers carry the extremes of the occupation (specifically, aggressive, fast riding) into their non-work lives and, consequently, see it as something more than work. Alleycats—as sentimental education—are the primary way this is accomplished. Marco and Max highlight how engrossment in the labor of delivery is not a complete answer to the lure of delivering packages. It is through participation in the rituals (especially alleycats) that the job truly becomes more than a job. As Gertrude attested about races, “I live for these things! It is all I want to do.”

### **Conclusions**

To recap, the bike messenger subculture is fortified by alleycats. Races are a form of deep play. They transform lived emotions into affect-meaning. That is, individual experiences are connected to the collectivity—allowing these values of the subculture to be internalized as objectively real. This process is compounded by the designation of sacred symbols. These symbols serve a dual purpose. First, they transfer the affect-meaning of the ritual into non-ritual life. The bicycle, for instance, becomes a symbol of the entire ritual experience which, in turn, is taken as indicative of the occupation itself. In Durkheim’s words, “It is, in fact, a well-known law that the feelings a thing arouses in us are spontaneously transmitted to the symbol that represents it” (221). The reality of the races can, therefore, be recalled through the image of the bike in everyday life. Second, symbols also heighten both the ritual

experience by increasing the anticipation of the coming event and generating more emotions in the event (thus, increasing the effervescence which can be returned to mundane life, and the cycle continues).

In focusing on affect-meaning, I have sought to highlight an often overlooked aspect of sociological analysis—emotions. However, the lure of delivering packages is still not fully answered. Up to this point, the analysis has only covered people and their emotions (individually and collectively). But, lived experience does not happen in a vacuum—it occurs in physical space. More importantly, the affect-meaning of urban cycling is just as dependent on the urban as it is on the cycling. Which is to say, the analysis must now turn to the setting in which the actions we have discussed occur.

This chapter is derived from “Bike Messengers and the Really Real: Effervescence, Reflexivity, and Postmodern Identity” (*Symbolic Interaction* vol. 29 no.1).

## CHAPTER 7: THE AFFECTIVE APPROPRIATION OF SPACE

### **Thinking and Rethinking the City**

#### *Bringing in Space*

As explained in the first chapter, bike messengers work in the downtown cores of major metropolitan areas. Their services are most useful in older cities whose business districts—developed long before the primacy of automobiles—are prone to traffic congestion and continually hampered by insufficient parking. Outside of these areas, bicycle couriers are largely unknown, and their existence considered, at best, quaint. Alternatively, inside these major urban centers, the bike messengers' presence is considered a cultural phenomenon. In one of the early statements of what would become the Chicago School of urban research, Park (1923 [1967]) notes, "The small community often tolerates eccentricity. The city, on the contrary, rewards it. Neither the criminal, the defective, nor the genius has the same opportunity to develop his innate dispositions in a small town that he invariably finds in a great city" (41). As we have seen, bike messengers fit this depiction perfectly. They are one of the countless cultural variations proliferating within a metropolis unfettered to the mores of the *Gemeinschaft* (Tönnies 1887 [1955]). From Gans' classic ethnography of slums to Small's (2004) recent work in barrios, urbanists have long chronicled the social worlds that make cities fascinating, fearful, and frustrating places. Largely absent from this literature, however, is a serious engagement with *physical* space. To repeat a point made in chapter four, sociologists study in cities, but tend to ignore the material structures through which individuals operate.

In this chapter, I will show that the subcultural practices of bike messengers cannot be divorced from their use of physical space. Like skateboarders, couriers are in a dialectical relationship with the city's built structures. It is through their use of the city—practices enabled and constrained by the urban environment—that messengers construct their social world and make sense of their lives. Specifically, the flow of the workday and the affect-meaning of alleycats are intertwined with the messengers' appropriation of urban space. That is, messengers are who they are—wild-riding madmen (and madwomen) living the life you may have dreamed of—precisely because space matters. It is not only the stage on which they act (i.e., something in the background); it is a dialectic component of the lifeworld.

### *Rules versus Problems*

As we saw in chapter four, Borden uses Lefebvre's conception of lived space (i.e., appropriation) to analyze skateboarding. Skaters take the urban planner's abstract spaces and infuse them with meaning. That is, skaters move past ordinary perceptions and official conceptions of the urban landscape to creatively experience space in unintended ways. By using handrails, curbs, and steps as objects of play, the bland functionality of the city becomes a site of flow (and, at times, edgework). Like skateboarders, bike messengers play in (and with) urban space. As we have seen, streets and sidewalk, cars and pedestrians are all conceptualized as part of a complex, shifting puzzle—an urban death maze. Solving the maze is about macro- and micro-routing (i.e., the fastest trajectory between two points and the continual adjustments

required in one's course of travel). This is not primarily about velocity—pedal power and aerobic capacity. Instead, it is about what Andy called skills with spatial capacity. That is, riding in a manner that looks “fucking insane” to outsiders, but comes from the confidence generated through experience in urban cycling (i.e., tacit knowledge).

Whereas skaters creatively use the functionally bland objects of the city (e.g., handrails and parking curbs), messengers play with the functional rules of city traffic. For bike couriers, traffic laws are used only as predictors—in a heuristic of risk—of what *other* users of the city should be doing. Culley (2002), writes of this perspective, “Red means red and green means green: I keep moving regardless” (189). Recounting a recent traffic citation, Jessica informed her friends, “I didn't know I'd even run [a red light]. I look at traffic. I don't pay attention to lights.” Or, as Andy bluntly stated, “I don't give two shits about traffic laws.” What Andy, Culley, and Jessica demonstrate is that messengers do not conceptualize traffic as a set of rules. Instead, traffic is a set of problems (i.e., dangers) that must be continually resolved.

To explain, typically traffic is thought of in terms of regulation. A good driver, it is said, follows the rules of the road, and the same holds true for most understandings of what makes a good cyclist, as well. Alternatively, for messengers, a cyclist does not follow rules; they avoid dangers. For example, a red light at an intersection signifies that one is likely to encounter more problems than if the light was green. The messenger may or may not be able to resolve this problem (i.e., fitting between the cross-flow of traffic). If she can solve it, laws be damned. If the rider cannot find a line through, she must stop, but stopping is always a source of

frustration. This is why Annabel, Bill, and Steve proudly acknowledged their ability to flow through traffic. As Marco said, “I literally run more red lights than I run green lights. I’ve gotten to the point where I just straight up bomb [i.e., speeds through] everything that goes. They’ll be cars going through [an intersection], and I’m just like, ‘OK, I see a car going,’ and then, like, boom [makes a hand motion implying forward motion], and even with pedestrians it’s the same thing.”

As they route themselves through the city, other objects and users of the city become obstacles and implements for the messenger as they attempt to keep their flow. Pedestrians provide a good example. Colliding with a pedestrian is dangerous for both walkers and riders. Of the numerous stories of such accidents, Calvin’s week-long coma stands as a stark reminder of the danger pedestrians pose to cyclists (and vice versa). A basic courier mantra, therefore, is, “Avoid collisions, they slow you down” (Ray, quoted in Geist 1983: B1). Scott, for example, collided with a pedestrian during his first month on the job. The accident was with an elderly woman. She sustained only minor injuries, but did require medical attention. In response, she sued Scott’s company (the case is currently unresolved). Alternatively, pedestrians are also implements of messengers because jaywalkers can slow down cars, and alter the flow of traffic to the messengers’ advantage. Jack refers to this as “the human shield.” Nathan, whom I was interviewing at the same time, explained, “Since they are jaywalking, you can be sure that no cars are coming.” Jack quickly chimed in, “Or, if a car is coming, they’ll hit them instead of you.” Hence, the human shield. Buses can provide the same effect (“bus shielding”). Both are examples of how messengers

creatively (and in some ways, counter-intuitively) *use* the rules and resources of the city (in Giddens' sense of the terms) to ride against the rules of the city (in the legal sense of the term).

It must be remembered that this sort of knowledge is often tacit, and, even when used consciously, it is decided upon in fractions of a second. In the case of pedestrian shielding, as a messenger speeds towards an intersection, he looks for indications about what may or may not occur as he crosses the plane of the opposing street. The presence of pedestrians helps the rider determine what other vehicles can or cannot do in the following few instances of time. As Bill previously explained, it is not a logical thing—the body acts (seemingly) instinctually. Further, as Marco noted, often it is only later that the rider consciously recalls the gravity of the specific dangers they faced.

The difference between the orientation to “rules” and “problems” is demonstrated by the worried and (often times) angry motorists (or cyclist or pedestrian) who fret over a rider refusing to obey traffic laws (even when there is no danger present). One night in Seattle, as I rode with Jack, he blew through a stop sign. Accelerating (opposed to slowing) as he approached the intersection, he slipped seamlessly between the cars; none of the drivers needed (or had quick enough reflexes) to hit their brakes. Regardless, an extremely irate man yelled from his car, “You’re going to get killed riding your bike like that.” Jack simply ignored the warning (and threat) and continued riding. A moment later he looked at me calmly and remarked, “No, actually, I’m not going to get killed riding like that. That’s how

you ride *not* to get hit.” Sarah explained this perspective by stating, “[M]essengers know how to ride in urban traffic, and flow *with* traffic. [...] I think that idea of ‘we are traffic too’ can hurt you more than help you. [...] I try to stay out of the way. [...] I think if I rode and obeyed all the laws and treated myself as traffic, I’d actually be stopping the flow as opposed to going with it.”

### *Betwixt and Between*

As the above comments make clear, a messenger’s relationship to her bicycle and between herself and traffic is completely divergent from that of the bicycle commuter and the recreational cyclist. All three types of rider are concerned with safety, but non-messengers tend to follow the principles of vehicular cycling (see Hurst 2004). From this perspective, bikers should behave like automobile drivers. In turn, cyclists should be given the same rights to the road as motor vehicles. This is what Sarah means with her derision of “we are traffic too.” Thinking in terms of problems, however, messengers conceive of bicycles as a sort of supra-traffic. In this conception, cars and pedestrians are required to follow the rules of the road, and cyclists are given clemency to fit between the cracks of the system. The messengers’ view of themselves, thus, perfectly reflects a traditional view of agency and structure; that they are free to operate *between* the girders of the structure (see Giddens 1984). To this end, bike couriers often describe themselves as invisible or claim that they wish they could be invisible.

In Herbert's words, "I think a good cyclist remembers that he's invisible. He looks at the whole thing, at what's going on, and makes decisions based on that. Whereas a regular street cyclist picks his line and stays with it, because that's all he knows how to do. You have to go around and through and up and down." Conversely, while Darren wants to be invisible, he felt that his riding was hampered by the motorists that did see him:

My object is, one, be safe—not get myself killed, and two, if I could just be invisible—completely invisible to cars and no one could see me in traffic. I don't want anyone to speed up or slow down for me. I don't want anyone to hesitate or worry. There are times that I know I could make an intersection [...], but I won't because I know that, just by the fact that I'm hauling towards that intersection, I'm going to scare oncoming traffic. I know I can make it. I know I've got plenty of room to make it. [...]

Darren's comments are double poignant because, as the reader should remember, I interviewed him soon after a very serious collision (one that occurred precisely because a car coming from behind did not see him).

There are two separate issues going on with regards to invisibility. First, there is Herbert's claim. In Herbert's description, urban cyclists should view the entire scenario laid out before them and slip in-between the cars and people (i.e., micro-routing). As a Chicago messenger explained, "A nice metaphor for it is, if you imagine like water falling over rocks in a stream. There is a natural way to go, and you know, the path of least resistance, etcetera. So, if there is a line of cars in traffic in a street that you're going down, there is just kind of a natural way that you fall through" (Josh, quoted in Mucha and Scheffler 2007). Second, there is Darren's explanation. Darren also wants to find the natural way to fall through, but since

cyclists usually are visible, the scenario they face changes based on their efforts to manipulate their way through it. Darren is not simply worried about scaring people for altruistic reasons (although, that might be part of his concern). He is cognizant of the fact that, if he scares people as he hauls towards an intersection, the route he is planning for (i.e., the gap in vehicles he is prepared to traverse) can change unpredictably if some drivers alter their speed when they see him coming. Ben, a former Chicago messenger now working in San Diego, explained, “I’d rather drivers didn’t see me. When they slow down, you can’t plan for that.” He said this to compare Chicago (where drivers are less likely to alter their speeds when they see a cyclist) to San Diego (where drivers will often stop or slow down out of fear of hitting a cyclist).

Alternatively, bicycle advocacy groups uniformly (and for very obvious reasons) want to increase a cyclist’s visibility. This term is generally referred to as “bicycle awareness,” and the goal is to improve the attentiveness of motor vehicle operators to the presence of cyclists on the road (see Mionske 2007).<sup>68</sup> Visibility, for

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<sup>68</sup> Transport for London (a governmental agency of London) has produced a rather astonishing advertisement in this regard. The spot starts with the viewer being told they are about to be given an “awareness test.” On the screen there are two teams of basketball players (one team in white shirts and one team in black shirts). The announcer asks the viewer to count how many passes the white team makes. The players start moving randomly around the court, passing two balls between themselves for 15 seconds. The image then freeze-frames, and the viewer is told the answer is 13, but then the announcer asks, “But did you see the moonwalking bear?” The footage just shown is then rewind, and the viewer is now primed, not to count the white team’s passes, but to look for a dancing bear. It turns out that the bear was in absolutely plain sight, but imperceptible to those too focused on counting passes. A man in a bear suit had walked right through the swirling mess of players, stopped in

very obvious reasons, is a good thing for cyclists *if* they are going to follow the rules of the road, and act predictably while doing it (e.g., staying to the far right of the lane, stopping at lights, etc.). Concurrent with the broad objective of bicycle awareness is an effort to enhance the bicycle infrastructure of the city. Specifically, bicycle advocacy groups want bike lanes. Bike lanes accomplish two things. First, they separate cars and cyclists. Cars cannot hit bikers if they do not come into contact with them. Second, they give legitimacy to bicycles. Motorists often believe that cyclists do not belong on the road, or even if legal rights to it are acknowledged, a moral right often is not (see Culley 2002; Horton 2007; Perry 1995).<sup>69</sup> Bike lanes, however, make it clear there is, at the very least, a three foot strip in which bicycles undeniably

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the middle of the screen doing a dance, and then moonwalked off the set. The ad then announces, “It’s easy to miss something you’re not looking for.” The point being, if drivers are only paying attention to other cars, cyclists in plain sight can be overlooked. The viewer is, thus, told, “Look out for cyclists.” Interested readers can go to Transport of London’s website ([www.tfl.gov.uk](http://www.tfl.gov.uk)). The advert underscores why messengers (and many other cyclists) often feel invisible—because sometimes they are.

<sup>69</sup> As a cyclist of many years (as a commuter, messenger, and recreational rider), my personal examples of this are legion. While it is no surprise that I have irritated drivers when practicing a problem-oriented approach to urban cycling, I have been told to “get on the sidewalk” or “get off the road” countless times while simply riding in a straight line on the far right of the road. In more extreme cases, I have been threatened or had objects thrown at me. Perhaps most disturbing is the number of people that rant about bicycles getting in their way and slowing them down when they are driving. It is other motor vehicles, of course, that really cause traffic congestion. The amount of time any one motorist has to slow down for a cyclist is minimal to non-existent. Alternatively, it is absolutely incalculable the number of times a driver is slowed by another motor vehicle. Still, it is the cyclist that often burns in the driver’s memory. These instances bring to the surface an underlying belief that bicycles do not truly belong on the road. Motorists, of course, complain incessantly about bad drivers, but cyclists, bad or good (however that criterion is defined), are lumped together as a nuisance for simply using the road.

belong. Conversely, by designating a place that bicycles do belong, bike lanes (by extension) demarcate where bicycles do not belong (i.e., anywhere outside that lane).

The way messengers describe their riding—invisibly falling through the gaps other users of the road have left—is liminal. That is, messengers see themselves as riding “betwixt and between,” to use a phrase made famous by Turner (1964). Bike messengers want to be invisible because they do not want to be part of traffic. Max, for example, stated, “I find the commuters who sit in traffic behind cars, in a lane of traffic, [...] the most obnoxious. It’s defeating the purpose of riding a bicycle in the city. The ability to move through traffic and not be part of traffic is the reason why [people should commute on a bicycle].” In other words, Max has no interest in the political platform of bicycle advocacy groups. He wants neither awareness nor legitimacy. Instead, he wants the ability to manipulate his way through the city—in ways neither conceived nor perceived by other users of the road. For Turner, “Liminality may perhaps be regarded as the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, as a realm of pure possibility whence *novel* configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (7). That is, liminality requires creativity because being betwixt and between, there is no distinct rules for one to follow.

Regardless of what is written in the law, bicycles are always (at least, somewhat) liminal. Drivers have the road; pedestrians have the sidewalk. Cyclists have neither. This deserves a bit of elaboration. Places where pedestrians are allowed to leave the sidewalk and enter the road are usually marked—a crosswalk. This is

because roads are understood as the domain of cars. The painted markers of the crosswalk, therefore, are necessary—to visually denote the proper places where this domain can be transgressed. Bike lanes are like crosswalks—they are little slivers of land conceded to foreigners in a vast territory they do not otherwise control. But, bike lanes are on only a tiny fraction of the roads cyclists use. For the most part, even for riders that adhere to the principles of vehicular cycling, a biker is still in a liminal position. What vehicular cyclists, however, want to do is eliminate the ambiguity of the machine and give the bicycle a distinctly recognized and *regulated* right to the road. Alternatively, messengers do not. As Max explained, it is “obnoxious.” That is, it offends his sensibilities on what cycling in the city can offer—a way around the rules of the road. To this end, Herbert said of the proposition of more bicycle lanes, “Any advantage for a bicyclist is a good thing. It would be a tool. It wouldn’t be: ‘You can only ride in the bicycle lane.’” In other words, for Herbert, a bike lane is just one more place to be betwixt and between as the rider finds her natural way to fall through.

## **Cities and Social Worlds**

### *Courier Riding and Messenger Meaning*

As we have seen, when messengers discursively rationalize their riding, they often emphasize safety. As one bike courier, juxtaposing non-messengers to messengers, noted, “They handle themselves seemingly more cautiously, but actually it is a little more dangerous [...]” As Jack stated, his riding style kept him from

getting hit. Corporeal security, however, is only part (and in many ways only a small part) of the equation. With no doubt, there are distinct dangers in the principles of vehicular cycling (see Hurst 2004), but the problem-oriented (i.e., invisible) method of messenger riding has its own very obvious hazards (and the frequency of messenger injuries underlines this fact). Clearly, the messengers' style of riding is primarily concerned with speed and efficiency (in the short run). The micro-routing which couriers cherish—which arises from their liminality—is primarily about playing the game (i.e., pushing the edges of flow). At this point in the analysis, however, we need to look at how such affect is emplaced. That is, we need to connect the joy of flow and the affect-meaning of rituals to how messengers live (in Lefebvre's sense of the term). In other words, it is here that we can finally address the affective appropriation of space. As we saw in chapter four, the lived experience of the skater cannot occur beyond an engagement with that space. To understand this is to incorporate physical structures into the sociological analysis. As Borden insists, a skater's moves are not generated *sui generis*; skateboarding is produced as the intersection of body, board, and terrain (i.e., individuals acting *within* space).

The rule-orientation of vehicular cycling applies in all situations—empty country roads and crowded city streets alike. The specific practices of riding in rural areas or urban areas may differ somewhat, but the principles are the same. The cyclist should follow the rules of the road and act predictably. Alternatively, the messengers' style of problem-oriented cycling is only viable within the context of urban gridlock. Sarah astutely made this point when trying to explain why a messenger's riding style

is about more than time deadlines. “I think downtown riding is different than any riding almost anywhere else in the city. [...] I’m much more aggressive, but it’s because I’m downtown. [...] I think it is more downtown versus non-downtown than clock versus off the clock.” It is downtown—packed and congested—that there are cracks for the courier to fall through. Messengers cannot ride like messengers outside the downtown core. Bicycles are liminal objects (or, at least, have the potential for being in a liminal position) in all situations, but this liminality is only advantageous (in terms of relative velocity) in specific situations. Whatever puzzles are offered on suburban streets or rural stretches, they are not the challenges surmountable by the messengers’ skills with spatial capacity.

The flow of urban cycling, therefore, is *enabled* by the city. Regardless of how messengers conceptualize themselves in traffic, the constraints of the city are integral to their actions. Which is to say, messengers are not pure agency invisibly falling through the structure; they are intertwined with it. In this way, the physical dimensions to Giddens’ duality of structure (as explained in chapter four) start to come into focus. It is the very limitations of the urban environment (i.e., the gridlock and unavoidable inefficiencies of traffic engineering) that allow messengers to act back upon the city and assert their own conceptions of space onto the city. Turner’s novel configurations do not arise from a void, but from a dynamic tension between two structural positions (e.g., the transitional period between being a boy and a man). For messengers, being neither an automobile driver nor a pedestrian allows for certain

freedoms, but only in the material context of the city. That is, the process of structuration involves more than social structures; it involves physical space as well.

To understand this, the analysis must move beyond descriptions and explanations of messenger practice and bring in the meanings couriers give to their actions. It is here that space becomes explicitly cultural. This is where we can understand the significance of emplaced action. To begin, the problem-oriented method of riding is not confined to the workday. To the contrary, as we have seen, the speed, daring, and creative outlook is carried over into the messengers' non-work life. When I asked Max, for example, if he runs red lights when not working he replied, "Occasionally, sometimes." But, then, thinking it over, stated, "Fuck it. If I look around and there's not a cop, yeah, I'm gonna go for it because I'm on a bike, you're in a car, I'm going to be gone before you get through that light anyway." For Max, this relates to what he calls "the rhythm and flow of the city" and what he sees as his inalienable right to manipulate his way through it. This goes back to Andy and his open disdain for the law; the rules were written for motor vehicles and messengers possess talents that should not be confined to such codes of conduct. This also relates back to Jessica's point about not even knowing she had run a red light.

The extremes of such non-work (but still edgeworking) riding are illustrated in a Saturday I spent with a group of New York messengers. Crossing paths with Stan during a weekday, he suggested I hang out with himself and his friends on the weekends. As he explained, "[We] ride around and cause havoc." A few weeks later, I met up with this group for a ride to the Kissena Park Velodrome (from Brooklyn to

Queens). On this trip, we rarely stopped for lights, and (in general) infuriated drivers throughout the two boroughs. This culminated in a physical standoff between our group and an angry driver. The incident started over José, slightly separated from the main group, making a particularly rash choice in running a red light to catch up. One driver felt particularly slighted by José's actions. As José rode back up to our group, he and the motorist were engaged in a heated argument (the driver was riding beside him, both issuing various threats). José staked out his position rather succinctly by stating to the driver, "I never said it was your fault. I just told you to fuck off." In the end, it took Andreas brandishing his bike lock (a six pound chain) as a weapon to convince the driver that he did not want to escalate things further. It was at this moment that I realized just how literal Stan's invitation had been. Later, I also realized that the ride was also an audition—a test among a recent group of friends to size up each other's riding prowess. Towards the end of the day, José proclaimed, "We now know that we are all riders." His point being, throughout the day (as we rode around causing havoc), everyone in our group had demonstrated they were urban cyclists. The day had been about showing a willingness to push the edge in traffic and having the prerequisite ability to do so.<sup>70</sup>

What my weekend with Stan and his friends underscores is the connection between how a messenger rides and the larger lifestyle that she is part of. The epitome of the how messengers live and the cultural values surrounding how messengers ride

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<sup>70</sup> In the interest of accuracy, I should mention that both my bravado and my skills lagged far behind the rest of this group. José may have proclaimed that we were all riders, but they were riders of a different caliber.

is, of course, the alleycat. To repeat Kyle's words from the last chapter, "It's what you do for a living, but it's not *just* what you do for a living." In this blurring, it is not just work and leisure that lose their bounds. As we have seen, the wild riding behaviors of messengers become indications of their innermost selves. The reader should remember Edward's claim of urban cycling, "This is our life." Edward said this while recounting a story of a messenger being severely injured while riding and outsiders condemning the injured rider for bringing his ill-fate on himself. Similar misfortune would meet Edward a few months after he repeated this story, but, like Darren, his own physical traumas (in Edward's case a shattered femur) did not alter his worldview.

At the risk of belaboring this point, it needs to be stressed that cyclists cannot ride around and cause havoc outside of cities (at least, not in the way Stan meant). When José said that we were all riders he was not referring to our cardiovascular fitness or the suppleness of our pedal strokes. He was talking about each cyclist's ability to navigate the maze. And, navigating the maze was what the day had been about. We were *urban* cycling. To remove the urban from our experience would be to remove the mountain from a mountain biking trip. In both cases, the rider is cycling (i.e., staying upright through the centrifugal force of two wheels propelled by rider's own biological energy), but it is the first word that is definitive. As Kyle explained:

When I'm just riding [outside the city], and I'm by myself, it's like unattached riding. I don't have to pay as much attention to what is going on. I don't necessarily have to be focused on where I am, where I am going. [...] I like to hop of the back country roads and just go ride

and not have to stop, and not have to look where I'm headed, and just kind of stare off and, you know, be free—just enjoy my surroundings and where I am. [...] I've learned how to ride in traffic and around heavy groups of people, and get through without stopping. [...] It's a very different style. [...Urban cycling is] a lot more aggressive riding style, even though it is slower [than riding on back country roads].

### *Structuration in the City*

It goes without saying that bike messengering is a strictly urban occupation. It is equally apparent that alleycats are a purely urban phenomenon. Less obvious, however, is what such simple observations mean for the role of space in cultural theories about urban social worlds. Clearly, messenger practices are emplaced. This fact alone is unlikely to raise the sociologist's eyebrows, but it should. To go back to Giddens, the move from dualism to duality has immense repercussions for the conceptualization of structure. Traditionally, structure is understood as a constraint. More so, it is understood as an *external* constraint. As such, structure is removed from agency—as if it could exist outside of human action. Conversely, by viewing structure as an external force, the actor's activities are freed from structure, insofar as they do not directly confront the structure. From this perspective, “The structural properties of social systems [...] are like walls of a room from which an individual cannot escape but inside which he or she is able to move at whim” (Giddens 1984: 174). Not surprisingly, this view represents the messengers' take on their actions. Summing up her younger, and wilder, years as a messenger, Rosie stated, “There definitely wasn't any social rules, and that was very free.”

Theoretically, however, for Giddens, this view is flawed. Agency and structure exist in a dialectical relationship—“the notion of action and structure *presuppose one another*” (1979: 53). For the purposes of the present argument, the built environment (along with the more commonly theorized *social* rules and resources) is, as Gieryn writes, “an agentic player in the game.” Just as Borden sees skateboarders connected to their use of architecture, couriers are tied to the city’s structure. There are good reasons why Rosie feels that there were no social rules and why Marco described his occupation by claiming, “[W]e’re pretty much just paid outlaws.” Sociologically, however, these lay conceptions miss the duality inherent in courier practices. In terms of structuration, messengers are far less outside the law than inside it. The very freedom Rosie describes and the outlaw character Marco cherishes come from how messengers use the very strictures (e.g., the flow of traffic and the rules of the road) that contain them.

There is also a second, bolder point to analyzing messenger practice as a form of urban structuration. Messengers not only utilize the rules and resources of the city, but in doing so, they help reconstitute what the city is. As sentimental education, alleycats teach couriers to not give “two shits about traffic laws,” and, instead, wildly embrace the potential edgework of dodging cars. My weekend with Stan and his friends, for example, is given new significance when thought of in terms of the ritual sanctification of urban cycling (i.e., our riding was connected to the effervescence of alleycats and reifies subcultural values as an objective reality). But, such riding not only educates and reinforces shared identities through collective meaning. Building

from Lefebvre, this riding transform the space in which it occurs. The utilitarian and rational rules of traffic are turned upside down and used for their own negation. By turning streets into racecourses (either in an alleycat, in making a paid delivery, or just in riding around town), messengers transform the veins of commerce into the roots of play. It is precisely these sorts of events that Lefebvre (1968 [1971]) believes can overturn the oppressive cloak of rationalization permeating everyday life. This issue will be discussed more in chapter nine. For now, the essential point is simply to go back to the debate between Gans and Lefebvre. Both theorists agree that design cannot uniformly determine behavior. By ruling physical space as totally insignificant, however, Gans is blinded to how behavior can determine design. That is, while the obdurate form of the built environment remains unaltered, the meaning of the design—how it is experience (“lived,” in Lefebvre’s conception)—can be altered through practice.<sup>71</sup> To ignore this is to fall into the trap of environmental determinism—the belief that city planners can dictate how space is used (the very trap Gans worked so hard to overcome).

To reiterate from chapter four, structure and agency presuppose one another. This means that structures cannot be understood outside of the reflexively aware individuals whose activities construct them. Likewise, agency is only possible in relation to the structures in which action takes place (physically, mentally, or socially).

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<sup>71</sup> My interest here is in the messenger subculture, but the practice of urban cycling has an affect on non-messengers too. Specifically, the city becomes a little bit more dangerous (which is why newspaper editorials often demonize messengers) or maybe even a little bit more romantic (as is illustrated in pop culture depictions of messengers or in Max and Rhonda’s childhood idolizations of messengers).

While theoretically compelling, social researchers have difficulty applying this theoretical insight to their empirical data. And, in the case of physical structures, the issue has been largely ignored altogether. In this chapter, however, I have emplaced the culturally significant practices of messengers (i.e., the game of deliveries and thrill of alleycats) squarely within the urban environment in which they occur.

At the same time, let me state, agency and structure may presuppose on another, but it is a mistake to assume that structuration requires parity in this dynamic. As a case in point, the reader can think of Willis's (1977) famous study of working class teenagers. Willis's lads are not cultural dupes (even if inadvertently all their efforts at rebellion result in perpetuating their class position). In their various efforts at "having a laff" (at the expense of those in positions authority) they transform *their* relation to the school by redefining the terms of engagement. But, the school itself functions just the same. They have not transformed *the school's* relationship to them (save the fact that they receive more disciplinary action than the more subdued students).<sup>72</sup> Likewise, messengers are in a dialectic relationship with the city, but the space they produce does not change the urban environment outside their specific interaction with it. As such, the point is not that messengers can appreciably transform the city for others—any more than the lads changed their school for the

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<sup>72</sup> Giddens (1984) writes of Willis's study, "Constraint [...] is shown to operate through the active involvement of the agents concerned, not as some force of which they are passive recipients" (289). Which is to say, the lads (as much as their teachers) understand authority and their structural position in relation to power. The end result of the lads' exercise of agency, however, is largely the unintentional reproduction of the existing social structure.

other students. Certainly, the lads' disruptions altered the tenor of the classroom just as the messengers' riding styles may alter the tenor of the street. These are not, however, the grand urban transformations that level ghettos (or give rise to them) or attract or repel industry. Messengers are insignificant players in the death and life of great cities. But, at the same time, I do want to insist that urban social worlds are in a dialectic relationship with the city, and to understand an urban social world the researcher must understand how its actions are emplaced.

Clearly, there are economic and social factors also at work, but the lure of delivering packages is far more than these things. In the last two chapters, we saw that the allure is ultimately derived from emotions—the joy of flow and the affect-meaning generated in rituals. In this chapter, we have seen that couriers do not play in a void. It is in thinking about bike messengers as space workers that their lived experience takes shape (as an appropriation of urban space). As we will see in chapter nine, a focus on the duality of urban space—how agents use the rules and resources of the city—offers an alternative perspective for conceptualizing human liberation. In the way messengers use the built environment (regardless of whether we find the behavior itself foolhardy or civically irresponsible) the material world is, at least partially, de-reified (as messengers objectivate their subcultural reality). The city, in each instance of messenger transgression, becomes opened up as a site of play. And, it is this potential—a potential open to all individuals in many different ways—that Lefebvre believes can lead to a more fulfilling (i.e., less rationalized) method of social organization. However, we are getting ahead of ourselves, at the moment, Lefebvre's

political agenda is far less important than its theoretical underpinnings. Irrespective of (French) leftist critiques of everyday life, the relevance of emplacing practices should be clear. As the example of messengers shows, the city is not simply a thing in the background of the messengers' social world. Urbanism is a way of life for messengers, but only to the degree it is enabled by their creative use of structure. Which is to say, messengers conduct an affective appropriation of the city. And, in turn, find meaning in delivering packages.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize my argument thus far, courier work allows for the creative, spontaneous action of the "I." The "I" is self-feeling. Which is to say, the actions of the "I" feel authentic (opposed to the obligatory actions engendered by the "me"). The authenticity of the "I" is what Csikszentmihalyi calls flow—the optimal experience of meeting required tasks with individual skills. The flow of urban cycling has a dangerous component, making it (at times) what Lyng calls edgework. Because of its physicality and danger, messengering attracts a disproportionate number of men to the occupation. Moreover, much of the behavior described in this dissertation has a specifically masculine character to it. However, it is not machismo that explains the lure of delivering packages. Likewise, dirty work research offers a set of cognitive explanations for how individuals handle stigma. For example, we have seen how messengers rationalize their riding as safe and less disruptive to traffic than the principles of vehicular cycling. We have also seen how they find comfort in knowing

that there are messengers working around the world. But, these discursive accounts do not address the intrinsic enjoyment made possible by flow, and it is in flow—optimally lived experience—that the lure of delivering packages starts to come into focus.

Beyond flow (which is an entirely individual experience), the messenger lifestyle is defined by the ritual of alleycats. Through alleycats, messengers collectivize and exaggerate the emotions of urban cycling. In doing so, they generate affect-meaning. That is, the significance of urban cycling becomes an objective reality, and messengering becomes a subculture complete with sacred totems energizing mundane life with the values of the race environment. It is here that we see messengers not only identifying with the occupation, but adhering to an all-encompassing lifestyle. To a large extent, the lifestyle (as a product of lived experience sanctified by rituals and supported by sacred symbols) is what explains the messenger subculture. It is in pushing the edge while delivering packages (or simply riding through traffic for any reason) that the messenger connects with the powers of the collective. This is where the subculture gets its ultimate meaning.

Emotions explain why delivering packages has an allure for couriers. Emotions also explain why a subculture has expanded out of the occupation to become a meaningful identity. An analysis that stops there, however, misses what is so specific about the messenger puzzle. As we have seen in this chapter, the flow of urban cycling cannot be separated from the urban environment (i.e., the material setting in which these emotions occur). As such, the affect-meaning of the messenger

subculture is co-determinate with the appropriation of physical space. Generally absent from sociological analysis, space is an essential component in the theoretical issues of structure and agency. In the case of bike messengers, the individual actions of urban cyclists are based around the pursuit of flow (informed through the sentimental education of messenger rituals). It is in these actions that messengers creatively alter the structural arrangements of space. As such, messengers engage in what I call the affective appropriation of space.

In the next chapter, I offer a practiced-based semiotic analysis of messenger style. In this analysis, I will connect the cultural objects of messengers to their emplaced social practices. That is, for Durkheim, the symbols of a group are (at least initially) totally arbitrary. In speaking about the selection of sacred totems, Durkheim states, “any object can play this role” (230). However, I contend that by including space in the cultural analysis, messenger style becomes concretely connected to messenger practice. As such, the symbols of a group are not entirely arbitrary—they are intertwined with action (actions which are emplaced). Culture may be a text (as Geertz asserts), but the sociological task is not simply to read it. We must also investigate *how* it is written and *why*. The fruits of this approach will be elaborated in the next chapter. There we will see a homology between the symbols messengers use and the affective appropriation of space.

A variation of this chapter is forthcoming as “Appropriating the City: Space, Theory, and Bike Messengers” (*Theory and Society* vol. 38).

## CHAPTER 8: THE MEANING OF MESSENGER STYLE

### **The Sociology of Style**

#### *Messengers, Style, and Semiotics*

In 1997, a writer for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* noted, “It was only a matter of time before the fashion world got hip to bike-messenger chic, a distinctive style that is equal parts hip-hop, skateboarder, and punk” (Allam 1997: 1D). Three years later, fashion photographer Philippe Bialobos (2000) actually published a book entitled *Messengers Style*. It is a collection of studio shots with an introduction by fashion historian Valerie Steele. Steele (2000) proclaims messengers as “trendsetter” because they wear sporty clothes and have athletically toned physiques. She concludes her introduction stating, “Strong, brave, fast, and free. No wonder we admire messengers and their style” (3). Up to this point, my argument has focused on practices—lived experiences embedded in the material environment. Throughout the preceding pages, however, I have touched, here and there, on style. In this chapter, though, I want to confront messenger style head-on.

The task of this chapter is to show there is no coincidence in Steele combining the significance of messenger style to the physical aspects of the job (i.e., being fast and strong) and its cultural values (i.e., being brave and free). In Steele’s formulation, outsiders admire messengers and their style because it symbolizes what messengers *do* and what they *represent*. That is, messengers (still keeping in line with Steele’s terminology) use their physical strength to bravely speed through the city—free from the rules and responsibilities of the average citizen. What Steele hints at is a semiotics

of messenger style. In Geertz's (1972 [1973]) words, "The culture of a people is an ensemble of text, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (452). In this chapter, therefore, I want to look at the messenger subculture as an ensemble of text, and what this text tells us is a particular story of affective spatial appropriation. Ultimately, I want to demonstrate that the meaning of the messenger subculture (i.e., the flow of urban cycling) is symbolically expressed in courier style.

Geertz's semiotic approach has already been utilized in the discussion of messenger races (see chapter six). Alleycats are not only rituals generating collective effervescence; they are a form of sentimental education. That is, they express a deeper set of subcultural values (i.e., the significance of flow over and above economic rationality). The semiotics of the messenger subculture, however, can be taken much further. It is not only alleycats (and other forms of collective after-hours socializing) that exude and instill the courier ethos. Perhaps more than anything, it is with style—the argot, demeanor, and image of a subculture (Brake 1985)—that insiders and outsiders alike are informed (i.e., sentimentally educated) about the messenger lifestyle. No doubt, this is the premise on which Bialobos's book was published. As Eco (1973) states, "[A]ny cultural phenomenon is *also* a sign phenomenon" (61). Which is to say, humanity *speaks* through its clothing (and its food, its furniture, etc.). To this, Hebdige (1979), in his characteristically dramatic phrasing, adds, "Style in subcultures is, then, pregnant with significance" (18). To read over the shoulder of messengers—to find out just what significance their style is pregnant with—is to connect cultural

analysis (i.e., questions of meaning) to social practices—actions that are emotionally embodied and physically emplaced. Ultimately, the lure of delivering packages, then, is not just in practice, but in symbols that constitute and are constituted by those practices.

### *The CCCS*

The most famous approach to the sociology of style comes from the researchers at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) during the 1970s. This group was particularly interested in the youth subcultures of Britain—hippies, mods, punks, rockers, skinheads, etc.—and they wanted to understand these groups in relation to capital (see Clarke *et al.* 1976). That is, from the CCCS perspective, subcultures represent a frustration between the ideals of a class and the actual (i.e., material) situation of that class. Most importantly, for the CCCS, this material frustration is *symbolically* displayed through subcultural styles. Skinheads, for example, yearning for a return of blue-collar prosperity and rigid masculine supremacy in the workforce, crop their hair short, don heavy boots, and wear suspenders in an exaggeration of the workingman persona (Cohen 1972 [1980]). Alternatively, Hebdige (1979) argues that punks wallow in the working class's decline through a nihilistic inversion of objects (e.g., wearing safety pins as jewelry and garbage bags as clothes). From the CCCS perspective, researchers must semiotically deconstruct style—as we just saw in the example of punks and skins—to accurately read the protean forms of working class resistance to bourgeois hegemony.

For Clarke (1976), subcultural style is a form of *bricolage*. Which is to say, subcultures are identifiable through their *rearrangement* of symbols taken from the dominant culture. Subcultures do not produce new things; they simply have new uses for pre-existing ones (and, thus, give new meanings to those old objects). This is what makes subcultures *sub*-cultures (opposed to being a *different* culture). Clarke proposes that bourgeois hegemony is expressed through a symbolic discourse that pervades everyday life. Which is to say, it is not only shaved heads or safety-pinned lips speaking. Conventional styles also speak; normalcy conveys adherence, if not acceptance, to capitalist ideology. “However, when the *bricoleur* locates the significant objects in a different position with that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs, or when the object is placed within a different total ensemble, a new discourse is constituted, a different message conveyed” (177). This is a point expanded upon by Hebdige who claims that subcultural style represent “noise” (within the otherwise hegemonic communication of bourgeois values).

For the CCCS, subcultural *bricoleurs* are constrained in the objects they can adapt. Abstractly, any group could use any objects. Skinheads could wear dresses and proclaim it made them tough; punks could wear well-pressed suits and ties and say it was ironic subversion. And, of course, there have been masculine groups who successfully appropriated “feminine” symbols—for example, the heavy metal subculture (see Weinstein 1991)<sup>73</sup>—and disenfranchised youths who considered fine

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<sup>73</sup> It should be noted that, Weinstein writes of heavy metal style as if it is intrinsically masculine. Long hair, spandex clothing (worn to pronounce one as a sexual object),

clothing an act of rebellion—for example, the English Teddy Boys (see Jefferson 1976). But (and this is the essential part), all four of these groups differ from each other in ways that extend far beyond clothes. Subcultures are realized through style, but style itself must be understood as representative of more than just surface imagery. Instead, style depicts the *self-consciousness* of the group. As such, the symbols of the group must resonate with a larger set of cosmic meanings for the subculture—masculinity for skinheads was a different masculinity than the one practiced and praised in heavy metal. In Clarke’s words, “The selection of the objects through which style is generated is then a matter of the *homologies* between the group’s self-consciousness and the possible meanings of the available objects” (179). Which means, again in Clarke’s words, that, “[T]he object in question must have the ‘objective possibility’ of reflecting the particular values and concerns of the group [...]” (179).

The best example of subcultural homology is found in Willis’s (1978) study of rockers (which he calls motor-biker boys) and hippies. Willis connects the main activities of each group with the musical preferences of the group. That is, Willis argues there is a cultural link between speeding on motorcycles and early rock’n’roll. Likewise, he connected taking psychedelic drugs to the progressive rock favored by the hippies (and specifically rejected by the rockers). All of which is to say, “[T]he

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and make-up (in the American and European context), however, requires an obvious redefinition of what “masculinity” means. But, Weinstein is certainly right that within the heavy metal subculture(s), these stylistic devices are overtly male (which is the point I am attempting to make).

members of a subculture must speak a common language. And if a style is really to catch on, if it is to become genuinely popular, it must say the right things in the right way at the right time. It must anticipate or encapsulate a mood, a moment” (Hebdige 1979: 122). Hippies, metal-heads, punks, rockers, skinheads, and Teds all encapsulate different moods (even though they all represent disaffection with bourgeois hegemony), and, thus, the symbols each group wields vary—for their styles need to project the objective possibilities of their *particular* self-consciousness.

### *Theories of Practice*

For Geertz (1966 [1973]) culture manifests itself as an ethos. It is “the tone, character, and quality of [...] life” (89). To be Balinese is to be something different than to be American, and to be Balinese (and not American) is to be versed in a particular universe of symbols (as opposed to another). Geertz’s approach is analogous to the CCCS’s assertion of bourgeois hegemony. That is, the bourgeoisie dominate capitalist society, and they will continue to do so to the extent that the universe of symbols available in society reflect capitalist interest. While there are cultural differences between Western democracies, for the CCCS, they are all variations on a capitalist ethos. Criticizing Geertz (and by extension the CCCS), Swidler (2001) writes, “But that analysis does not take us very far in understanding the ways people appropriate and use cultural meanings” (21).

For Swidler, culture is not *one* coherent system of meaning. In Geertz’s (1973) famous metaphor, “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has

spun” (5). In this sense, humans are trapped by their culture, and semiotics illuminates the meanings individuals attribute to the threads that confine them. Conversely, Swidler (1986) sees culture not as a web (formed from a single coherent discourse), but as a “toolkit” of various and (often) contradictory meanings. In this sense, there can be no cultural hegemony (bourgeois or otherwise). There are institutions that influence desired outcomes and shape immediate social situations, but culture itself is merely a repertoire of potential meanings individuals call upon to orient action. For example, marriage is the institutionalization of love (or, at least, a Western ideal of monogamous sexual relations). Couples orient their actions within this institutional framework, but the meaning of marriage (e.g., emotional attachment or contractual bond) varies (for the same individual) across situations. As Swidler (2001) analogizes, “Bats know where they are by bouncing sounds off the objects around them. Similarly people orient themselves partly by bouncing their ideas off the cultural alternatives made apparent in their environments” (30).

While Swidler is relentless in her critique of Geertz, her practiced-based approach is not irreconcilable with semiotic analysis. In discussing the divide between practice and semiotics, Sewell (1999) writes, “Systems and practice approaches have seemed incompatible, I think, because the most prominent practitioners of the culture-as-symbols-of-meaning approach effectively marginalized considerations of culture-as-practice—if they didn’t preclude it altogether” (46). However, Sewell goes on to explain, “Yet the presumption that a concept of culture as a [system] of symbols and meaning is at odds with a concept of culture as practice seems to be perverse” (47). In

contrast to an inherent opposition, Sewell asserts that practices and systems presuppose one another.<sup>74</sup> In fact, Sewell's desired reconciliation adheres to Giddens' theory of structuration and brings us back (somewhat surprisingly) to the CCCS.

Swidler is certainly correct that individuals do selectively pick and choose from a collection of possible meanings. Indeed, subcultures represent the very extremes of this process. At the same time, Swidler's understanding of practice fails to adequately accommodate for the duality of structure. Specifically, Swidler conceptualizes culture as a "thing" external to practice. Of course, in Swidler's terms, culture enables actions through repertoires that justify various end goals (e.g., staying married or getting divorced). However, in her conception, culture itself stands apart from the individuals who practice it by reaching into their toolkits. Swidler, thus, talks about people "using" culture and notes that people vary in "how much" culture they do use. But, adhering to the tenants of structuration, culture is more than an organizing principle for action; culture is at once constituting and constituted by action. In Sewell's words, "Culture is neither a particular kind of practice nor practice that takes place in a particular social location. It is, rather, the semiotic dimension of human social practice in general" (48). Which is to say, culture is the meaningful

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<sup>74</sup> It is worth noting that while both Sewell and Swidler place Geertz firmly in the systems camp (certainly a reasonable categorization), Ortner (1984) acknowledges a strong emphasis on practice in his writing. "Geertz did not develop a theory of action or practice as such. He did, however, firmly plant the actor at the center of his model, and much of the later practiced-based work builds on a Geertzian (or Geetz-Weberian) base [...]" (130).

schema (i.e., the rules) in Giddens' conception of structure (also see Hays 1994).<sup>75</sup> Instead of seeing culture as a user's manual for actions (i.e., repertoires or toolkits), culture should be understood as a set of virtual schemas.

As schemas, culture is part of structure, and structure (it must be remembered) is co-dependent with action. "What is 'cultural' about cultural analysis, then, is not inclusion of a particular dimension that is foundational of the setting—a pure realm of signifying signs—but analysis of the mode by which the agents executing a practice come to operate in a meaningful and symbolically 'real' world" (Biernacki 2000: 302). While by no means uniformly successful in their various analyses, the CCCS did *attempt* (admittedly, often half-heartedly) to connect practice and symbols. This is most clearly displayed in the ethnographies of Willis (1977, 1978).<sup>76</sup> In his study of hippies and rockers and in his study of the lads, Willis is profoundly concerned with lived experience. For Willis, structures are both altered and reproduced through knowing and willing actions of individuals. That is, Willis's respondents are embroiled in social structures—they are not totally free agents—but structures alone do not determine action—hippies, lads, and rockers are still agents. Against structural

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<sup>75</sup> Structure, as explicated in Giddens' theory of structuration, is explained in chapter four.

<sup>76</sup> Alternatively, the duality of structure is most clearly lost in Hebdige's analysis of punk. The CCCS is highly criticized for Hebdige's (and others') structural reductionism (see Muggleton 2000; Sherwood *et al.* 1993). At the same time, the stated goal of the CCCS is to incorporate agency into their theories. As Hall (1992) notes, "I remember wrestling with Althusser. I remember looking at the idea of 'theoretical practice' in *Reading Capital* and thinking, 'I've gone as far in this book as it is proper to go.' I felt I will not give an inch to this profound misreading, this super-structuralist mistranslation, of classical marxism, unless he beats me down, unless he defeats me in the spirit" (280).

determinism, therefore, is a structural duality.<sup>77</sup> Individuals mobilize resources (i.e., physical materials) to manipulate existing schemas (i.e., cultural rules). It is drawing upon similar (but deviant) rules and resources that constitute subcultures. Style, then, is not a tool in a kit, but rather a symbolic component *of* subcultural practice (actions which cannot be separated from the meanings that inform them). Such a perspective does not require the CCCS insistence on a hegemonic discourse. Instead, following Sewell, all that is necessary is a loose agreement between actors in a society (or a subsection of society) on what objects and actions mean (or could mean, if manipulated in certain ways).<sup>78</sup>

#### *Other Ethnographies of Style*

The CCCS had a very clear ideological mission—explaining British subcultures in relation to a Marxist analysis of class.<sup>79</sup> To the extent that the CCCS approach failed to empirically connect practice to symbols, it is not difficult to attribute the shortcomings to theoretical relapses into structural determinism (informed

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<sup>77</sup> In terminology, Willis (1977) uses culture as synonymous with agency (thus, juxtaposing it to structure). For the argument I am making here, though, this is a semantic flaw, and not a theoretically substantive one.

<sup>78</sup> In Ortner's (1984) classic summation of contemporary anthropological theory, for example, she states, "[T]hose authors who emphasize cultural domination also place important limits on the scope and depth of cultural controls. The extreme case is never reached, and often never even approached. Thus while accepting the view of culture as powerfully constraining, they argue that hegemony is always more fragile than it appears, and never as total as it (or as traditional cultural anthropology) would claim" (153-154).

<sup>79</sup> Hall (1992) denies such a rendition, but the group's Marxist underpinnings are irrefutable.

by their Marxism). Hebdige, for example, did not need to interview punks (or so he must have thought) because the meaning of style was discernable merely by analyzing the working class's material position (and then extrapolating outward to the significance of punk noise). Of course, the members of the CCCS are not the only social researchers interested in style. Not surprisingly, descriptions of style are a regular component in qualitative analysis. Ethnographies of goth music (Hodkinson 2002), horse racing (Case 1984), punk rock (Fox 1987; Muggleton 2000), and motorcycle gangs (Wolf 1991)—just to name a few examples—all include discussions of style. Whereas the CCCS was sometimes too eager to ignore practice by assuming symbolic reflections of structure, other ethnographers focus on practice, but treat symbols as disconnected from both action and structure. For my present purposes, Mitchell's (1983) study of mountaineers and Ouellet's (1994) study of truckers provide useful comparisons.

While not his explicit intention, in discussing how mountaineers construct their social world, Mitchell analyzes style. In an age of planes, helicopters, and various automated gadgets, making it to the peaks of mountains in itself is not impressive; what climbers care about is *how* a person makes it to the peak. In this sense, the whole of mountaineer identity is located within a discussion of style. For example, if a person was somehow able to parachute to the top of Mount Everest, this would not make her a "mountaineer." Likewise, choices of what clothes to wear, what routes of ascent to take, what tools to use and (most importantly) *not* use are paramount within the climber's social world. A climber with a new ice axe is seen as a neophyte, while

a climber with an old rope is seen as a fool. According to Mitchell, therefore, climbers carefully manage their image (through the use of symbols) to portray themselves as experienced climbers.

In attempting to understand the strict work ethic of truckers, Ouellet (1994) provides another excellent discussion of style. For Ouellet, the “super trucker’s” sense of identity is rooted within his idealized image of the trucker. For these men, “styling” in a shiny Peterbilt is worth more in self-esteem than higher paying union jobs driving less prestigious rigs. The question of trucker style, however, goes deeper than the make of a truck (and the amount of chrome which adorns it). Like Mitchell’s mountaineers, truckers must negotiate a contested terrain of style. That is, just as some equipment is appropriate for some climbs but not others, truckers must choose when to break traffic laws and when to put in extra time for the company. A slow trucker gets no respect, but a trucker with too many speeding tickets is seen as irresponsible. Likewise, super truckers must work hard for their employers, but at the same time, they do not want to be seen as company dupes.

Mitchell and Ouellet demonstrate that both social worlds have a style, and that each style signifies the boundaries of that world. It is in properly wielding the right symbols that an individual demonstrates they are competent members of their social world. Conversely, the improper use of a symbol or the correct use of the wrong one designates that a person is not truly a member. Further, Mitchell and Ouellet make it clear that neither world’s style is ready-made. Climbers and truckers must *actively* make decisions about what symbols to use in varying situations, and it is within this

constellation of symbolic choices that style is born. In this sense, climbers and truckers construct strategies of action from their cultural repertoires. That is, climbers and truckers reach into their conceptual toolkits before deciding what to take out of their material toolkits. However, neither Mitchell nor Ouellet attempt to connect the symbols they describe to the practices of the social worlds from which they arise.

The question of meaning is not resolved by merely observing that truckers value polished chrome while mountaineers value tattered clothing. Nor is it enough to acknowledge that such objects signal membership. The essential question is how material and ideal symbolism (i.e., objects and values) are constructed in and through practice. The question, therefore, is not only Geertz's emphasis on what is said (a question Swidler claims is too simplistic), but also how and why it is said. This issue is what Biernacki (2000) calls "the pragmatic *relations* between signs and the organizations of practice" (309). To this end, the cultural analysis of bike messengers offered here must connect the affective appropriation of space with its semiotic dimension—a dimension inseparable from the actions that create it (and, in turn, are created by it). Which is to say, messenger style is the meaningful expression of the lure of delivering packages—the lure of flow found in urban cycling.

### **An Analysis of Messenger Style**

#### *Liminality: Strangers in the Urban Grid*

As we saw in the last chapter, city planners are ambivalent about bicycles. Roads have been constructed for automobiles, and sidewalks have been put in place

for pedestrians. Bicycles, however, exist betwixt and between, and in this liminal zone, cyclists have a freedom to maneuver denied to others. It is the very non-status of the bicycle, therefore, which allows messengers to perform their job. In negotiating their way through the ebbs and flows of “legitimate” traffic, messengers disregard traffic laws, and often, this disregard is conducted quite flamboyantly—Max’s “fuck it” and Andy’s lack of “two shits about traffic laws.” As such, insiders and outsiders alike often describe messengers as outlaws. Marco, it may be remembered, referred to himself and his co-workers as “paid outlaws.” Likewise, in differentiating himself from commuters and recreational cyclists, a former DC messenger, commented to me, “They don’t understand. You and I have experience with the outlaw side of cycling.” Steve, a former rider turned company owner, actually explained his time as a messenger by dividing society into four main categories: “There was civilians. Then you have the police—the paramilitary. Then you have criminals. Then you have outlaws. Bike messengers fall under the realm of outlaw” (quoted in Sutherland 2006).

An outlaw may break laws, but the word “outlaw” is not synonymous with “criminal.” The outlaw is characterized not for her specific crime, but for a disposition assumed to be dangerously incongruous with Gorz’s heteronomous sphere. That is, the outlaw demands autonomy at the expense of the greater good (or so their detractors claim). At the same time, outlaws are not totally outside society. The autonomy they demand makes them heroes (folk heroes), but heroes at the price of being pariahs (Shamblin 1972). Outlaws are a particular form of what Simmel’s

(1908 [1971]) calls “strangers.” Strangers are neither a native nor an alien. They are estranged in their own homeland—“near and far *at the same time*” (148). Strangers and outlaws are not synonymous—there are certainly strangers who are not outlaws (but there are no outlaws who are not strangers). In analyzing messenger style, however, we can see how the more general character of messenger strangeness feeds into an outlaw image. Which is to say, using Simmel’s conception of the stranger, we can connect the liminal space in which messengers ride with the outlaw character messengers espouse. “The stranger is by his very nature no owner of land—land not only in the physical sense but also metaphysically as a vital substance which is fixed, if not in space, then at least in an ideal position with the social environment” (144). As we saw in the last chapter, cyclists, unlike drivers and walkers, have no land. Further, couriers, unlike other cyclists, are ambivalent about their landlessness. To own land (e.g., a bike lane) is to be confined to it, and messengers desire something very different from a rightful claim to a small strip of road. Instead, messengers relish their liminal position (i.e., their status as strangers), and the opportunities it affords them (opportunities that are often outlawed).

Pedaling through the city, the bike messenger, as we have seen, feels outside the bounds of ordinary society. Laws and regulations are rarely enforced, and the messenger can travel (more or less) where she desires (as fast as she dares). As Culley (2002) writes of his experiences, “I am free to move as I wish, piercing gridlocked intersections, snaking between cars, and running the wrong way up one-way streets. I get juiced by this” (189). Conversely, when the messenger dismounts her bike and

enters the client's office, she feels thrust back inside society—forced to conform to laws and regulations. On the surface this may sound trite, but the lawlessness and feelings of freedom offered by bicycle travel are sharply punctuated by the strict conformity the messenger faces when entering a building. Culley, somewhat dramatically, writes of an elevator ride to make a pick-up, “I was in a steel box now, realizing that the world, like a projected film, runs across my neutral surface evenly. I was not in control here. I knew that. My heart gulped as it endeavored to know itself once again on this mythic descension into the modern world” (35). Messengers (like all agents), of course, are never free from structure. But, the interconnection of agency and structure is an objective, theoretical point separate from subjective perception. Beyond the theorist's explanatory gaze, messengers feel that their actions remove them from structure—Rosie's point (from chapter seven) about being free from social rules.

My own field notes are filled with stories demonstrating the contrast between being inside and outside (literally and figuratively).<sup>80</sup> For example, my field notes from June 23, 2002, are illustrative:

I got frustrated several times today trying to find just where exactly I was allowed to enter the building. One guard made me turn around and walk a block around the building just so I could use the freight elevator

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<sup>80</sup> The reader should note that, to be inside and outside, in the sense I am using the terms here, is partially inverting their meanings in relation to subcultures. That is, to be outside buildings is to feel outside of social regulation that is to be inside the subculture (and vice versa). The confusion of these words is regrettable. Unfortunately, the inside/outside distinction is an established one in the subcultural literature, but the words “inside” and “outside” (in their simple, literal definitions) perfectly capture the material and sensorial distinctions being made here.

(an elevator that was ten feet and in plain sight of where the guard was standing). To make matters worse, when the freight elevator arrived the elevator guy barked, “What do you want? Why don’t you use the regular elevator?” I started to walk to the other elevator, only to have the guard start yelling at me again to go back to the freight elevator. The freight operator, in turn, looked at me as if the confusion was entirely my fault.

Five days earlier, though, I wrote about the exhilaration of being outside:

When you catch a wave of traffic it is pretty awesome. All of the sudden you can just be flying through the city. You can cover serious distance in no time. I feel pretty safe in these situations, but, damn, there are so many things that could possibly go wrong. And, at that speed it could get messy. Of course, that is half the reason it is thrilling. Your legs are just pumping as hard as possible and your mind is racing, looking ahead for approaching dangers.

While urban cycling is (in itself) liminal, the other aspects of messenger work (especially entering buildings to make pick-ups and drop-offs) enhance this liminality. Messengers are continually thrust back and forth between feelings of freedom and conformity. In both situations, however, the messenger is still a stranger—someone who does not belong to either world. Just as bikes have a tenuous position on the road, landlords and business managers (along with the employees they command) are unsure what to do with couriers in their buildings. Messengers are making deliveries, but they are not handling freight. They are part of the business day, but they are not businessmen. Which is to say, other people (even those that regularly deal with messengers) do not know how to properly classify them. Perhaps inside, even more than outside, bike couriers are “*no longer* classified and *not yet* classified” (Turner 1964: 6).

If symbols are connected to practice, then messenger style must hold the “objective possibility” of portraying liminality—messenger style should be the style of strangers. And, not just strangers, but strangers with outlaw potential. Most importantly, it must be remembered that for the CCCS, styles were not accidental or circumstantial. Styles become styles (as opposed to individual particularities) because they encapsulate a mood that is understood to be objectively real. At this point in the dissertation, the reality of the messenger subculture should be clear. Through a dialectical relationship with the urban environment, messengers generate flow that is collectively experienced in rituals producing affect-meaning. The question, then, is how are these emplaced lived experiences encapsulated by messenger style? In the following sections, I will analyze several aspects of messenger style: acting rushed (demeanor); keywords (argot); not wearing helmets, riding track bikes, and clothing *bricolage* (image). In each instance, these symbols of the courier lifestyle will be connected to liminality—not just any liminality (for many social groups can make a claim to an ill fit between themselves and the larger society), but a specifically metropolitan liminality utilized in the pursuit of flow (on a bicycle).

*“You can kind of be an asshole:” Acting Rushed*

As we have seen throughout this dissertation, it is in how messengers ride their bikes that an outlaw image is most thoroughly cultivated. As a *Chicago Tribune* headline declared, “Pedestrians may swear at bicycle messengers, but companies swear by them” (Duvall 1991: 22). The point being, messengers may irritate the

average citizen, but they provide a necessary service. Although, as we now know, the way a courier rides cannot be reduced to their client's timetables. Messengers commit their offenses because of the joy they find in pushing the edge. However, messengers are not just fast on their bikes; they are fast off of them too. Whether pedaling or walking, couriers usually appear to be in a hurry—they are people with places to go (or so it seems).

As with riding, there is (most certainly) a practical component to a messenger hustling in and out of buildings—there are jobs that must be done. At the same time, couriers often hustle when they are not on a deadline. While there may be some vague flow-like elements to efficient building travel (and Csikszentmihalyi has done his best to extend the concept of flow to its outermost limits),<sup>81</sup> no messenger (whether in casual conversation or in interviews) described their time inside a building as thrilling. If there is joy to be had in buildings it comes from wanting a respite from the weather or maybe socializing with people who might be inside (e.g., other messengers or receptionists). In these cases, joy comes from not being rushed. There is, however, a symbolic component to appearing to be in a hurry. Being rushed, after all, is what messengers idealize—it is what they are paid to do and what they play for. Acting rushed, therefore, sends a clear signal to all that one is doing “real” messenger work.

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<sup>81</sup> Csikszentmihalyi divides flow into two main categories: micro and deep. The arguments in this dissertation have focused solely on the deep category. Micro-flow, however, can be as simple (and uninvolved) as chewing gum or doodling. In this sense, there is certainly satisfaction in knowing the best way into a building or slipping into an elevator just before the door closes. Clearly, though, these are not the sorts of actions that dampen reflexive thought (as explained in chapter four).

Rushing for a messenger, though, is more than a mere signal. That is, it does not simply indicate (correctly or falsely) that one is busy. Rushing is, instead, deeply symbolic. In explaining why he wanted to be a bike messenger, Howie, for example, stated, “I love bikes, and then there is that edgy element [...] of being a ‘bad boy.’ Having a reason to run lights, sort of. Having that kind behavior justified a little bit. You can kind of be an asshole as you push your way through lobbies.” Upon hearing this, Bill quickly interjected, “Elevator close door button, I think that is very important.” Bill’s point was that as messengers, there is no social obligation to be polite by holding an elevator door for someone. In fact, just the opposite: messengers should try to close the doors as fast as possible. As Howie added, “Close those things [i.e., elevator doors] as fast as you can. Growling at people, and then smiling as you turn around.” In other words, to act rushed is about more than looking busy. Acting rushed separates messengers (in a specifically stylized way) from others, and messengers cherish this distinction.<sup>82</sup> As a case in point, when Bill’s girlfriend asked him the most important thing about being a messenger, he stated simply, “Hitting the close door button on elevators.”

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<sup>82</sup> Of course, business people act rushed too. The symbolism of messengers acting rushed, however, comes from not simply walking fast (with eyes fixed in determination or frantically conveying information over a cell phone)—these traits are shared by couriers and corporate suits alike. The difference comes in embracing (indeed, relishing) an ethic of incivility. Further, in most cases a harried business person acts rushed by quickening their pace while still, more or less, attempting to display the comportment of a person under no serious duress. There are times for the messenger, though, when making mad dashes through lobbies and upstairs are not only necessary but cool.

Messengers, therefore, place themselves outside normal conventions of civility, but they do it under the guise of performing their job. This is what Howie means by saying that the behavior is justified (a little bit). As they push their way through lobbies, messengers exude a certain outlaw quality—asserting their autonomy (e.g., their right to close the elevator door because they are in a rush) over the convenience of others. More so, in buildings, messengers are strangers—individuals near and far (at the same time). That is, most other occupants of the city (especially those inside the buildings messengers usually service) acknowledge (even if they do not fully agree with) the scripts messengers write: that couriers are rushing because of their job. In this sense, messengers are near. It is understood that companies swear by them (so to speak). At the same time, the curtness to outright rudeness described by Bill and Howie inevitably makes messengers seem far from others. Performing a job or not, messenger offenses can cause others to swear at the courier. Which, as Howie made clear, was his intention; he wanted to come off as a “bad boy.”

*“If I was a civilian:” Keywords*

The symbolic value of acting rushed—which is (in the context of messengers) portraying one’s self as a stranger (and a bit of an outlaw)—is further illustrated by the term “suit.” Suits are business people. “Suit” is an obviously pejorative term—reducing a person to an inanimate object. Further, this object is associated with a way of life couriers abhor. As Rick explained, by being a messenger, “I’m not sitting behind a desk being strangled.” It is the “quality of life issue” described in chapter

three. Which is to say, when couriers barge their way through lobbies and hit the close door button in elevators, they are being rude to a specific sub-class of person—a *businessperson*. It is assumed that these people (more than others) are jealous of the messenger's lifestyle. In being rude to business people, the messenger emphasizes that they are, in fact, free in ways the office worker is not. This is why Howie growls to their faces, but smiles when he turns around. In other words, being a bad boy is fun because one is being an outlaw while others are conforming to social norms. Further, suits are assumed to be especially resentful of the courier's freedom. As such, suits are blamed for encouraging legal enforcement for traffic violations and supporting restrictive building policies. To be rude to business people and to refer to them as suits (although rarely in face-to-face interchanges) is, thus, equally an act of revenge—taking back in subjective pride what is lost in objective power relations.

Of course, the meaning of the word "suit" is never articulated in this exact way. Suits are suits because they are assholes, or boring, or stuck-up. Rick, a particularly aggressive messenger, told a story of punching a man getting out of a cab. The man had not looked before opening his door, almost causing an accident with Rick. In describing the incident, Rick stated, "He got out of the cab [Rick then pauses his speech and sticks up his chin and motions towards his throat, adjusting an imaginary tie]. I got up in his face and sort of slapped him. 'Do you know what you just did?' He got out his cell phone to call the cops. Yeah right. It's going to take at least five minutes for them to get there. I'll have dropped five packages by then. I hit him right in his face." Rick did not use the word suit in his tale, but the moral

justification for Rick's violence comes when indicating the man was wearing a suit (i.e., being a suit). The crux of Rick's story comes from the man's indifference (illustrated by the adjustment of his tie) to the injuries he might have inflicted on Rick. The term suit, then, is the semantic complement to acting rushed. It emphasizes the difference between messengers and those they serve, and it delineates the appropriate target for their behavior when they act rushed. It is useful to note that Rick told this story to a group of messengers relaxing after-hours. As such, it is a form of sentimental education: messengers bravely play the game of flow while suits are strangled behind their desks, or worse, endangering messengers through pompous indifference.<sup>83</sup>

Messengers do not only place a linguistic barrier between themselves and business people. Couriers actually distinguish themselves from *all* other people. To go back to Steve's division of society, messengers (as outlaws) are separate from civilians (i.e., the masses). As Steve explained, "A lot of people spit on you [...] which didn't bother me because as far as I was concerned I was part of a whole different culture" (quoted in Sutherland 2006). Messengers regularly use the term civilian to distinguish others from themselves. As Lee explained, "People outside the

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<sup>83</sup> To the outsider there is a clear hypocrisy in the messenger's villainization of suits. Business people act rushed—just like messengers. Business people are assholes—just like messengers. Such ideological inconsistencies, however, are masked in everyday interactions of the social world and only come to light in an etic analysis like this where different stories (with different moral intentions) told at different times are placed side by side. Such inconsistencies can be found in any social world. As Turner (1967) makes clear, symbols can be contradictory and what people say about them can be inconsistent. It is the analyst's responsibility, however, to step back and attempt to make sense of them.

community [are] referred to as civilians because there's that same camaraderie that cops [have]. You do something where you face adversity on a daily basis, and you have a tendency to stick together." Much of this adversity is defined in relation to messengers being strangers (i.e., occupying an ambivalent place in society), and willfully going against social conventions (i.e., being outlaws).

In describing the worst part of her job, for example, Sarah stated, "Sometimes I don't like the way people treat me. [...] I've had these encounters in elevators and on the streets. People yell at you and they say things at you, and I think if I wasn't a messenger they wouldn't say those things to me. If I had a suit on [...] they wouldn't say things to me. [...] I feel like people say things to me that they wouldn't say if I was a civilian." Of course, urban life (for all people) involves dealing with the anger, indifference, and rudeness of others. Sarah, though, felt that being a messenger increased such treatment. This is a perfect example of how messengering is dirty work (see chapter three). However, in denoting themselves as *not* civilians, messengers make it clear that their strangeness is not confined to the workday—it is not an identity that can be stripped off on the weekend. The treatment Sarah received (or felt she received) is endemic to her self, and using the word civilian (just as with the word suit) is a form of sentimental education for all those that hear it. With their stories and words, messengers construct their subculture around being strangers (of a particular sort).

While the words civilian and suit educate messengers about themselves in relation to the rest of society, the words "ride" and "work" educate messengers about

their life within the subculture. Ride and work are both used synonymously with “messenger work.” A telling example of how these words are used occurred during my first weeks working as a messenger. Adam and I were discussing his year-long stay in Los Angeles, and I did not understand the meaning applied to the terms.

Jeff: “So did you ride in LA?”

Adam: “No I did not work in LA.”

J: “Were you going to school in LA?”

A: “No, I moved out there for a job in graphic design.”

[later in the conversation]

J: “You didn’t ride your bike when you were out there?”

A: “Of course I did.”

In this conversation Adam thought I was asking if he worked as a messenger in LA. Conversely, I was confused as to why he started talking about working in graphic design when I was talking about riding bikes. Later, when I attempted to ask Adam why he had not ridden his bike in LA, he was completely confused as to why I assumed he had not. Likewise, when I told New York messengers I lived in Boston for a year they would ask if I “worked” in Boston. I would get funny looks when I told them about my job at a community newspaper. Eventually I learned to tell people, “I lived in Boston for a year, but I did not work there.” In such a statement it is understood that I did have a job, but I had not worked as a bike messenger.<sup>84</sup>

What does conflating riding with working tell us about messenger meaning?

Among lifestyle messengers, we have seen how the spheres of work and leisure are

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<sup>84</sup> It is worth mentioning that such a conflation also negates the value of other types of work. One can think of here of professors at research-oriented universities. They may spend all day preparing teaching materials and lecturing, but for neither themselves nor their colleagues does this effort count as “work”—work is research (and teaching, while part of the job description, is something that just gets in the way).

highly integrated (see chapter six). Messengers spend their non-work hours in largely the same manner that they spend their work hours: speeding through the city on bikes. Since messengers spend a great deal of their leisure time riding, reducing work to “riding” is indicative of the messenger lifestyle colonizing the logic of work. In other words, messengers do not so much work as they simply ride their bikes (whether they are riding their bikes to a party or to make a delivery). Nippert-Eng argues that the boundaries workers construct between their occupational time and leisure time is crucial to understanding how individuals construct identities. Thus, messengers can be seen as constructing identities that conflate their work and leisure selves. By using ride and work synonymously, messengers not only demonstrate an integration of work and leisure, but also liminality. The rationalization of labor assumes the clear demarcation of work and leisure time, but, for the courier, riding for work and riding for fun all becomes just *riding*. In doing so, messengers define their activities outside of cultural classifications—no longer classified and not yet classified (i.e., as strangers). And, this is why the poor treatment described by Sarah strikes at the heart of her identity; she *is* a bike courier (not a civilian).

*“I’ve learned a lot about how to ride:” Not Wearing Helmets*

We already know that messenger behavior cannot be explained by simple economic motives. Instead, I have shown messengering to be a game of flow (sometimes played at the edges of survival). The symbolic importance of risk (or, more accurately: the symbolic importance of risk management) is expressed in a

refusal to wear a helmet. While many messengers do wear helmets (at least occasionally), the vast majority does not wear them consistently. A conversation I overheard at the Warriors Fun Ride was indicative of how helmets are understood within the subculture. The wife of one of the race organizers was talking to someone about a competitor's girlfriend. "She wanted him to wear a helmet. [...] It is the one night he wants to hang out and have fun with his boys, and do you know how much shit he would get for that?" This woman knew that the racer would be looked down upon if he followed his girlfriend's advice. On another occasion, Vinny rode into Tompkins Square Park wearing a helmet. Another veteran courier loudly yelled, "Rookie!" The insult was a joke, but there was a meaning behind it.

Veteran couriers do not need to wear helmets because they know how to handle themselves in traffic. Rookies, on the other hand, do not. For example, when Mike moved to New York he originally wore a helmet. In his first weeks as a courier he got into two serious accidents. One accident sent a pedestrian to the hospital. In the other accident, Mike collided with a car and his bicycle was completely destroyed. The latter accident also broke his helmet in two. The helmet, by all counts, spared him from a serious head injury (and possibly saved his life). After this second accident, though, Mike decided to *stop* wearing a helmet. When I questioned him about his rather strange logic Mike replied, "Yeah, but I've learned a lot about how to ride in New York since then."

There is no functional reason that messengers abstain from helmet use. Some messengers claim that helmets are too hot for the summer months. However, these

couriers did not wear helmets in the winter. The general courier disdain for helmets is purely symbolic. Riding without a helmet conveys confidence (justified or not) in one's skills and experience. Further, such skills and experience implicitly involve knowledge of the environment. To ride without a helmet is to assert not only an ability to handle one's self, but an ability to deal with others (specifically, an ability to deal with the danger of cars). At the same time, messengers readily admit the risks inherent in their job, and they candidly discuss the injuries and deaths of their friends and co-workers. Darren, for example, the seriously injured courier who stated that *all* riders will eventually have an accident, was ambivalent about helmets (even in the days immediately following his own injuries). As he stated, "I don't like wearing a helmet. I understand there's a reason for it. In fact, if I'd been wearing my helmet a couple of weeks ago I would have been saved from a lot of these injuries. But, I just don't like wearing a helmet. Call me stupid, whatever. I don't know. [...] It's not a fashion thing. It just feels better to be not wearing a helmet. It's as simple as that." Or, in Rhonda's words, "When I wear it, it gets in my way, it bothers me. I can't flip my sunglasses up. I can't wear the hat I want to wear. Which, I suppose, could be misconstrued as vanity, but [...] I don't feel that's why I don't wear a helmet. Truly, it's just an inconvenience to me, and the times that I wish I was wearing a helmet, it's too late."

On the surface, these quotes about helmets seem to indicate indifference, and when asked to discursively justify their behaviors, messengers tend to waffle between acknowledging dangers and simply disregarding them. To write off messenger

ambivalence as indifference, however, is to miss how helmets are symbolically rooted in practice. To draw a comparison with motorcycle clubs, Wolf writes, “The outlaw considers their face-it-head-on-and-tough-it-out approach towards danger and discomfort to be another line of demarcation between themselves and the citizen. [...] Bikers face their vulnerability with a cavalier attitude, a style they feel has a lot to do with the courage to face risks and endure uncertainty” (52-53). In refusing to wear helmets, messengers assert a face-it-head-on-and-tough-it-out image that differentiates themselves from more timid cyclists (and civilians more generally). This is why the rider at the Warriors Fun Ride would get shit for wearing one and why Vinny was called a rookie.

More importantly, for messengers, not wearing a helmet is a visual representation of their “natural” fit with the urban environment. That is, people require protection from elements beyond their control. For example, a hiker packs a raincoat because he cannot prevent it from raining. A construction worker wears a hard hat because she cannot be certain something will not fall on her head. Conversely, messengers show their control by shunning such protection. Whether any messenger actually possesses this control is a totally separate issue. At the semiotic level, messengers resolve the danger of urban cycling by simply removing their helmets. To not wear a helmet is to be at home with the liminality of cycling. There are objectively agreed upon dangers to riding in the city, but to not wear a helmet is to render them subjectively irrelevant. It should be remembered from chapter seven that couriers consider problem-oriented cycling (i.e., cycling which strategically utilizes

the bicycle's liminal status) a safer method of riding. As such, it is in being strangers (who can successfully handle liminality) that messengers are justified (at least in their own minds) to ride helmetless.<sup>85</sup>

*"Rebels without brakes:" Riding Track Bikes*

In terms of risk management, messengers do more than push the edges of flow without helmets. Many are pushing the edge on bicycles without breaks. Messengers ride several types of bicycles (road and mountain bike being the most common), but, as we have seen, track bikes are considered the archetypical machine. Messengers pride themselves on their track bike riding skills. Not only do messengers think they possess talents (due to their work experience) that hipsters cannot, couriers also contrast their skills with elite track racers (i.e., people that compete on the velodrome). Efren, for example, joked about track racers, "They don't know how to [stop quickly]!"

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<sup>85</sup> In recent years I have seen (through websites and YouTube videos) several prominent New York couriers, many who previously did not wear helmets, embracing them. While my research for this project is concluded, and I have not specifically spoken to these riders about the matter, I see the move as an effort for greater legitimation of messengering among the public. To wear a helmet is to reverse everything said in this section. First, a helmet wearer is making it clear (to outsiders) that she has thought about and cares about her personal safety. Second, a helmet wearer is indicating that her present environment *is* a threat to her safety. As such, for messengers to wear helmets draws attention to the dangers of their occupation (especially for outsiders). This move by some within the messenger subculture, therefore, can be seen as an effort to make messengering less strange—to be taken as legitimate workers doing a dangerous (but necessary) job. In terms of stated ideologies, this is what messengers have always espoused. I think that the adaption of helmet wearing comes from a realization (by a minority of publically prominent New York couriers) that to make their stated ideology understood by non-messengers, courier style (or at least certain aspects of it) must also be changed.

They couldn't ride in traffic. They'd be scared!" Indeed, on a recreational ride in Athens, GA, I met a former track Olympian who said as much. Despite his ability to race (on a velodrome) at the highest levels of international competition, this man had ridden his track bike on the street just once. He explained that he found the experience far too dangerous to ever repeat. Conversely, Calvin, who worked on a fixed for nearly three decades, commented, "If anyone says anything to me about riding fixed they are just jealous because they can't do it." And, certainly, many people do not understand how riders can control fixies. As a man in an elevator asked me, "Are you one of those crazies who rides without brakes and gears?" Emphasizing the fears of outsiders,<sup>86</sup> a group of messengers who regularly trained for alleycats in New York referred to themselves as *Los Guerreros Sin Frenos—Rebels Without Brakes*.

In chapter three I listed several functional reasons messengers use track bikes. Kugelmass (1981), however, argues that messengers adopt track bikes specifically because they are harder to ride. While I believe that the practical advantages to a track bike are more relevant, there is a great deal of truth in Kugelmass's claim. For instance, several messengers and I occasionally rode our track bikes around Central Park before or after work. In the warmer months, Central Park is always crowded with cyclists (being one of the few places in Manhattan where a cyclist can ride not as an urban cyclist). Many of these cyclists are serious recreational riders with top-of-

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<sup>86</sup> As indicated in chapter three, the exoticness of riding fixed on city streets is quickly disappearing. While many people choose to ride with a brake, the mystery of the track bike is nearly dissolved within the larger social world of bicycling. This was not the case during the time of my fieldwork in New York.

the-line racing machines. One day as we stopped to rest, Mike commented, “Man, we’d be so much faster if we had gears.” The physics of such a claim (at least on relatively flat terrain is questionable), but it is (correctly or not) considered true among most cyclists. Mike, however, was not advocating that we trade in our fixies for multi-gear machines. Quite the opposite, he was implying that we were working harder than the other cyclists in the park. Similarly, in places like Seattle and San Francisco (which are hilly and wet), there are numerous disadvantages to riding fixed. As one Seattle messenger (who rides a track bike) told me, “This is a stupid city for riding fixed. It’s a city with seven hills.”

Like with helmets, the messengers who chose to ride fixed in these conditions display a face-it-head-on-and-tough-it-out image that clearly extends beyond rational concerns of income into the realm of subcultural meaning. And, like with refusing to wear helmets, choosing to ride fixed is an assertion of comfort and control with the liminality of city riding. Which is to say, to ride the most minimalistic of cycling machines in arguably some of the most dangerous and technically challenging of conditions is to state that one is undeniably confident in their abilities. To ride a track bike is to fully embrace the outlaw side of messengering (and the legality of track bikes on city streets is questionable at best). Further, as with acting rushed, riding fixed is near and far activity (to use Simmel’s words, again). While outsiders may understand the practical advantages of riding fixed, the choice to do it still seems more than a bit crazy. Track bikes, therefore, enhance the strangeness of messengers (for outsiders often cannot understand why messengers do it). Indeed, as the quote from

the Seattle messenger shows, even some track riders themselves appear perplexed by their own decisions—because the decision is largely symbolic.

*“I still don’t look like a cyclist:” Clothing Bricolage*

In general terminology, clothes and style are synonymous. To speak of style is, more than anything, to speak of how one dresses. In analyzing how couriers choose to dress, the other aspects of messenger style—argot, demeanor and (non-clothing related) image—come together. Moreover, just as with the rest of messenger style, messenger clothing is interconnected with messenger practice. As we will see, the *bricolage* of messenger clothing is co-determined by the actions of messengers in liminal space. As the beginning of this chapter noted, messenger style is distinctly urban—hip-hop, skateboarder, and punk (to use Allam’s description). What it is not is “cycling chic” (i.e., the tight spandex shorts and bright polyester jerseys of professional competitive cyclists). While I saw more messengers than I could count (or keep track of in my field notes) working in New York, I can recall the number of messengers I saw working in complete spandex cycling kits from memory (the number was three). While many commuters and most recreational riders proudly ride in full cycling regalia, the messenger “look” is something very different.

Messengers do wear cycling clothing. Cycling shoes, gloves, jerseys, and caps, for example, are frequently seen. But, the use of these items is cautiously (and consciously) monitored. As a case in point, Henry admitted he originally wore cycling shorts to work because he was excited about being a bike messenger. Reflecting back,

though, he shook his head, “I looked like a dork! You can’t walk into a bar after work dressed in spandex.” Many messengers do wear cycling shorts (or cycling pants in the winter), but they wear regular (i.e., loose fitting) shorts or pants over them. This allows for the comfort of cycling shorts (which, in addition to clinging to the rider’s legs, have a padded chamois and special seam construction, all of which prevent chaffing) without looking like a cyclist. An interaction I had with Klaus provides a telling example. Stopping to talk to Klaus at a messenger center, I commented on the frigidly cold weather. Klaus, who was dressed in baggy black Carhartt work pants and jacket, gave me some advice: “I don’t really like cycling gear, but in the winter it is warm.” He then pulled up his jacket to show a cycling windbreaker worn underneath. He concluded by proudly stating that even though he did wear cycling clothing, “I still don’t look like a cyclist.”

Implicit in Klaus’s disclaimer is a belief that looking like a cyclist is bad. This point is equally illustrated by Max. Max, it should be remembered, dressed to ride his bike “professionally.” He did own standard cycling clothing (and would wear it when doing road rides on the weekend), but to dress as a professional messenger means not dressing like a professional cyclist. Like Klaus, Max covered his cycling clothing when working. The messenger’s disdain for standard cycling gear was driven home by a group of couriers socializing after work. While drinking beer, one messenger casually flipped through a cycling mail-order catalog. Pondering the images of models posed in their cycling kits, he asked the group, “Why don’t they have pictures of [the models] on bikes, because that is what you do when you wear those clothes.”

To this, another messenger retorted, “No they don’t. They’re in a coffee shop... online.” Everyone laughed. The original messenger then mocked, “Look at me I’m hella rich.” While they couched their humor in class terms—people that can afford to look like they ride versus people that actually ride—the two men making the jokes rode very expensive machines (built with high-end components). These messengers were not opposed to spending money on cycling, but they follow a specific stylistic code for how that money is spent. Small displays of cycling paraphernalia (e.g., cycling shoes and cycling caps) denote an acceptable appreciation of bicycling. An overt display (e.g., wearing a full cycling kit) is considered detrimentally silly.

While street clothes are far more common than cycling gear, many of these items have been modified. Like Henry, Darren looked back upon his rookie days as a time of stylistic naivety. Darren’s transgression, however, was not in looking too much like a cyclist, but in looking too much like a civilian. “I walked into that job, and I got a really good deal [i.e., making a good commission at a good company], and I remember the first day I started, I was really green. I think back on it, I think I was wearing the stuff that I had. It wasn’t very functional, and to a certain extent it wasn’t very ‘happening,’ if you will. I looked kind of stupid.” Darren was wearing the clothes he usually wore, but, in hindsight, his clothing choices appeared foolish. Foolish precisely because bike messenger style is urban, but it is not a mirror reflection of other street styles. Clothing is modified for functionality and this functionality then becomes symbolic (“happening,” in Darren’s words) of the messenger lifestyle more generally.

One example of how civilian clothes are modified to make them both functional and happening is the cutting or rolling of pants just above the ankles. Lifestyle messengers tend to wear these pants when they are not working. In fact, wearing messenger clothes when one is not working is perhaps the best indicator of the lifestyle messenger. Joan, of course, demonstrated this by telling me to just be myself. Or, by José, who upon seeing me with a friend outside of work, proclaimed, “What are you doing dressed like a civilian?” Alternatively, Andreas, in preparing for a party in his apartment, showered and put on clean clothes. But, even though he would not be riding his bike for the rest of the evening, he rolled up his pant legs and put on his cycling shoes. Cycling shoes have extremely stiff soles (to better transfer leg power directly into the pedal stroke) and a cleat that clips directly into the pedal of a bicycle (like a ski boot in skis). Needless to say, such shoes are less comfortable than regular street shoes. It is possible that these were the only shoes Andreas owned. They were Sidi Dominators (which retail for over \$200). Whether he chose to wear them for show or if he wore them because they were all he owned, the point remains the same: to be himself, Andreas dressed liked a messenger *at all times*.

In addition to rolling up their pants, bike messengers often have patches sewn onto the seat of their pants. The number of hours a messenger spends riding causes incredible wear on the rear section of pants. To prolong the life of their clothes, many couriers reinforce the thinning fabric with patches. Two of the messenger I met, Mike and William, were actually very skilled tailors. Mike had constructed his own messenger bags and William participated in sewing circles held by a group in

Tompkins Square Park. While both Mike and William's patches were expertly sewn, an intentional effort was made to draw attention to the alterations. Mike had sewn large star patterns to the seat of his pants, and William used bright, contrasting colors to reinforce several pairs of his army surplus shorts. Likewise, Andreas used neon green fabric to mend his dark blue jeans. This practice is analogous to Mitchell's discussion of mountain climbers. Mountaineers sew patches on their clothes to denote past climbing experience. At the surface level, messengers use patches in much the same manner. Patches signal that a rider has enough street experience to have worn out their pants. Like rolled and cut pants, many messengers wear their patched pants when they are not riding bicycles. Charles, the owner of Flying High, for instance, wore his patched pants when going out to drum up new clients. On these ventures, he claimed he made a conscious effort to look presentable (by civilian standards). His collared shirts and sweaters, however, were entirely offset (whenever he turned around) by the black patches sewn onto the rear of his light blue jeans.

Overall, the *bricolage* of messenger clothing is about more than pure functionality or the mere signaling of experience. Courier clothing, more than anything, is a symbolic representation of the liminality of messenger work.<sup>87</sup> As we have seen, couriers, like Simmel's strangers, are considered (by themselves and by others) as inside and outside society. And, as with Hebdige's punks, courier fashion expresses this ambivalence. Cycling apparel is within; it denotes competence. Cycling

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<sup>87</sup> To elaborate on the matter: suits are work clothing and spandex is leisure clothing. Messenger clothing is a style that is neither purely work nor purely leisure—it serves both functions simultaneously.

caps or cycling shoes, for instance, conjure the images of dedicated professional cyclists. Conversely, patched and cut-off pants negate such a clear image. They are from without. These symbols denote an imperfect fit: fabric that has fallen apart too soon and in-seams that were designed too long. Of course, I am not arguing that patches, cut-off pants, or other forms of clothing modification are inherently outside of mainstream fashion. Rips, tears, and patches often adorn *haute couture*. I am arguing, however, that all styles offer themselves to be read. The modifications messengers make to their clothes (when juxtaposed with cycling apparel) provide a reading that cannot be subsumed under the simple rubric of hip-hop, punk, or skater fashion. Therefore, we can understand messengers as *bricoleurs*. Messengers could just dress as cyclists (as a few do). Or, messengers could just dress in ragged street wear (as some do). For lifestyle messengers, however, neither style accurately speaks to the subculture. As such, they have introduced “noise” into the system. They are neither ordinary citizens occupying the city (i.e., civilians) nor are they recreational cyclists aping the style of professional racers. They are something in between and, at the same time, something totally different. Within the messenger subculture’s stylistic displays, therefore, we see a novel assembly of symbols that require a unique reading, and this reading comes from practice—using a bicycle to flow in the urban grid.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> While the matter will not be elaborated here, it is worth observing that much of courier clothing is self-modified. It is a style that they literally construct for themselves. This is a point that further differentiates the occasionally grungy or ragged styles of high fashion from the do-it-yourself styles of messengers.

## Conclusions

Sociologists have long catalogued the various styles of the people they study. Mitchell and Ouellet, for example, offer particularly compelling accounts of how mountaineers and truckers manage symbolic choices in the construction of identity. Unfortunately, neither researcher links these symbols to the practices of their social worlds. Mitchell demonstrates how a mountain climber can use a battered ice axe to promote a specific image of the self. Likewise, Ouellet details the importance of truckers modifying and cleaning their trucks. What is missing in their discussions of style, however, is a connection between the actions of mountaineers and truckers with the meanings imputed upon their symbols. Neither Mitchell nor Ouellet explain *why* truckers have come to value meticulously shiny trucks while climbers value intentionally ragged attire. Both groups cherish experience and dedication, but both groups express this knowledge and commitment in contradictory ways.

In their exploration of subcultures, the CCCS emphasizes the theoretical linking of practice and symbols. “Style [...] cannot be seen in isolation from the group’s structure, position, relations, practices, and self-consciousness” (Clarke 1976: 176-177). By combining a semiotic analysis with a theory of practice, messenger style can be understood as the symbolic dimension to the affective appropriation of space. There is, as the CCCS would assert, a homology to messenger style. The argot, demeanor, and image of the subculture all express a liminal strangeness. It is important to stress that this homology does not arise from a static structural position (e.g., the messenger’s class relationship to capital). Instead, it comes from the lived

experiences of individuals enabled and constrained by their environment (i.e., the game of flow realized through the bicycle's liminal position in the city). Moreover, the lure of delivering packages is symbolically expressed in messenger style. The lure is found in practices, but the practices (in turn) are semiotically displayed by subcultural style.

All of this said, a very large disclaimer must be attached to this chapter. As Stanley Cohen (1980 [2002]) makes clear, the researcher's attempt to explain the meaning of style can easily slip into a realm of complete theoretical conjecture. Criticizing the CCCS he writes, "This is, to be sure, an imaginative way of reading the style, but how can we be sure that it is also not imaginary?" (lix). And Hebdige, while believing he had correctly cracked the punk rocker's code, acknowledged, "It is highly unlikely [...] that the members of any of the subcultures described in this book would recognize themselves reflected here" (139). In the end, I cannot prove that the analysis I offer here is accurate, and I worry that most messengers will feel I have taken too many liberties in reading over their shoulders. However, I do not want the analysis provided in this chapter to be taken as definitive truth, and I hope that both messengers and non-messengers alike will allow me some leeway in my interpretations.

Following Eco, styles have significance. That is what makes them styles and not simply raw material—what makes us human is the shrouding of our actions and

objects in meaning.<sup>89</sup> This meaning, however, is often below the level of discursive consciousness. To take the symbols of affect-meaning and hammer them into a coherent and logical set of words is to alter the very nature of their meaning—something lived versus something thought. For Geertz (1973), cultural interpretations are always fictional—a translation of raw human experience into a codified genre (literature and science, in this sense, are the same). The semiotic analysis offered here, therefore, is a “something fashioned” (14). It is not real life but “an interpretive gloss” (Muggleton 2000: 7) of messenger life. Within the theoretical paradigm outlined in chapter four, the analysis of this chapter is “correct”—affect-meaning is not only emplaced, but emplaced emotional practices are interconnected with cultural meaning (Biernacki’s pragmatic relationship between practice and signs). Alternatively, such explanations may ring-false to many who live the lifestyle. But, wrongheaded as it might seem to those within the subculture, for the sociologist interested in the subculture, the homology between practice and symbols must be explored.

What we (as sociologist) gain in the etic analysis of this chapter is a fuller understanding of agency and structure. In chapter seven, emotional practices were connected to physical space. In doing so, we see how lived experiences are dialectically related to the structures in which they occur. Likewise, in this chapter,

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<sup>89</sup> As Marx (1867 [1976]) writes, “But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax” (284). Which is to say, physical activity is inseparable from mental activity (also see Berger and Luckmann 1966).

style was connected to the same dialectic between emotional practices (i.e., agency) and structure. As such, a practiced-based semiotics helps explain the lure of delivering packages. Actions (specifically the flow of urban cycling) are part of a larger cosmology—a set of meaningful styles reflecting emotionally significant practices. Messengers do not aculturally reach into their toolkits and pull out cultural responses. The action itself is constituted by subcultural repertoires just as those repertoires are constructed by those same actions. The homology between messenger practice and messenger style helps illuminate this duality.

In the following chapter, I will sum up the basic arguments of this dissertation. I will also move the discussion into questions of liberty. The CCCS, as we have seen, was obsessed with the anti-hegemonic potential of subcultures. They were correct to stress that style has profound meaning, and that these meanings were related to practice. Their mistake, however, was to focus too much on style. The style of the group, for the CCCS, speaks to the reality of the group. But, it is only in practice that a group's reality is constructed. In the argument I am making about messengers, style informs—it is sentimental education—but the subculture is not (in the final analysis) reductive to its semiotic dimension. The affect-meaning of messengers is, more than anything, a *lived* reality. We will now move beyond the semiotic realm back to the materiality of practice to understand the political significance of the messenger's lived experience.

This chapter is a reworking of “Style and Action: A Decoding of Bike Messenger Symbols” (*Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* vol. 34 no.3).

## CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS (THE POLITICS OF APPROPRIATION)

### **Emotions, Space, and Cultural Analysis: A Recap**

#### *Explaining the Allure*

This dissertation addresses the question, “What’s the lure of delivering packages?” On the surface this question is pretty simple to answer. The lure of delivering packages comes from messengering being, as Scott put it in chapter five, “[T]he biggest non-job I’ve ever had.” Or, as Jordan stated, “[T]he most fun job I will *ever have in my life*, without a doubt.” Such replies, however, do little more than fashion the question into a statement. What I have attempted to do throughout this dissertation, therefore, is adequately answer this question. I have tried to explain why messengers have such affective ties to their job, and why they participate in a subculture based on the occupation—what I call the messenger lifestyle. To do this we have taken a reasonably lengthy journey into two often-divergent strands of social theory: emotions and space. Emotions and space combine (through lived experience) in a process of affective spatial appropriation. Because of the affective appropriation of space, messengers take a job that, when looked at from afar, appears to be anything but satisfying and make it so. The job, after all, is dirty, exceedingly dangerous, low paying, stigmatized, and strenuous. For the lifestyle messenger, however, the job is also the foundation for authentic identity.

*Affect-Meaning*

The affective appropriation of space starts with emotions. Put simply, dodging cars and pedestrians as well as charting a course through the city is anything but boring. It is mental and physical labor performed in a highly unpredictable environment. As Kyle explained in chapter five, “[Messengering] uses every skill I have on the bike and uses them all. It takes everything I can do to make it all happen, and make it happen quickly and smoothly.” To take everything Kyle has means that he is engrossed by messenger work. Instead of clockwatching—a primary indicator of alienation—Kyle is totally submerged in his labor. Such a dedication, though, is not exhausting; it is invigorating. As Aronowitz notes, “In creative work as well as genuine play exhaustion is not deadening. The activity, like deep sexual pleasure, enlivens the senses and elevates the person” (62). Csikszentmihalyi calls this elevation flow. In flow, the creative, spontaneous action of the “I” overrides the self-reflexive nature of the “me” (see chapter four). Flow is an optimal experience and it is intrinsically enjoyable. To be in a state of flow is to be in a state of play. And, as we saw in chapter five, delivering packages is a game that bike couriers play throughout the day. This is what Burawoy refers to as making the labor process a game.

Messengering, however, is more than a game of delivery. Beyond making the labor process a game, messengers also make a game *of* the labor process. Which is to say, outside of work couriers take part in competitions that replicate (certain aspects of) their job. This was the focus of chapter six. As Jordan stated, “[A]n alleycat boils down your job, like the game aspect of your job, and it is fun to be good at a game

[...]” Specifically, alleycats remove all of the tedious requirements of the job (e.g., waiting on clients and waiting on elevators) and leave only the outer extremes of flowing through urban traffic—what Lyng calls edgework. Further, borrowing from Geertz, the ritual of alleycats—as models *of* and models *for* reality—prioritizes the excitement and thrills of urban cycling. Most importantly, they function as Durkheimian rituals. Which is to say, alleycats generate collective effervescence (see chapter four), attaching couriers to their subculture.

Taken together, the flow of messenger labor combined with its consecration in the ritual of racing goes a long way in explaining the lure of delivering packages. Emotions, as we saw in chapter four, appear to arise from our innermost being. They are segments of experience in which the self (the “I” and the “me”) feels uncharacteristically unified. This is why Denzin describes emotions as a process of being-in-the-world—a lived experience that is thoroughly embodied and intimately felt. It is embodiment that makes emotions veridical in a way unavailable to rational, reflexive discourse. For this reason, emotions are lived as an absolute reality. The reader should remember from chapter four that I am not interested in addressing specific emotions, but in analyzing affect more generally. Affect, in this sense, is what Denzin calls self-feeling, and as Bourdieu claims, “The body believes in what it plays at.” But, the emotional engrossment of delivering packages is not only lived through an individual’s subjective experience. Instead, alleycats collectivize the self-feelings found in urban cycling. In doing so, the ritual of racing transforms the optimal experience of flow into affect-meaning. With affect-meaning, lived

experience feels objectively real. It is what Geertz calls the “really real,” and it is the theoretical underpinning of Durkheim’s study of society. For the purposes of this dissertation, it is with the generation of affect-meaning that delivering packages becomes profoundly alluring—alluring enough to base one’s lifestyle around it. In a word, it becomes the basis for a subculture.

### *Spatial Appropriation*

Affect-meaning explains why there is a lure in delivering packages; it does not explain *how* there is a lure to delivering them. To address this issue the dissertation turns from emotions to space. The physical contours of the material world have long been the sole province of geography—a domain few sociologists have shown an interest in contesting. Space, however, is an integral aspect of the social world. This point is one of the major (but often overlooked) contributions of Giddens’ theory of structuration (see chapter four). Physical structures, like all other structures, constrain and enable action. The importance of the material world for the lived experience of messengers is the focus of chapter seven. In that chapter, Sarah described riding her bike downtown in comparison to other parts of Seattle. “I think downtown riding is different than any riding almost anywhere else in the city. [...] I’m much more aggressive, but it’s because I’m downtown.” For Max, what makes urban cycling *urban* is attending to “the rhythm and flow of the city.” All of which is to say, messengering is a specifically urban phenomenon and, in order to understand couriers (or other social worlds), sociologists must not lose sight of the fact that subcultures are

emplaced. In other words, the body may believe in what it plays at, but the game always “happens somewhere and involves material stuff” (to re-quote Gieryn).

Through practices like what Jack, in chapter seven, called “the human shield,” messengers (often counter-intuitively) use the rules and resources of the city (in Giddens’ sense of the terms) to produce the flow of urban cycling. Moreover, cyclists are able to creatively manipulate their way through the city because of the liminal position bicycles occupy within the urban infrastructure. Unlike automobile drivers who have the road or pedestrians who have the sidewalk, cyclists exist betwixt and between (to use a phrase from Turner)—a status at once liberating and limiting. It is limiting because it is dangerous and often unclear what legal rights a cyclist does have. But, it is also liberating because with no official place in which to belong, the cyclist is free to maneuver where she can fit. Josh, for example, describes this as “water falling over rocks in a stream [...] the path of least resistance.” In this way, messengers appropriate the space of the city. Like skateboarders, messengers use the material structures of the urban environment (and the rules governing their use) for their own purposes—transforming urban space into a site of play.

In the final analysis, what the affective appropriation of space shows us is how the physical world is of major consequence for social research. The messenger subculture can only be realized within dense city traffic. It is there, and only there, that messengers can generate the affect-meaning of urban cycling. But, space (and the ways in which social agents use this space) is not tangential to the process. To the contrary, couriers actively engage with the environment—appropriating it for their

own ends. Borrowing from Lefebvre, messengers *live* through space, and they do so affectively. That is, emotions and space are lived together, and we can see the subcultural relevance of affective spatial appropriation in the analysis of messenger style found in chapter eight. Combining the concepts of Turner and Simmel, we saw a liminal strangeness in messenger style. Couriers act rushed, *bricolage* clothes, conflate working to riding, do not wear helmets, ride brakeless bikes, and trash-talk “suits.” To adequately understand the meaning of this style requires more than a semiotic decoding; cultural analysis must step beyond the purely discursive realm. The symbols couriers wield are inexorably linked to the emotionally charged and spatially situated practices that sustain them. In other words, messenger practice and messenger style form a homology, but it is a homology not based on class position. To the contrary, messenger style derives from their unique manipulations of *spatial* position as they flow through the urban grid.

### *Closure and Aperture*

The primary goal of this dissertation has been to answer the question of why and how there is a lure in delivering packages and, in the process, explain the existence of the bike messenger subculture. In many ways, chapter eight represents the theoretical conclusion to my cultural argument. It is in that chapter that we see the cultural significance of affective spatial appropriation. Here, however, in this final chapter, I want to bring up a separate matter. Instead of culture, I want to discuss politics. Or, more accurately, I want to use culture to analyze politics. To be perfectly

clear, my primary academic goal with this work is to improve the theoretical tools for understanding culture, and I have done this by incorporating emotions and space into the analysis. That said, sociology is a discipline that should not (and, for that matter, cannot) be separated from the political. In these final pages, therefore, I want to work through the political implications and possibilities of a cultural analysis incorporating emotions and space. To do this we need to ask not only why the bike messenger subculture exists and how it exists, but also whether it *should* exist? To answer this third question we must once again dive into yet another set of theoretical propositions. Ultimately, I will show that considering the affective appropriation of space can do more than improve cultural analysis. It can also help us understand the conditions of human liberty, and (in this sense) the study of bike messengers becomes a study about the politics of everyday life.

### **Politics of the Allure**

#### *Manufacturing Consent*

Concurrent with messengering's allure is the occupation's danger, and nestled just beneath the mystique of the subculture is a job filled with hardship and minimal economic return. Beyond the question of why and how, therefore, is the question of should. Should companies be allowed to continue profiting off the backs of messengers without giving more in return? Should couriers so willingly consent to this exchange? Over a decade ago, when the Teamsters were hoping to unionize the New York City bike courier industry (an initiative that ultimately failed), *The New*

*York Times* referred to the occupation as “the sweatshop of the streets” (Lipsyte 1995). In the article a bike courier rhetorically asks, “How can messengers be happy?” (Danny, quoted in Lipsyte 1995: 13-1; also see Raab 1994). Indeed, Sassen and Smith (1991) refer to bike messengering as part of “the massive increase in low-wage, dead-end service jobs” (2) accompanying globalization. In chapter five Sarah confided that her non-messenger friends do not understand her attraction to the job. As she succinctly put it, “[T]hey don’t get it.” As a hazardous and strenuous job performed for little pay and no benefits, perhaps there is little to get. Or worse, perhaps messengers like Sarah, invigorated by a dead-end job, are the ones who really don’t get it.

Burawoy’s labor process as a game is an attempt to explain why some workers don’t get it. That is, Burawoy, conducting ethnographic research among piece-rate machinists at Allied Corporation, asks, “Why do workers work as hard as they do?” (34). Being an unabashed Marxist,<sup>90</sup> he thinks the working class should be fighting for a systematic redistribution of wealth—for control of the means of production. Instead, though, the working class (especially in the United States) has failed to live up to its revolutionary potential (also see Aronowitz 1973). In fact, Allied’s machinists voluntarily work harder than necessary. What makes Burawoy’s research

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<sup>90</sup> “Let me hasten to add that this is not an exercise in neo-Marxism, Marxist revisionism [...]. Rather, it is a Marxist study. [...] I take as a point of departure the possibility and desirability of a fundamentally different form of society—call it communism, if you will—in which men and women, freed from the pressures of scarcity and from the insecurities of everyday existence under capitalism, shape their own lives” (Burawoy 1979: xii-xiii).

particularly compelling is his move away from discursive ideology; he de-emphasizes an ideological state apparatus (Althusser 1970 [1971]) and focuses on lived experience. For Burawoy, individuals do not conceptualize their relationship to the labor process based on what is taught in classrooms, preached from pulpits, or printed in newspapers. Likewise, individuals do not inherently identify with the ideologies of labor organizers either.<sup>91</sup> Schools, churches, and media outlets may profess the ideologies of the bourgeoisie, and union leaders may espouse their antithesis. But, the daily practices of individuals do not simply mirror ideological content, regardless of what that content may be. In other words, discursive ideology cannot explain worker motivation.

The workers at Allied play a game of making out. In this game they produce more than the minimum output required for a specific job and, thus, earn a higher rate for the parts produced. As we saw in chapter five, playing the game results in pride and prestige and also alleviates boredom. In a word, it makes the workday fun (or, at least, bearable). At the same time, playing the game means the machinists provide more surplus labor. In providing more surplus labor they generate greater surplus value, and, thus, higher profits for the owners (see Marx 1867 [1976]). Not surprisingly, Burawoy is highly critical of labor being constituted as a game. Beyond

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<sup>91</sup> In Turner's (1995) study of two Japanese factories, for example, she found that the perspective of union organizers did not automatically resonate with the beliefs and values of rank and file workers. Instead, it was through direct participation in protests—protests workers were initially wary of conducting—*combined* with the daily routines of factory socializing that produced a working class consciousness. Which is to say, ideology in isolation was inconsequential (or, at least, not consequential in the way ideologues intend).

whatever economic, mental, or social rewards the game offers Allied's employees, the ultimate beneficiaries are the managers and owners. They are the ones truly profiting from the workers' added effort. This is not to say that, as a worker, Burawoy did not take part in the game. He did, and he readily acknowledges enjoying its challenges and rewards. As a Marxist, though, he views such games as a particularly insidious aspect of the overall perpetuation of capitalism. Specifically, at the same time the game adds to surplus labor, it further obscures that surplus labor (by making the rules of the game appear natural and inevitable). That is, through the daily practices of the shop floor, the game is not only played but thoroughly consented to. The rules of the game are an ideology lived in practice, and those rules—hard work and submission to the task at hand—benefit capital (at the expense of labor).

Burawoy does not deny that various aspects of the game contradict the regulations management passes down. For example, workers set upper limits on how much they will produce when playing the game. Specifically, workers conspire to ensure output never exceeds 140 percent of the company's set minimum. The machinists know that if they play the game too well, management will raise the minimum. However, for Burawoy, the necessity of such covert tactics on the part of workers only further obscures the game's true function—greater exploitation. In other words, workers consent to the game because it appears to be in their interest (i.e., it is fun and they are paid at a higher rate). The more the game contradicts managerial edicts, the more the game appears to be under worker control. But, borrowing from Marcuse (1964), Burawoy claims that enjoying the game is nothing but repressive

satisfaction. It is a satisfaction coming from choices made within the strict limits of a system to which the agent has only minimal control. Which is to say, Allied's machinists only gain satisfaction from the game by first consenting to a system in which their survival requires laboring for another's profit. The game, by obscuring the workers' position within the system, therefore, reifies capital at the same time it reproduces it.

### *Pedaling Consent*

There is one glaring difference between the workers Burawoy studied and bike messengers. Unlike the machinists at Allied, most piece-rate messengers have no base rate. Going into the day, Allied's workers know that they will at least earn a predetermined minimum. The goal, of course, is to beat this rate. Few commission riders have such a guarantee; their employment ensures them nothing but the right to *potentially* make a living. In Burawoy's analysis, "Participation in the game is predicated on two limits of uncertainty in outcomes: on the one side, workers have to be guaranteed a minimum acceptable wage and, on the other side, management has to be assured of a minimum level of profit" (89). Commission riders forgo the first limit on uncertainty and, thus, nullify management's need for the second. If Burawoy found the game of making out disheartening at Allied, one can only assume he would find the game of delivery horrifyingly egregious. Which, of course, is why there is an argument to be made that couriers work in a sweatshop on wheels. And, the behaviors

of hourly riders are even more outrageous. These workers consent to a game in which they are given no material rewards for playing.<sup>92</sup>

Looking at messengers, Burawoy's argument appears to be drastically understated. For Burawoy, the practices of the shop floor produce an adherence to capitalist ideology. This ideology, though, is situational. It exists within the factory, but workers do not carry it home with them (or vice versa). Bike couriers, as we have seen, do. As Kyle stated in chapter six, "It's what you do for a living, but it's not *just* what you do for a living. It becomes way more than that." With the messenger subculture, the manufacturing (or, more accurately, pedaling) of consent spins beyond the workday into the realm of leisure (and then returns intensified). As a case in point, CLS hired both bike messengers and walking messengers. Their bike messengers performed on-demand deliveries while their walkers performed route deliveries (i.e., they followed a daily pick-up and drop-off schedule, much like the US Postal Service). Several years ago CLS raised the starting wage for their walkers, but not their riders. Undeniably, bike messengers must physically exert themselves more than the walkers. On-demand delivery, because of the macro- and micro-routing skills required (see chapter five), also involves a much higher degree of mental operation. And, obviously, bikers incur *far* more risk throughout the day. The reason for the walkers' raise was simple economics. CLS needed walkers and was having trouble filling

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<sup>92</sup> These points bring up a related (but divergent) set of questions about the nature of labor relations under global capital. For the simplicity of discussion I am largely sidestepping these issues here. The connections between messengering, global finance (see chapter two), and individual liberty (see below) are specifically elaborated elsewhere (Kidder *forthcoming*).

positions. CLS also needed riders, but they never had trouble filling them, and the reason, of course, is the game of delivery. Bikers play a game that walkers (moving slower, following fixed routes) cannot.

When asked, CLS's messengers always insisted they should be paid more than the walkers (a claim that holds much merit). The potential joys found in playing the game, however (along with the mystique of the subculture that glorifies it), enabled management to comparatively reduce the riders' wages. In Burawoy's analysis, the game can result in lost earnings only if it is played too ambitiously; workers must conceal their actual proficiencies or else management will change the numbers required for making out. The issue at CLS, however, was different. Seattle (along with many other smaller messenger markets) simply had more people willing to be bike messengers than there were slots to fill. This, however, was not simply the result of an overall depressed labor market. To the contrary, would-be bike couriers at CLS were turning down better paying and easier jobs as walkers. It is worth noting here that walking messengers at CLS had roughly the same freedoms from managerial oversight as the bikers.<sup>93</sup> In some cases they may have had more. One walker, for example, claimed he had enough time in between his morning and afternoon routes to

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<sup>93</sup> This point is notable especially in reference to Blauner's (1964) study of alienation in the workforce. CLS's walkers have more freedoms than continual-process workers (e.g., individuals responsible for monitoring the various stages of production in a chemical factory). Blauner believes that because continual-process work gives control of the pace of labor back to workers it is less alienating than other forms of modern labor. And, no doubt, CLS's walkers appeared to enjoy their job (especially in relation to their other occupational options). However, as Hodson (1996) observes, the freedoms offered by greater worker control over the pace of labor does not totally rectify the alienation produced by the increased de-skilling of labor.

spend several hours at home in the middle of each day. Also, like bike messengers, walkers did not have a dress code. Regardless, many people preferred to be bikers. The job was tougher and paid less, but they still wanted it. In fact, they wanted it *because* it was harder—it offered the chance to have flow at work—and they would take a pay cut to do it.<sup>94</sup>

### **Exploitation and Lived Experience**

#### *Domination, Power, and Surplus Labor*

From a typical Marxist perspective, Burawoy's critique is clearly correct. To the extent that workers consent to laboring under the conditions of capitalism, capital is not threatened by labor. Further, Burawoy's analysis of how consent is produced through lived experience makes his book a modern classic (both in terms of ethnography and social theory). At the same time, I want to propose that his analysis, illuminating in so many crucial ways, is blinded to the full implications of lived experience (by a dogmatic concern with the extraction of surplus labor). For Burawoy, as with most Marxists, the principal crime of capitalism—the grand chains to which it has shackled humanity—is the extraction of surplus labor. Until the day that workers (organized as a class for themselves) no longer consent to surplus labor,

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<sup>94</sup> In the larger messenger cities (Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC) the lure of the game does not explain the messengers' low wages. As discussed in chapter two, larger messenger cities tap into the surplus of economically disadvantaged individuals (unable or unwilling) to perform other types of work (which ensures wages will stay low). And, of course, in an increasingly digital age, there is less and less need for on-demand couriers.

humanity cannot be free—to paraphrase Marx (with Engels (1848 [1978])). This may be true, but it by no means follows that with an end to surplus labor humanity is free. Exploitation transcends the extraction of surplus labor. The daily realities for workers in actually existing socialist societies definitively demonstrates this.<sup>95</sup>

The debates surrounding exploitation are far too complex to address here. For the present argument, Giddens' (1981) definition is sufficient. "Exploitation may be regarded as domination *which is harnessed to sectional interests* (domination over nature or domination over human beings)" (60). This definition, however, requires some elaboration. In Giddens' terms, domination is a structured form of power. As we have seen throughout the dissertation, agency and structure presuppose one another (see especially chapters four and seven). Structural properties (i.e., rules and resources) organize systems of interaction, but structures themselves only exist (as memory traces) in the instance of their reproduction by acting individuals. The reproduction of structures occurs through a process of mediation. It is this mediation that is structuration. Through the modality of structuration, therefore, domination manifests itself in daily life via power in interaction. That is, relationships of

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<sup>95</sup> The more radical Marxist position, of course, is to claim that actually existing socialist societies are nothing but state-run capitalism—a path of development still involving surplus extraction (and, thus, exploitation). The question must then be asked, "Is modern social organization possible without exploitation (defined as the extraction of surplus labor)?" Gorz, for example, is quite adamant that (as long as we live in a technologically advanced society) workers must produce surplus and that surplus must be redistributed by some method. And, Marx (1875 [1976]) makes the same point in criticizing Lassalleian communism. The key question is the equity of that redistribution. For the purposes of the argument here, I simply want to observe that socialist workers have a more equitable redistribution of their surplus, but it is unclear if they feel any less exploited. The reasons for this will be explained below.

domination are predicated on their reproduction in everyday events through specific individuals or groups exercising power over others.

Borrowing from Lukes (1974), Giddens sees the possession of power as having the ability to act otherwise in a given situation. To lack power is to lack that option. For example, professors dominate their lecture halls to the extent that the students adhere to the expectations they set down (i.e., defer to their power). Students are by no means powerless in this situation (see below), but clearly their ability to act otherwise (and still receive a good grade) is far more curtailed than the professor's (who may, on a whim, end class early or modify sections of the course with no negative repercussions). Like the students in the hypothetical example, the workers at Allied have strict limits to how much they can deviate from the rules of the game (and still earn a living). While the game feels empowering, workers (as a dominated group within the factory hierarchy) have little power to act otherwise. "It is by constituting our lives as a series of games, a set of limited choices, that capitalist relations not only become objects of consent but are taken as given and immutable" (93). That is, aside from what Burawoy believes are insignificant choices (i.e., making out or not making out), the game legitimizes the domination of workers.

Because Burawoy is so monolithically concerned with surplus labor, power (in the final instance) is only understood in relation to how much surplus labor workers willingly consent to have extracted from them. Workers are depicted as (more or less) powerless because they collude with management. Power is assumed to be nonexistent if it is not directed against the bourgeoisie. Alternatively, for Giddens,

domination and power are more general aspects of the human condition. Because structures only exist as they are drawn upon by agents “in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world” (1976: 75) domination and power are always multidirectional. “[A]ll power relations [...] are reciprocal: however wide the asymmetrical distribution of resources involved, all power relations manifest autonomy and dependence ‘in both directions’” (1979: 149). This is what Giddens refers to as the dialectic of control. Only by complete physical containment (e.g., being confined to a straitjacket) does one lose the capacity for action. “But in all other cases—that is, in all cases in which human agency is exercised within a relationship of any kind—power relations are two ways” (149).<sup>96</sup> As such, the notion of social change is built into the theory of structuration. There are no specific rules concerned with transformation—“*all social rules are transformational*” (1979: 64). In this sense, “[T]he seed of change is there in *every act* which contributes toward the reproduction of any ‘ordered’ form of social life” (1976: 102).

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<sup>96</sup> In this limited regard, Giddens is aligned with Foucault. As Foucault (1976 [1978]) states, “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (93). However, as Giddens (1981) explains, “[For Foucault] the transmutation of power emanates from the mysterious and dark backdrop of a ‘history without a subject.’ [...] I do not at all accept a ‘subjectless history’—if that term means that the events that govern human social affairs are determined by forces of which those involved are wholly unaware. It is precisely to counter such a view of history or the social sciences that I elaborate some of the main tenets of the theory of structuration” (171).

*Alienation as Exploitation*

While all social rules are transformational, structures of power are clearly reproduced through time. Giddens, therefore, is particularly concerned with the legitimation of domination. Through ideology, which is realized through lived experience, the bourgeoisie promotes its sectional interests as universal, conceals contradictions, and reifies existing social relations. The game of making out is a prime example of this, and, in this sense, Burawoy and Giddens are closely aligned. The two theorists, however, have a key divergence—the importance they give to alienation. For Giddens (1971), Marx’s most essential concept is not surplus labor, but alienation. “There can be no doubt at all that the notion of alienation continues to be at the root of Marx’s mature works in spite of the fact that the term itself appears only rarely in his writings after 1844” (9). For Marx, the species-being of humanity is creation, and for Giddens, it is this emphasis on human creation—praxis (i.e., the individual’s active involvement in the world)—that is Marx’s most enduring legacy.<sup>97</sup> What is unique about human action (opposed to other animals) is intentionality. In Marx’s (1867 [1976]) words, “[W]hat distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax”

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<sup>97</sup> “Only if historical materialism is regarded as embodying the more abstract elements of a theory of human *Praxis*, snippets of which can be gleaned from the diversity of Marx’s writing, does it remain an indispensable contribution to social theory today” (1981: 2). The abstract elements Giddens is referring to are an individual’s ongoing involvement in the process of events-in-the-world. It is important to note here that Giddens has a more expansive definition of praxis than what is generally used. This is because the seeds of change are embedded in every act. As such, there is no concrete dividing line between revolutionary activity and complacency (a point elaborated below).

(284). That is, while other animals create, humans are alone in the conscious creation of the world.<sup>98</sup> “Through and because of this production, nature appears as *his* work and his reality” (1844 [1978]: 76). Alienation is a denial of humanity’s species-being. “[T]here is a “*loss of reality*” (71); the world, which is a human construction, confronts the individual as an alien object whose existence is beyond human control.

Alienation is the product of exploitation. It comes from creation (i.e., production) that is dominated (i.e., not conducted freely). In other words, alienation results from being forced (through domination harnessed as section interest) to produce a reality disconnected from one’s own interests. As Marx writes, “His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour” (74). In contrast, liberation comes from production oriented towards one’s own desires—labor that affirms rather than denies (to paraphrase Marx; also see Blauner 1964). As such, liberty is derived not simply from an absence of surplus labor. In focusing on alienation, the issue of exploitation moves from a critique of capital towards a critique of rationalized production more generally. Rationalization, by definition, strips control out of the hands of workers. As Weber (1914 [1946]) describes it, the individual is reduced to a “single cog in an ever-moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march” (228). Weber’s (1904-1905 [1958]) great fear, of course, is that

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<sup>98</sup> Humans are not the only tool-using animals, and there are reasons to believe some other mammals are capable of self-recognition. Remarkable as these facts are, they do not challenge Berger and Luckmann’s claim that humans—as environment deficient creatures—must drastically alter the world to make it inhabitable—an evolutionary feature leading to humans’ uniquely social characteristics (e.g., an ability to transmit extremely complex information between individuals via language). This matter was touched on in chapter four.

rationalized capitalism produces an iron cage trapping humanity. “And, in the midst of a culture that is rationally organized for a vocational workaday life, there is hardly any room for the cultivation of acosmic brotherliness [...]” (1915 [1946]: 357).

### *Liberty and Tactics*

Weber’s scathing critiques of rationalization are echoed in the works of Lefebvre. For Lefebvre, rationalization produces alienation by abstracting the mental, physical, and social spaces of everyday life. In abstraction, the potential uses of space are reduced. That is, through abstraction there is a fixed route of march. Abstract space is a conceived space, and the more abstracted it becomes the more perceptions of that space are unable to move beyond (capitalist) rationality (see chapter four). “Within this space, and on the subject of this space, everything is openly declared: everything is said or written.”<sup>99</sup> Save for the fact that there is very little to be said—and even less to be ‘lived,’ for lived experience is crushed, vanquished by what is

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<sup>99</sup> Borrowing from Barthes (1953 [1968]), Lefebvre (1968 [1971]) describes a zero point—a state in which everything is considered obvious. As such, the world is understood as transparent and communication is rendered irrelevant. It is the perfection of the doxa—a state in which “the natural and the social world appears as self-evident” (Bourdieu 1972 [1977]: 164). Through its seeming transparency, the space of rationalized capital is not only self-evident, but seemingly inevitable. To this end, capitalism is reproduced less by violence (although violence and its threat is ever-present) and more by self-repression (also see Bauman 1988). Individuals act according to pre-established conceptions because the physical, mental, and social aspects of space structure out alternatives. For Lefebvre, this lack of alternatives is terrorism. “[T]here is no need for a dictator; each member betrays and chastises himself; terror cannot be located, for it comes from everywhere and every specific thing” (147).

‘conceived of’ (1976 [1991]: 51). At the same time (unlike Weber), Lefebvre does not believe alienation is totalizing or that abstract space is omnipresent. Conceptions do not always vanquish lived experience. Against exploitation there is the possibility of appropriation. The alienation of abstract space can be countered by the liberty of differential space—a space that is not conceived but lived.

In the argument I am presenting here, appropriation is the inevitable outcome of the dialectic of control. Instead of conceptualizing power as unidirectional, Lefebvre proposes that space is a terrain contested by its various users. This transformative potential is what de Certeau means by tactics. Dominant groups utilize strategies (Lefebvre’s conceptions of space) to exert power over others. In contrast, tactics are practices utilized by the dominated to make use of the structures that dominate them. Which is to say, seemingly weak or marginalized individuals should not be understood as powerless. One can think here of Goffman’s (1961) study of asylums. Even though confined within total institutions, inmates are still agents (in the full sense of the term). They are able to make remarkably creative use of the rules and resources to which they are subjected. In other words, inmates appropriate the asylum—not totally, of course, but in profound (and surprising) ways. And, this is what Burawoy’s study of Allied Corporation misses. While he admits the game offers “a critical freedom” (199), he believes its value is nullified by the workers’ consent to harder labor. Conversely, I want to assert that regardless of management’s agreement with (most aspects of) the game, it is still a tactic of the workers. It puts the process of creation back into the hands of the workers. Engrossed in labor, the game brings

reality back into production. Thinking in terms of praxis, the game does not increase exploitation; it reduces it. Otherwise alienating labor is transformed into enjoyable production.

In every waking moment, all individuals engage in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world (i.e., praxis). This is inevitable. But, the alienated individual feels stripped of his agency—seemingly cut off from the process. In such a state, power appears unidirectional—manifested only in one’s domination. As already stated, alienation is never complete, but the more a person is alienated the more obscured her significance to events-in-the-world becomes.<sup>100</sup> In other words, individuals feel powerless to change their situation, and in this state there is no joy only maligned frustration—boredom. This is why physical exertion in one’s paid labor often feels exhausting while the physical exertion of play (sex being a particularly poignant example) is often invigorating. Paid labor (to the extent it is forced) drains the individual because it gives nothing back. Creative labor, as Aronowitz insists, does give back.

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<sup>100</sup> It must be clarified that the social construction of reality is dependent on some level of forgetting—of taking a humanly constructed and subjectively contingent world as an objective fact (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Human group life, thus, always involves some loss of reality. In this sense, pre-modern times were extremely alienating (to the extent that modernity is the product of not only capitalism but also the Enlightenment). However, as should be clear from the discussion above, the concern here is not simply with a failure of the individual to understand her direct role in world building. Instead, alienation (as a discernable phenomenon from the more general process of objectivation) is the product of forced labor—an exploitative set of power relations that engender dissatisfaction.

This, of course, is not to deny that the leisure sphere can be exploitative (and, thus, alienating). Indeed, much of it is. Popular culture strips the spontaneous creation away from play (leaving only the desire for exercised, fragranced, manicured, and stylized bodies). Of the countless examples that could be cited here, one can think of the prefabricated costumes sold for Halloween. Instead of creativity (both in the subject of the costume and in the construction of the costume), children and adults are left with nothing to do but make purchases. At the same time, the alienated nature of these costumes does not negate the genuine (and transgressive) pleasures that many people can find in the holiday. The existence of false consciousness (and how such a concept is to be operationalized) is a separate (and potentially unsolvable) matter. Alienation—as the severing of humanity from its species-being—comes from a loss of creative control in action. No doubt, as the Halloween example shows, creative control is denied people in all sorts of ways. But, creative control, as part of a dialectic, is also wrestled back. It is a mistake to write off these tactics as a distraction to the issue of surplus labor. Alienation, and the ability to transcend it, is of paramount importance. It is at the very heart of liberty.

### *Liberty and Space*

The discussion of alienation does not end with acknowledging the enjoyment some workers may find in their labor. Marx, like Burawoy, would find little

satisfaction in a workforce content to labor for the capitalists.<sup>101</sup> Marx's (1845 [1978]) great dictum, after all, is to *change the world*. And, this is where we must emphasize the role of physical space. It is in its materiality that appropriation achieves its biggest coup against exploitation. Abstract space is a space of strategy. It is conceptualized for domination—generally speaking, for capital accumulation. Which is to say, strategies have specified places. As de Certeau explains, “[Strategy] postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats (customers or competitors, enemies, the country surrounding the city, objectives and objects of research, etc.) can be managed” (36). Unlike strategies, tactics exist beneath and beside approved activities. “The space of tactics is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with the terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power” (37). Through tactics, abstract space is appropriated for alternate ends. Differential space, therefore, can never be an official designation. It must be a fluid state, shaking up the pre-conceived notions of a place. To clarify, places of leisure are not necessarily differential. The issue here is not satisfaction alone, but satisfaction arising from appropriation. That is, satisfaction that comes not from accepting one's repression (i.e., in the fixed route of march), but from altering it (i.e., in “acting otherwise” to official conceptions).

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<sup>101</sup> Similar to the idea of a false consciousness, Marcuse (1964) describes a happy consciousness. Such a consciousness is one-dimensional, and individuals subconsciously suffer from capitalist repression, but outwardly feel satisfied with technological enjoyments provided by modern industry.

Through appropriation the taken-for-granted reality postulated by abstract space is de-reified and opened to new possibilities. Because of this, the individual's power in the creation of the world becomes (at least partially) transparent. One can think here of Willis's lads (see chapter seven). In having a laff, the school becomes a site of struggle, and not a site of unmitigated domination. From the perspective of those in authority, the behavior of the lads is not problematic because it interrupts the lads' studies—their failure at school is almost a foregone conclusion. Instead, they fear the lads' actions de-legitimize the institutional hierarchy.<sup>102</sup> Of course, the lads' appropriation of the school is severely limited, and by no means are their tactics politically progressive (the lads are anti-intellectual, racist, and sexist). The point here, however, is that unlike the school conformists, the lads (by divesting themselves from academic and career goals) understand that they have a considerable ability to act otherwise at school.

Willis does not elaborate on the concepts of place or space in his study, but all parties understand the spatially contingent relevance of the lads' behavior. That is, much of the lads' activity is misbehavior only to the extent that it occurs at or near school (or at a time when they should be in school). Much of the lads' motivation for their behavior also comes from the fact that their actions have added significance

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<sup>102</sup> McFarland (2004), for example, describes classroom order as a precarious social balance, potentially disrupted by student challenges to how teachers frame interaction. If teachers do not successfully reframe student resistance to the educational paradigm teacher domination of the classroom is (increasingly) challenged—potentially to the point that no official learning can take place.

within the school setting.<sup>103</sup> This is why de Certeau and Lefebvre give such prominence to physical space. The concreteness of space empowers whoever organizes its use. Through strategies space can exploit, but through tactics its potential is appropriated for other purposes. As Willis writes, “The space won from the school and its rules by [the lads] is used for the shaping and development of particular cultural skills principally devoted to ‘having a laff’ (29). A similar point, of course, could be made about Goffman’s inmates. Spatial appropriation is inherently liberating (for those it empowers), and this is why commercial property owners and local governments often view graffiti writers and skateboarders as serious criminal offenders (see Ferrell 1993 and Borden 2001, respectively; also see Ferrell 2001). Their small acts are understood to have large consequences. That is, skaters and writers redefine the meaning of a place. Their spatial tactics re-conceive the purpose of parking lots, staircases, and walls, and in turning spaces of commerce (i.e., strategy) into spaces of play (i.e., tactics), skaters and writers openly challenge the power of those seeking to control given places.

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<sup>103</sup> In discussing smoking for instance, Willis explains, “The majority of [the lads] smoke and, perhaps more importantly, are *seen* to smoke. The essence of schoolboy smoking is school gate smoking. A great deal of time is typically spent by ‘the lads’ planning their next smoke and ‘hopping off’ lessons ‘for a quick drag’. And if ‘the lads’ delight in smoking and flaunting their impertinence, senior staff at least cannot ignore it” (18).

*The Message of Liberty*

Bike messengers' appropriation is two-fold. First, like Burawoy's workers they appropriate the workday in terms of mental and social satisfaction. Through the flow of urban cycling—pushed to the edge in the game of delivery—couriers become engrossed in their labor. Macro- and micro-routing—as a series of tactics—overcome the exploitation of alienation by giving messengers creative control of the labor process. Second, messengers appropriate the physical space of the city. The flow of urban cycling not only eliminates the boredom of the workday; it transforms their relationship to the urban milieu. That is, couriers, through what de Certeau calls “an ensemble of possibilities” (98) (or what I call macro- and micro-routing), take control of their relationship to the material environment. This control is a political counterpart to the messenger's problem-oriented cycling (see chapter seven). Instead of taking the rules and resources of the city as objective facts—as a set of forces restraining one's options (e.g., stopping at red lights or giving pedestrians the right of way)—messengers are enabled by the opportunities the rules and resources provide.

This is not to deny that couriers supply surplus labor. Nor is this to claim bike messengers do not have legitimate grievances about the conditions under which their labor is produced. They most certainly do (on both counts). Clearly, messengers are in a dominated position, and it is in their best interest to struggle for more power within the occupation's hierarchy. The problem is that most efforts at labor reform threaten to *disempower* couriers and re-alienate the workday. That is, working to improve the safety of the messenger threatens to increase her alienation by

circumscribing essential elements of the game. To clarify, danger itself is not the most essential part of the game (although, it is required for the extremes of edgework), but systematically reducing danger in the occupation would inevitably result in a reduction, if not elimination, of the game. Riders would need to be subject to greater regulations, and conditions of the labor would need to be standardized (to whatever extent that would be possible). In other words, companies (or a rider's union) would need to actively suppress rider's tactics and impose a set of officially sanctioned strategies.<sup>104</sup>

In the first chapter, I said that the affective appropriation of space challenged purely cognitive and aspatial notions of liberty. Throughout the preceding discussion of alienation, the reasons for this should be coming into focus. Bike messenger labor can sound atrocious because—as liberal, reform-minded individuals—we want workers to be free from such dangers and hardships. To be sure, the progress of a

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<sup>104</sup> One example of this conundrum is insurance. Messengers could be insulated from some of the financial dangers that accompany their work with medical insurance. The problem, however, is that insurance companies will not underwrite such an injury prone occupation without extremely high premiums and/or a guarantee that the riders they are insuring will not be injury prone. The various ways messenger companies deal with this is covered in chapter two. In general, there are three basic models: 1) The messenger company simply does not cover their riders. This is the option taken by most small companies (as few small companies can afford to pay insurance premiums). 2) The messenger company formally covers their riders, but in practice they seek to limit the actual injuries ever filed (e.g., by blacklisting or firing workers who report injuries). This was Sprint Courier's method. 3) The messenger company truly covers their riders. CLS would fall into this category. At the same time (and not surprisingly), CLS also actively sought to monitor and regulate (to at least some degree) their riders' behaviors. And, this is why many Seattle messengers viewed CLS negatively—the job involved a lot of “hand holding” as more than one messenger described it.

nation can be measured by the steps it takes to move beyond the Satanic Mill (Polanyi 1944 [2001])—that is, to the degree that the horrors of an unregulated market are kept in check by social institutions. In contrast to the early days of industrialism, Western societies have made their workplaces safer and limited the hours individuals labor each day. Satan has been shipped overseas (or else hidden from government regulators). Alternatively, labor itself has not necessarily become any less alienating. If anything, it has increased (Blauner 1964; Sennett 1998). This is clear in the pejorative sense in which the word “work” is used. Work is what people call the activities they do not want to do—the things they must endure (to achieve something else).

In messengering, though, we see something different. We see labor that is not alienating, but it comes at the price of greater danger and hardship. The satisfaction an individual gets by messengering is not liberation *from* the exigencies of their labor (i.e., physical exertion, risk, etc.), but a liberation *to* creatively act. Throughout the workday, messengers have a myriad of chances to act otherwise—to have control over their production. That is, they are *actively* engaged in the ongoing process of events-in-the-world. And, most importantly, by looking at the material environment, we can see the messenger’s job as producing differential space—as (monetarily) opening new possibilities in the exploitative conceptions of the world.

In contrast to traditional attempts at labor reform (i.e., greater regulation over workers), there are alternative ways some messengers have improved their position as workers. The messengers I am referring to seek to limit (or eliminate) their production

of surplus labor without re-alienating the workday. They do this by forming collectives. These messengers share in the administrative duties of the operation and divide the profits equally (e.g., see Hendershot 2007). This is possible because the messenger industry lends itself to small companies operating with very little overhead cost. As such, collectivities are a far more viable option for bike messengers than they are for machinists (who would have to pool together millions of dollars to start their own factory). Couriers who go “independent” generally begin by working at established companies and then poach their clients when they leave. I should hasten to add that this sort of reform does not require the help of outside organizers nor does it need the theoretical input of well-meaning intellectuals. These are initiatives messengers have taken themselves. At the same time, increasing government regulation of the industry and the industry’s consequent reforms (e.g., companies listing their riders as employees) raises the cost of doing business. It squeezes out smaller companies (Tommason 1991), and makes it increasingly difficult for collectives to operate (legally). The quandary here, of course, is that, generally speaking, government regulations are an essential measure to protect workers. In the case of messengers, though, regulations threaten to kill with kindness everything riders cherish about their job.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> As we saw in chapter seven, this same issue exists with regards to bicycle advocacy.

*Putting It in Perspective*

As stated in chapter one, the liberation offered by messengering, in many respects, is exceedingly small. The discussion of alienation addressed here says nothing of how class, gender, and racial inequalities (or many other forms of oppression) are perpetuated. Moreover, messengering (and other high-skilled, physical occupations) is only a viable option for a small (and shrinking) portion of the population. Further still, the idealized situation of small collectives is not a reasonable model for other industries to emulate. Gorz, for example, thinks that labor in modern societies is going to be alienating. Complex social organization requires too much rationalized production for all activities to be non-alienating. The solution, according to Gorz, is not to attempt a utopian unification of existence, but to minimize the amount of time any one individual spends in the heteronomous sphere (see chapter one). That is, we need to accept a certain degree of alienation, but if society's resources are reallocated to equitably increase every individual's autonomy, exploitation is eliminated.

All of these things said, there are important political implications to this study of messengers. To go back to the question of this chapter—"Should it be?"—there is no one clear answer. Messengering is not alienating and that is a good thing. That individuals can find work enjoyable enough to almost be a calling is remarkably positive—especially compared to the crushing monotony many individuals feel performing their paid labor. Alternatively, employers unduly profit from the lure of delivering packages. Collectives are a possibility for some bike couriers, but the trend

is for bigger companies (relative to the overall contraction of the industry). Most importantly, the flow of the workday and the edgework of races give couriers something more. Beyond the usual confines of labor issues, messengering opens differential space. Impractical as the messenger model may be to any sort of global solution to capitalism (or rationalism, more generally), it is a lifestyle that requires appropriation of abstract space. But, unlike most lifestyles, it is not avocational. As such, it is a job that allows individuals to realize their power as agents (in moment-to-moment enactments of tactics). In this regard, messengering most definitely “should be.” Regardless of its flaws, no matter of how it could be better, messengering stands as a testament to the affective satisfaction individuals find in appropriating space and it also stands as a testament to the ability of tactics to operate beneath and alongside strategies. As we saw in chapter two, bike couriers are part of the globalization of capital. However, in performing their job, messengers also make it into something else—a meaningful identity produced through authentic action.

### **Conclusion: The Fashion in the Fight**

As a way of conclusion, I want to bring up Starr (2000), a researcher who directly confronts the duality of structure and agency by studying anti-corporate movements. Starr, like many political sociologists, is frustrated by contemporary theories that (in her view) over-emphasize agency. For Starr, action is only agentic when it directly challenges capitalist hegemony. In this sense, she is like Burawoy—who dismisses the non-alienated tactics of workers as repressive satisfaction. As Starr

eloquently phrases it, “[Researchers] need to distinguish between fashion and a fight [...]” (35). For her part, Starr has no interest in “elevating the significance of cultural gestures *as* social movements” (37). For Starr, the difference between cultural gestures and political movements is in the discursive process of naming the enemy (and subsequently mobilizing against it). Bike messengers, like Burawoy’s workers, have not named the enemy—rationalized capital—and instead work with it.

Starr and Burawoy, however, are missing an essential theoretical point about the interrelation of structure and agency. The agency required to reproduce existing structures cannot be isolated from the agency required to produce new ones. First and foremost, structures only exist in the instance of their reproduction by reflexively aware individuals. Outside of their enactment, structures are only memory traces within the minds of individuals. As such, structures cannot be treated as thinking entities with needs and intentions. The word “structure” is only shorthand for collective activity reproduced through time (see Collins 1981). Second, because reflexively aware individuals conduct these activities, their reproduction always involves interpretation. This is why Giddens claims that the seeds of change are in every act.

Unless one adheres to an all or nothing criteria for liberation—a criterion nullifying every social change in history (for no revolution has been complete or perfect)—the satisfactions messengers find in their labor cannot be ignored (nor should they be marginalized). Further, this satisfaction comes from an emplaced affect that directly alters the rider’s relationship with the rules and resources of their

environment. No enemy is named, but (through the enactment of non-discursive practices) the exploitation of alienation is surpassed by the liberation of appropriation. Starr writes, “While the mobilization of subjectivity allows for agency, it is hard to ever know which mobilizations are simply the structure ‘speaking’ through subjects and which are genuinely agentic” (32). However, instead of distinguishing between fashion and fights, I want to claim that sociologists should conceptualize the fights in fashion and the fashion in fights. I am not speaking here simply of clothes or hairstyles, but of the cultural significance of symbols. Structures do not and cannot speak through individuals; there are no structural imperatives.<sup>106</sup> In utilizing symbols, individuals are actively making sense of their world. Admittedly, some individual’s actions challenge exploitation while others perpetuate it (intentionally or unintentionally), but there are *very* few circumstances when anyone is merely a passive recipient.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> “According to the theory of structuration, social systems have no purpose, reasons, or needs whatsoever; only human individuals do so. Any explanation of social reproduction which imputes teleology to social systems must be declared invalid” (Giddens 1979: 7). Functionalism has long been criticized for teleology—one can think here of Merton’s (1949) latent functions (a hidden logic governing the structuring of social action). Other theoretical perspectives, however, are equally culpable, and historical materialists are an obvious case. Even Harvey, generally a strong advocate for the acknowledgement of agency, sometimes explains cultural changes as if they were the result of the *needs* of capitalism. In Harvey’s (1990) hands, for example, the conditions of postmodernity appear to be dictated by an economy totally removed from conscious human activity. The same, of course, can be said of Baudrillard’s (1973 [1975]) postmodern retooling of Marx. Conversely, Harvey’s (2003) more recent work on modernity directly connects the changes in Paris to the actors making them (specifically, Haussmann, Napoléan III, and the radicals and reactionaries opposing and supporting the Second Empire).

<sup>107</sup> The reader should remember from chapter seven that in Willis’s study constraint

The cultural analysis of messengers provided in this dissertation highlights the fashion in the fight. Bike messengering is not a political movement, but the subculture is more than a hollow gesture. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Messengering is (as de Certeau would say) the weak making use of the strong. Moreover, bike couriers (as Lefebvre would contend) appropriate the city—living through abstract space (and, thus, transforming it). This fight, however, cannot be separated from its fashion. The meanings messengers have for their symbols (i.e., their style) are interconnected with the practices that sustain them. That is, to understand bike couriers—to grasp the lure of delivering packages—is to understand affect, its emplacement, and its manifestation in symbols. Further, in looking at how messengers affectively appropriate space, the sociologist confronts a larger political issue. In the final analysis, if we are to take emotions and space seriously, we see that political struggles and everyday life are inevitably intertwined. What messengers show us is that there is potential liberation in action not explicitly (i.e., discursively) political.

To go back to the night of the Warriors Fun Ride, there was no identified enemy. No one talked of unions or better wages. The night was all about fashion; it was highly symbolic. From the bikes we rode to how we rode them to what we wore as we did it, clearly, the Warriors was a (sub)cultural gesture. The night, however, was also a fight. Every one of us, as we sped through the street, took part in making a different world for ourselves. The reality we made that night—the alternate cosmos

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operates *through* the activities of individuals—not through forces beyond individual control (see Giddens 1984). The same, no doubt, could be said of Burawoy's machinists.

we cut from asphalt and steel before us—was far removed from Marx’s (with Engels 1848 [1978]) “icy waters of egotistical calculation” (475) and Weber’s devastating senselessness. Instead, it conjured up the notion of the festival—an appropriation of the established order for different ends. To quote Lefebvre (1968 [1971]), “That is why we must contrast style and [capitalist] culture, to show upon the latter’s fragmentary character, its lack of unity, and why we are justified in formulating a revolutionary plan to recreate a style, resurrect the Festival and gather culture’s scattered fragments for a transition of everyday life” (38).

When couriers exclaim that messengering is the job they love or the best job ever they are referring to moments epitomized by the Warriors. They are talking about moments of creative, spontaneous action, when one’s subjective feelings become objectified, and when the material environment no longer controls but is controlled. These moments are epitomized (and optimized) in alleycats, but they are not experienced in the leisure sphere alone. The messenger lifestyle integrates the courier’s life. To borrow from Aronowitz again, “[T]he soul cannot be healed unless divided labor is reintegrated, unless the lost ‘instinct of workmanship’ is found within the ordinary sphere of labor rather than becoming an ‘avocation.’” This is the political significance of the messenger’s cultural gesture; it is the fashion of their fight—the style that counters the exploitative alienation of everyday life. As Margot exclaimed, “I cannot believe I get paid for this shit.”

## APPENDIX A: AN EXPANDED DISCUSSION OF METHODS

### **Ethnography and Sociology**

#### *Detached Involvement*

At least since Malinowski (1922 [1950]) published his study of the Trobriand Islanders, anthropology has considered participant-observation an essential component to understanding the Other.<sup>108</sup> Around the same time as Malinowski's research, an ethnographic tradition was developing in the University of Chicago's department of sociology (Prus 1996). From Anderson's (1923 [1961]) research on homeless men to Sutherland's (1937) classic study on the professional thief, sociology, like anthropology, has a long history of observing and participating in curious and unknown social settings. Perhaps the most notable difference between anthropology and sociology is the prominence of ethnography in anthropology. While there are clearly rifts and divides in anthropology, fieldwork is a cherished aspect of the discipline. Sociology, however, is split between quantitative and qualitative methodologies. For early qualitative sociologists, participant-observation was an enterprise requiring fierce defense. While the infighting between "quals" and "quants" has subsided in recent years, the collective works of Blumer stand as a testament to the former acidity of the debates (e.g., see 1954, 1962, 1966, 1969).

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<sup>108</sup> It is always worth remembering that Malinowski had no intentions of conducting such in-depth research. He had, in fact, only planned to spend a brief period of time on the Trobriand Islands. However, as a Polish national studying at the London School of Economics, the outbreak of World War One prevented Malinowski from returning to England. Papua was (in a sense) an internment camp, and the young anthropologist was begrudgingly sentenced to academic stardom.

One of the essential aspects of the scientific model of ethnography is “detached involvement” (Nash 1963). The ethnographer, it is argued, must balance between intimate knowledge of the setting and personal distance to what is being studied. Agar (1980 [1996]) warns, “You keep your distance at the risk of failing to understand the complexities of a human situation different from your own. You go native, but then stop functioning as a social scientist” (101). For Agar, real ethnographers equally employ both strategies. Implicit in this description, is the idea that personal distance allows for an “objective” understanding—an understanding that transcends local beliefs and subjective feelings. Not surprisingly, early ethnographers took little issue with the idea of distance. Malinowski’s (1967) diary, for example, illustrates (to a nearly horrifying degree) the emotional distance between the researcher and his subjects.

### *Active Participation*

In the decades since Malinowski’s study of Papua, ethnographers have progressively advocated greater amounts of participation and more intimate forms of observation. Nelson (1969) advocates what he calls “active participation”—against the traditional ethnographer’s “passive participation.” Instead of merely observing action, Nelson proposes that the ethnographer learn and master the tasks of the culture being studied. For Nelson, who worked among Eskimos, seal hunting cannot be adequately described without first knowing how to successfully hunt one. Nelson goes further to argue that, through such active participation, formal interviews are not

necessary. Instead, he engages only in informal conversations conducted in day-to-day life. Such full immersion is equally found in Wolf's (1991) study of an outlaw motorcycle club. For Wolf, much of what it means to be an outlaw biker can only be understood through "being there"—*experiencing* the fraternal bonding of the club, the thrills of speeding down open highways, and the public ostracism of looking like an outlaw. As Wolf asserts, "[C]ombining participation and observation is the most effective way of achieving an understanding of a culture as it is experienced and lived by its participants" (22).<sup>109</sup> Wolf goes on to claim, "An ethnographer who removes himself—the 'I'—from the ethnography only creates the illusion of objectivity" (27).

Rosaldo (1989a) drastically illustrates the epistemological issues surrounding active participation and role of the ethnographer as knower. Rosaldo's wife died in the Philippines while they were studying the Ilongot. For Rosaldo, it is only through his own intense feelings of loss that he was able to understand the practice of headhunting. In this sense, Nash's detached involvement can actually preclude *any* involvement. Rosaldo (1989b), therefore, advocates social research that allows for both detached and attached involvement.<sup>110</sup> Ewing (1994) goes a step further to

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<sup>109</sup> Mitchell (1993) asserts the need for emic (as opposed to etic) research. According to Mitchell, it is not a lack of data that results in failed fieldwork. It is an imbalance of affective attributes and cognitive reason. In other words, the researcher can hear what the respondent is saying, but cannot *feel* what the respondent truly means. Mitchell's (2002) own research on survivalists attests to this point. Mitchell demonstrates that surveys and interviews—removed from the nuances of the life-world and devoid of personal relationships—result in caricatures of social groups (also see Wacquant 2004).

<sup>110</sup> Somewhat differently, Burawoy (1998) proposes a dual model of research—positive and reflexive. Burawoy has not abandoned the promises of hard science, but

question the anthropological taboo of “going native” altogether. For Ewing, the ethnographic division between the researcher and those being studied is a form of hegemonic Western discourse. That is, the cultural relativism dominating academia does not perfectly level the field of knowledge. While the ethnographer might participate in the actions of the Other, she maintains a cognitive distance—a distance which privileges Western insights. For Ewing, who studied Pakistani Sufis, the researcher must be willing to not only acknowledge the meaning practices have for her respondents, but must be willing to accept those meanings as true for herself.<sup>111</sup>

Ultimately, the general trend in ethnography is toward more involved participation in the lifeworlds being studied. This involvement is both physical and emotional. As Denzin (1989) claims, “Emotionality and shared experience provide the conditions for deep, authentic understanding” (33).<sup>112</sup> Wacquant’s (2004)

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argues for a sociology that is open to the benefits of attached and involved data gathering. “Where positive science promises to insulate subject from object, reflexive science evaluates dialogue as its defining principle and intersubjectivity between participant and observer as its premise. It enjoins where positive science separates: participant and observer, knowledge and social situation, situation and its field location” (14).

<sup>111</sup> Ewing interviewed a Sufi saint who foretold he would visit her in a dream. Ewing, in fact, did experience a vivid dream of the saint that very night. Her article is a discussion on how an anthropologist should deal with such events. Clearly, the appropriate “rational” response is to assume that the dream was the product of suggestion—the result of the workings of her mind. For Sufis, however, the explanation is mystical—the saint *did* visit her in her dream. If all knowledge claims are relative, there is no de facto reason to dismiss the dream as mere suggestive power. Further, to do so is an underhanded method of negating the beliefs of the Other by privileging Western thought.

<sup>112</sup> Denzin’s interpretative process involves five steps: analyzing previous research on

observant participation of boxing is a recent (and truly marvelous) testament to this approach. Wacquant goes so far as to claim a “total ‘surrender’ to the exigencies of the field” (11; also see K. Wolf 1964). That is, Wacquant submitted himself entirely into the lifeworld of the gym: informants became friends and fieldwork transformed itself into recreation and personal release. Proclaiming to have never previously entertained the idea of becoming a pugilist, Wacquant spent three years training and sparring in a rundown boxing gym in Chicago’s severely impoverished Southside. It is only by repeatedly and regularly stepping into the ring and experiencing “the taste and ache of action” that Wacquant could gain the trust of his informants. But, far more importantly, it is only by participating in “the carnal dimension of existence” (vi) that the world of the boxer is understood. Following Bourdieu’s (1972 [1977]) emphasis on practice, Wacquant asserts that it is the *embodiment* of the social world *within* the agent that informs the informant. A researcher ignorant to these processes misses the essence of the object of her investigation (also see Wacquant 1992). As such, “[I]t is imperative that the sociologist submit himself to the fire and action *in situ*; that to the greatest extent possible he put his own organism, sensibility, and incarnate intelligence at the epicenter of the array of material and symbolic forces that he intends to dissect” (Wacquant 2004: viii).

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a phenomenon (deconstruction), observing and recording actual instances of the experience (capture), isolating key aspects of the process (reduction), interpretation of the event (construction), and relocating the interpreted phenomenon in the life-world of the individuals performing it (contextualization).

## Studying Messengers

### *Total Surrender*

There is a difference between trying something—to say one has done it—and really doing something—to be fully immersed in an activity as an intrinsic part of one’s life. This, of course, is one of Bourdieu’s (1972 [1977]) critiques of anthropology. “The anthropologist’s particular relation to the object of his study contains the making of a theoretical distortion inasmuch as his situation as an observer, excluded from the real play of social activities by the fact that he has no place (except by choice or by way of game) in the system observed and has no need to make a place for himself there [...]” (1). And, this is the organizing methodological principle for Wacquant’s study of boxing. Sociologists are quick to point out the failing of many journalists comes from “reporting” from the field instead of *researching* it.<sup>113</sup> However, even lauded examples of sociological participation often represent only short forays into the lifeworld under investigation (e.g., Leidner 1993).

Through a series of factors—none of which were the result of intentional epistemological foresight on my part—I entered the field in a state of total surrender. I came to study bike messengers after completing one year of graduate studies at the University of Georgia. At the time, neither Athens, Georgia, nor graduate school seemed to be a good fit for me. I read Culley’s *Immortal Class* and decided to drop

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<sup>113</sup> Journalists who are able to extricate themselves from the pressure of deadlines (e.g., Ehrenreich 2001), of course, end up producing works every bit as valuable as the ethnographies of anthropologists and sociologists (and their work is generally far more enjoyable to read).

out of graduate school—a decision much of the faculty appreciated. I made arrangements to move to New York, where I planned to start working as a messenger. Before I left Georgia, however, one professor (seeing some sort of potential in me) suggested that I not drop out. Instead, he proposed I take a leave of absence, and that during that time I could do the fieldwork for my master's thesis. It seemed like a pretty good idea (and I figured I could always stay in New York if I really did not want to come back).

The result is the dissertation you are holding. I did go back to Georgia and eventually to University of California, San Diego for my doctorate. I bring up this autobiographical information because I think it situates me, in important ways, in the field. I am not a bike messenger cannibalizing his past—putting an academic spin on my previous life. I moved to New York and took copious field notes. I got IRB approval before I left Georgia. In other words, I was always cognizant of and attentive to my role as a researcher. At the same time, when I started the research, I was not sure if I was really going to go back to complete my master's degree. In this sense, my difficulties in graduate school were really a blessing. I had the training to go out in the field and do productive work, but I was also unsure of my desire to be a sociologist. As such, I was able to fully immerse myself in the occupation and be sincerely engaged with the messengers I met. At least at first, my field notes were little more than diary entries—inspired by the sociological imagination. Later, in San Diego and Seattle, I entered the field completely accepting my position as an ethnographer. But, my initially tenuous position as a graduate student gave me a

unique (and valuable) perspective for my rookie year. This is a perspective that (again, through no great forethought of my own) saved me from the theoretical distortions critiqued by Bourdieu.

*Field Notes, Interviews, and Other Sources*

As explained in chapter one, couriers' favorite topic of discussion (and often, it seems, their only topic of discussion) is messengering. To be a fly on the wall at a messenger gathering is to hear countless anecdotes, histories, and philosophies of messenger life. To be an inquisitive rookie at messenger gatherings (opposed to a fly on the wall) allows one—in very unobtrusive ways to ask probing questions or to ask for clarifications (for many veterans, or even other rookies looking to assert the knowledge they have gained, are eager to help educate others on the ways of messenger life). This, as we have seen, is Nelson's approach to research, and in such situations—insiders talking to insiders—there is less bravado, shock-talk, or hyperbole than when messengers talk to journalists. This is not to say there are no self-aggrandizing exaggerations in these situations, just that there is less of it. It is in these organic situations that the subculture is actually lived, and because I was accepted as a legitimate member of their world, I was treated as an insider (with no need to put on airs around me).<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> In New York, however, I was viewed as a rookie by other couriers. This distinction is no small matter. While I was accepted as an insider, I had not earned the rights and status of a veteran messenger. For example, veteran messengers put on a facade of indifference toward poor weather around both rookies and outsiders, but

The bulk of my data comes not from working as a courier, but from hanging out as one. However, the former is a prerequisite for the latter. Again, as stated in the first chapter, I integrated myself into the messenger world. I did my best to make myself available for all sorts of social events—group rides, hangouts after work, parties, and races. I unobtrusively took notes throughout these gatherings and compiled them in my field notes when I got home. The formal interviews revealed little new information, but they did allow me to capture verbatim, elongated responses to my questions. As described in chapter one, I also used secondary sources to reinforce my findings.

### **My Time in the Field**

#### *Being a Rookie Messenger*

I moved to New York in what I considered to be excellent physical condition. I had been an avid bicycle commuter for over a year (in addition to a rather heavy gym routine). This conditioning, however, proved to be inadequate. During my first few weeks of work I did very little other than ride, eat, and sleep. To this day, my roommate from that period still makes jokes about regularly coming home around ten in the evening to find me asleep on the couch with my dishes from dinner sprawled out before me, and the TV still on. Within a few short weeks the constant pedaling required by the job also managed to put severe strain on my knees (a problem that

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they appear to have no problems bemoaning cold and wet conditions with other veterans.

continues to plague me). My exceptional fatigue and aching knees were exacerbated by my desire to convince my dispatcher that I was a willing and capable messenger. In other words, for my first two weeks at Sprint I came into work by eight a.m. and worked until seven. I slowly learned, however, that while companies do cherish hardworking riders, they also take advantage of naïve rookies eager to prove their mettle. I fell into the latter category and actually made more money by scaling down my hours. Still, even just working an eight to nine hour day left me utterly exhausted and immensely hungry. For breakfast I would generally eat three to four bowls of cereal and one to two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. During the day I would eat one to two bagels with tofu cream cheese and around five bananas. An average dinner might consist of four veggie patties, a twelve-inch baguette, a large sweet potato, and a bowl of broccoli.<sup>115</sup> The “courier appetite” is an often-remarked phenomenon within the social world. In fact, one Canadian messenger spent 16 years in a legal battle with the government to have his additional caloric intake counted as a legitimate business deduction (Fuel for Thought 1999).

Beyond the fatigue and the food (and, of course, the daily lessons in the chills and spills of urban cycling), being a rookie messenger involved coming to very

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<sup>115</sup> My vegan and (somewhat) nutritious diet should not mislead the reader. Most couriers are meat-eaters and not very concerned with healthy food. Cheap and greasy pizza, for instance, is a far more common lunchtime meal. I was told that one messenger’s favorite dinner consisted of four packets of Ramon Noodles and an entire stick of butter. At the same time, however, it must be noted that some couriers are vegetarians and vegan (as evidenced by the Warriors’ organizers supplying veggie dogs at the race). The Washington, DC NAC3 had similar food arrangements. As such, my dietary choices were not viewed as particularly strange (although many may have viewed them as foolish).

personal terms with the weather. This point was already discussed in chapter two, but a courier is exposed to the elements for a considerable portion of the day, and precipitation (whether it is rain or snow) follows the rider into buildings through soggy socks and wet pants. In the summer this is not too much of an issue, but cold days require discipline. One has to push through his discomfort and not let frustration bog down his mind. In general I consider myself a person reasonably adept at enduring physical hardships. However, there are messengers whose endurance appears to have no end. I will never forget seeing Stan on an absolutely frigid winter day in nothing but a sweater, Dickies pants (rolled up past his ankles), and a pair of slip-on Vans (worn with no socks). I was in my warmest winter clothing and had spent the entire morning cursing a wind that cut right through my gloves, leaving my finger painfully numb and nearly immobile. Stan, on the other hand, was not even wearing gloves.

Other, perhaps, not-so-obvious things I learned as a rookie messenger were the very basics of radio etiquette. For example, even if you know the person you are attempting to reach is probably already sitting by their radio, you open the conversation by making some sort of noise letting the other person know you are trying to contact them. They respond in kind, and then the conversation actually starts. Being rather naïve in these matters, I spent my first days as a rookie just pressing down the talk button and spewing out whatever information I was trying to convey (without knowing if my dispatcher was at his desk and ready to listen to me). I also learned a lot about bathrooms. There are very few truly public toilets in

Manhattan. This is an issue discussed at some length by Duneier (1999) in his ethnography of homeless Greenwich Village street vendors. For many reasons messengers are often treated better than the homeless men and women in Duneier's study, but relieving one's self in Manhattan if one is not a paying customer can require some insider knowledge about where to find restrooms which are not locked (or where employees will unlock them for you). Not surprisingly, San Diego and Seattle building managers are far more user friendly when it comes to toilet access.

*Being Straight-Edge and Being a Messenger*

There is one aspect of my life that has, no doubt, hampered my research to some extent. As we have seen, messengers like to party. Alcohol and drugs are mainstays of the subculture, but the reader may have noticed that throughout the text I never mentioned being intoxicated myself. While a clear head might have helped me in races (and I needed all the help I could get) and it certainly improved my ability to take field notes, these are not the reasons that I never drank or smoked with my informants. Since high school, I have been part of the punk rock subculture known as straight-edge. Straight-edgers abstain from alcohol, cigarettes, illegal drugs, and any other intoxicant.<sup>116</sup> It is part of my identity and it is not something I am willing to compromise. As such, I have always been a bit of an outsider in the messenger world (no matter how much I might have tried to be an insider). When people drink or take

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<sup>116</sup> I have no interest in delving into details about the straight-edge subculture. Curious readers can consult Haenfler's (2006) book *Straight Edge: Clean Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change* for more information.

drugs, those not partaking are usually treated with at least some degree of suspicion—at best they are innocent squares not knowing what they are missing, or worse, they are moralistic teetotalers judging those who like to have a good time. Overall, during my research my informants (thankfully) tended to label me as the former far more than the latter.

In New York, for example, the fact I was straight-edge was not too much of an issue. By circumstance, I ended up meeting and socializing with some of the subculture's wilder members. Being associated with these men and women seemed to exempt me from the latter form of suspicion. To hang out with the people I did was, I assume, proof negative for me being a moralistic teetotaler. In Seattle, however, I never really overcome this concern (as best I can tell). Two separate messengers told me that in the past straight-edge messengers had "caused problems" (those problems were not specified). I believe some messengers thought I would repeat this experience. I can think of one occasion in particular where, at least at first, my presence in a room where people were smoking marijuana was somewhat unsettling for those getting high. The issue had nothing to do with my status as a researcher, but with my status as a square. San Diego messengers, having no set of solidified messenger norms, had no problems with my abstinences. At races where drinking alcohol at a checkpoint was a requirement (a common practice in San Diego), most organizers (thinking of me) offered a soft drink alternative.

*And Finally...*

I must also confess that when I was 25, moving to New York to work as a messenger was a dream. It was fun and exciting. I enjoyed going to bars after work and just hanging out. Traveling for races was even more fun. As a 30-year-old, my time in Seattle was more prosaic. I still enjoyed working as a messenger, but I was more interested in waking up early on Saturday to go on a long road ride than I was in staying out late on Friday night. While many of the messengers I know are older than me, I cannot (nor do I have the interest) in keeping up with their lifestyle. When all is said and done, I really am a square, but not because I don't drink, but because I am more content analyzing experiences than I am in the incessant carnival that surrounds much of the subculture. Which, I guess, is a variation on an old adage. Something to the effect of: Those that can do, do. Those that can't do, write about those who can.

The days and years I spent as a messenger were great times, but they were arduous as well. I have nothing but respect and admiration for the men and women who have toughed it out on the streets and continue to do so day in and day out earning far less than they deserve. Outsiders fail to grasp the messenger subculture because they have never been part of it, and they look for simple explanations to either glamorize it or demonize it (or simply disregard it). My approach has—more than anything else—sought to overcome such pitfalls. Overall, I hope that in these pages I have done the messenger subculture justice—that even through the interpretive gloss of sociological analysis, couriers can see themselves and their world reflected in these pages.

## APPENDIX B: BEING A WOMAN IN THE MESSENGER SUBCULTURE

### **Putting Up with the Guys**

As touched on in chapter three, women in social worlds dominated by men must acquiesce to male forms of interaction (or, alternatively, leave the social world). This is not the same thing as men banding together to intentionally bar women from entry. As Fine (2005) explains, men can be accepting of a female presence in their world (and often are)—as long as the women play by the rules set down by men.<sup>117</sup> Of course, these male-centric rules often create environments too inhospitable for women to willingly endure. The female messengers I encountered in my research, by definition, are women with such endurance. However, being a women in the occupation and/or the subculture is not without its struggles. Margot provided a telling explanation:

It takes a certain kind of girl to be a messenger. You've got to suck it up. I hear really gross stuff all day long [over the radio]. It's nothing new. Interacting with guys [is different]. Sometimes I'm like [husband's name], "Today [Messenger's name] was so mean to [messenger's name]." He's like, "That's how boys get along." [...] I've learned that's just how boys interact. [...] They've been short with me over the radio and I've had to be like, "[Messenger's name], what's

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<sup>117</sup> "In general, men do not object to women participating in their groups out of some hostile or mysterious misogynist urge. It is not biology per se that is at issue, but rather the cultural and folk traditions that surround gender in society. Women have the potential to disrupt patterns of male interaction, possibly without even recognizing that they are doing so. Men may feel constrained in their talk and actions in front of women, again perhaps without clear insight as to why this is. [...] These features cause females to be treated as a potentially disruptive influence. The female starts out with obstacles that new male member of the group does not have to face. Although, as I have emphasized, women can and do overcome these barriers, their success is frequently defined as a personal achievement and does not generalize to other women. They are seen as exceptional" (Fine 2005: 72).

going on? Is everything okay?” And he’s like, “What are you talking about?” [...] He won’t even remember what I’m referring to. I take things really personally, and I think they just fucking forget about it right after it happens.

For Margot, “to suck it up” involves two things. First, working at a company that uses an open radio channel, she hears her male co-workers discuss—in what she considers to be rather gross detail—the positive and negative attributes of various women they encounter throughout the day. Second, Margot must accept her co-workers’ gruff and callous methods of conflict resolution—a form of interaction that she clearly finds distressing and perplexing. In order to continue being a messenger, Margot has made a conscious effort to adapt. Studying women in male-dominated corporate settings, Kanter (1977) makes a similar set of observations about the women she considers to be the most socially successful in the business world. The women who truly thrive in the social networks of the corporation (especially in the era in which Kanter conducted her fieldwork) not only learn how men interact, but come to accept it and even partake in it. One of Kanter’s respondents even accompanied (and assisted) her male co-workers on “women hunts.” By making this nearly total acquiescence, such women are treated as (more or less) equal members of the social world. Kanter, however, posits that there may be an unacknowledged psychological expense in the trade. For better or for worse, adapting to male forms of interaction and accepting their topics of discussion are an inevitable part of the messenger lifestyle for women. As Fine explains, “The relationship between men and women depends greatly on the choices and responses of each woman, and her attitudes—

perhaps more than on the community of men, where norms are already set and are unlikely to change rapidly [...]” (67).

Beyond the crass and the hostile, female messengers are often the target of sexual advances (directly and indirectly). A former Portland messenger, for example, characterized the beginning of her career as being “fresh meat” for male couriers. Likewise, a dispatcher at Sprint was renowned (at least among the female messengers at Sprint) for eagerly (if not aggressively) inviting female rookies to hang out at Sophie’s Bar (one of New York’s premier messenger haunts) on Friday nights. Oddly, there is a positive flipside to male messengers pursuing female rookies as potential mates: these women are quickly inducted into the messenger subculture. And, as long as these women succeed in the occupation and accept the norms of male interaction, their acceptance within the subculture is not predicated on making themselves sexually available to male couriers. When I asked Rosie if she was treated differently being a female messenger she replied:

Yeah, definitely, I know the guys I worked with liked working with a girl, at least at my first company. They liked having a female voice on the radio. [...] If there is a cute messenger girl, all the guys are on them. I was always friends with people, and they were always rooting for me. I don’t know how much sexism was going on in the industry. [...] I don’t think [male messengers] really realize what they’re doing, and that is even more condescending in a way. [...] I’ve definitely gotten more perceptive about that sort of thing and maybe more sensitive to it now that I am an older woman. Maybe a lot of it I just didn’t notice at the time, but I definitely didn’t feel like it was an issue. I definitely felt different because I was a female and I was definitely singled out in a certain way, but it was almost like a romanticizing of the messenger industry, “Oh, this is a lot of respect.”

In other words, looking back, Rosie believes that there was sexism going on, but, at the time, she took the extra attention she received as respect.

### **Proving One's Mettle**

One of the common issues brought up in my interviews with female messengers was a matter of having to prove one's self. Whether purely self-imposed or indirectly cajoled by others, the women (more than the men) in this research felt compelled to assert their competence as messengers.<sup>118</sup> As Epstein (1970) explains, such self-consciousness is common for women in male-dominated settings. Margot, for example, felt a pressure to perform at her new company, but could not pinpoint exactly where it arose from. "I think they have the same expectations of you. If I say I'm going to do something I'm going to do it and I'll do it on time. I think I've shown the people I work for that I'm willing to bust ass and that I work hard. [...] I don't know if they saw it that way, but I felt it. I didn't want them to regret hiring a girl. Maybe I was worried about it, but I don't think that they were." In a similar vein, Sarah explained:

I don't know. Maybe it is in my head, but I feel that I had to prove myself. [...] Every so often I will get a comment, "Oh wow, you did that!" or "You made it. You made that deadline!" I want to be like,

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<sup>118</sup> As we have seen throughout this dissertation, male messengers are also eager to prove their mettle, but in interviews they never couched their behavior in this way. None of the men I interviewed talked directly about wanting to prove to their dispatcher, their company, or their co-workers that they were good messengers. Instead, men simply talk about wanting to be good messengers (or maybe even the best messenger). Clearly, they did want to impress others, but this desire is distinct from the female messenger's direct fear of negative appraisal.

“Fuck off.” If I was a guy doing that job there would be no question of whether that job was going to get done. Whereas me being a female, I think that he’s saying it because I’m a female. Maybe it is in my head, but I do think that.

Eva put the issue of proving one’s self rather bluntly. “There were people out there that made it very apparent to me that I needed to prove myself.” Eva said this in response to a question about women being treated different from men in the messenger subculture. However, Eva quickly switched the discussion away from gender to a matter of rookies. She made it clear that all rookies (men and women) need to prove themselves to seasoned riders. “When new people start here, I’m off-stand-ish. ‘Prove yourself, kid.’ I’ve seen people come and go, and come and go. I feel like, if you’re serious about it, you’re serious about it, and if not, go.” Working with Eva, I experienced this pressure directly; it took close to a year for Eva to positively interact with me.

### **Putting Up with Outsiders**

Given messengers’ rather condescending view of outsiders (see chapter six and chapter eight), it is not surprising that female messengers feel the weight of sexism strongest from non-messengers. For example, Eva’s first response when I asked about differential treatment was about her clients: “I don’t know if you guys get that, when you go into a law firm and you pick up a box or something. I get it. ‘Can you carry that?’” Similarly, while Sarah feels that her dispatcher may sometimes be condescending, her real ire is directed at non-messengers. Specifically, female

messengers bear the brunt of outsider curiosity, and the public nature of the occupation opens female messengers up to unwanted private comments.

I think messengers get stared at. Male and female messengers get stared at. [...] As a female people say things to me too, but they say things they wouldn't necessarily say to another female who clearly is not a messenger. [...] Being in an elevator alone with a guy, and he makes a comment on my legs, I don't think he would say that if I was wearing a business skirt. [...] Because I am a female and I'm a messenger [...] people feel entitled to say things to me that they wouldn't necessarily say to someone else.

Rosie made a similar set of observations to Sarah. However, Rosie couched them in a more positive light. Rosie looked back on her messenger days as being a “mini-celebrity.” As a woman in a predominantly male occupation in direct public view, she enjoyed having people recognize her and talk to her (also see Epstein 1970). Describing her long transition into an office worker at CLS, Rosie stated, “I had to get used to walking around everywhere and no one looks at me or cares about me, as opposed to when you're riding your bike around and lots of people are looking at you, checking out your bike, or your whatever.” Rosie also believed that as a woman she was able to assert herself more in traffic.

I think that I probably had it easier because I could definitely get away with stuff that guys couldn't get away with, in traffic especially. I wore skirts. I was one of the original skirt wearers downtown—“Skirts and bikes.” I think that definitely distracted people. I could get away with yelling at people a lot more, flipping them off and stuff, and not having them get as mad at me and having them chase me down and want to run me over. I definitely had incidences, but I think I got away with my temper a lot more because I was a female. They didn't really know how to take it, like how to deal with it.

### Being Different from the Guys

The most surprising thing, for me at least, to come out of my interviews with female messengers is the gendered division some women made between messengers. Only two of my respondents made this point, but it captures a powerful discrepancy between the motivations of male and female messengers.<sup>119</sup> Rosie for example, stated:

I think generally you're going to find a high percentage of strong work ethic, high achiever females gravitating toward this job, and with men it is a lot more of a crap shoot, a lot more antisocial guys, and guys that maybe don't have anything else to do. [...] There's definitely a range of guys, but 90 percent of the time the female is going to be [...] hard working. They don't necessarily have all the same interests or anything, but they just have this general personality style that gravitates toward the job.

Almost identically, Sarah noted:

I don't want to make blanket statements or blanket generalizations, but just in terms of the people that I see, right now, on the road, I think there is a tendency towards [messengering:] it draws a certain type of female and it draws a certain type of male, but it is definitely not the same type of person. I don't know that I can elaborate entirely on that, but I think there is a lot of common traits to a lot of females on the road and there is a lot of common traits to the males on the road. But it is not necessarily that both males and females are the same. [...] I think generally [...] there is a lot of hard workers among the females. Not that there's not a lot of hard workers among the males too. But, I think being a female on the road there is a [different] element.

Rosie and Sarah's observations do not challenge the underlying assumptions of the affective appropriation of space. What their observations do indicate is that men and women may have different underlying motivations for becoming messengers. For men, being a messenger is often a refusal to meet social expectations (i.e., dropping

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<sup>119</sup> It should be noted that both respondents are close friends and it is quite possible that the similarities in their comment come from having discussed the matter jointly.

out or refusing to enter “the rat race”). For women, being a messenger is a way of defying social expectations (i.e., wanting to do a dangerous physical job, on the same terms as men). As Sarah stated, “For me, as a woman, I like [being a messenger]. It is a physical active thing that I can do. I don’t know what other job is possible for that. I don’t want to work construction.”

## APPENDIX C: A FEW MORE WORDS ABOUT MY KEY RESPONDENTS

### **Adam**

I met Adam in New York, working at Sprint Courier. Before New York, he rode in Boston for six years. While he was a well-known member of the Boston messenger scene, in New York he kept mostly to himself. A Latino in his late 20s, prone to wearing baggy shorts, sunglasses, and mesh trucker hats, Adam had a real penchant for very expensive bicycles. The first bike he worked on in New York was stolen, and he worked hard (on a borrowed machine) to quickly save up enough money to build up a new track bike. Even though he was an aspiring graphic designer (and ready to get off the road), he could not bring himself to ride a cheap bicycle. As he told me at the time, he was “particular” about his bikes. “I’m crazy. I so should have just saved my money and bought a beater.” In the spring of 2003, I was told he moved back to Boston and was still riding, but I have not heard about him (or from him) in many years.

### **Andreas**

Andreas moved to New York in 2002, but I would not meet him until close to a year later. In the Midwest, Andreas worked as a courier and in bicycle shops. Andreas is a charismatic figure—a handsome white male in his mid-20s, stylish and well spoken. Unlike Adam, he quickly asserted himself into the New York scene. A graduate of a liberal arts college, he was interested in radical political activism. He was shocked, for example, that as a graduate student I was not intimately familiar with

the works of Slavoj Zizek. Originally, Andreas's goal was to open a co-operatively run bicycle shop servicing both the messenger and economically disadvantaged communities. He started messengering again to make ends meet. Andreas relished the competitive side of alleycats, but he always claimed that his interest in working as a courier stemmed solely from a desire to work outside the bounds of traditional corporate America. When I left New York, Andreas was studying to be an EMT. He finished his training and has worked as an EMT for many years. I have also heard he still comes out to races and messenger parties.

### **Andy**

A politically radical white male in his late 30s, Andy was an avid recreational rider. He was particularly fond of bicycle touring—taking weeklong trips covering hundreds and hundreds of miles. Having worked as a messenger for 13 years, when I met him Andy was interested in pursuing other career options. He was taking carpentry courses and wanted to continue doing physically creative labor. Soon after I left Seattle he moved into his company's office, but then left the company (after a disagreement with the owner). He took up work building cabinets (which he liked) and more menial forms of construction (which he did not like as much).

### **Annabel**

I worked with Annabel in Seattle. The child of Vietnamese immigrants, Annabel was an outgoing (if not hyper) college student in her mid-20s. She had a

quick, sarcastic humor that could light up any situation. She was messengering (in addition to holding several other part-time service jobs) to pay for her education. During my ten months at CLS, I watched Annabel quickly mature as a messenger. She started as an eager rookie, sometimes pretending she had rushes in her bag just to make the day more exciting. Only a few months later, Annabel was already transformed into a more cynical rider. She still enjoyed the job, but she no longer felt compelled to rush when there was no real deadline.

### **Arnold**

Arnold was a big, white man in his mid-20s. An avid weightlifter, Arnold had tattoos adorning both sides of his thick neck and more ink decorating his bulging arms. He would later have his neck pieces lasered off to help his chances of making it into S.E.A.L. training—a dream that never materialized. I ran into Arnold a few months after I left New York. He was working as a bouncer at a bar in DC. He would later join the Army and made it into the Special Forces. Not surprisingly, he was stationed in the Middle East. I was told he did not really like it.

### **Bill**

Bill was white and in his mid-20s. Before working as a messenger, he had ridden his bicycle from Alaska to Washington State. He loved riding his bike and messengering allowed him to do it for pay. Given Bill's extreme pleasure in making rush deliveries and his perverse pleasure in closing elevator doors in people's faces

(see chapter eight), it may come as a surprise that his goal was to be a librarian. When I was leaving Seattle he had been accepted to graduate school for information science and was in the process of interviewing at libraries for internships.

### **Bob**

The messenger world is filled with characters, and Bob is one of Seattle's classic characters. Off the road for many years now, Bob, white in his early 40s, was an administrative worker at CLS. He eagerly agreed to do an interview, but was quickly disappointed by my line of questioning. What Bob wanted to accomplish in the interview was to tell me stories about his younger days: about being the fastest rider at CLS, about riding full speed into an air conditioner unit protruding from a window, or about running head-on into an oncoming taxi. Bob, bored by my questions anyway, cut the interview short because he had a wedding ceremony to conduct; he was a Universal Life Church minister (a position he appeared to take quite seriously).

### **Charles**

Charles was my boss when I worked at Flying High. Born in Wales, he was a white male in his mid-30s. Charles started Flying High because he was in the country illegally, and he had trouble getting a job working for a good messenger company. So, he decided to ride for himself. When I worked for him, he was completely off the bike. More or less, he sat in his apartment all day, answering phone calls, dispatching

the jobs to his two riders, downloading songs off the internet, and smoking pot (a lot of pot). Whenever it snowed more than a few inches, Charles would close down Flying High for the day. On one level I think he was concerned with rider safety, but I think he really just liked the idea of giving himself the afternoon off. Charles never really talked “serious” politics, but he was always excited about the potential for social unrest. Rioting, he claimed, was a necessary form of human expression. When James Brown played a free concert in the city, Charles was ecstatic, not so much because of the music, but because of the rambunctious history of Brown (particularly his 1988 high speed police chase).

### **Calvin**

There are few words that can describe Calvin’s riding style. Like a master of a martial art, Calvin’s control of his machine was surreal. A messenger since the 1970s, to watch Calvin ride in New York traffic was to watch perfection in motion. When I knew him, Calvin’s bike was almost completely covered in stickers (and he had more than one decorated this way). Many of the stickers were self-made, cut from magazines and newspapers and adhered to the frames with packaging tape. The images and slogans ranged from bicycle advocacy to pornography to simple absurdity. As a rookie rider, I was surprised and encouraged by Calvin’s friendly wave (usually a peace sign) when we would cross paths in traffic. In many ways, Calvin stands as the supreme representation for both the highs and lows of the occupation. Even into his 50s, Calvin still attended alleycats and parties. He kept up with the “old cats” and the

“young bloods” alike. Alternatively, as a poor black man, messengering never provided the material compensations worthy of an individual who sacrificed so much physically. Presumably, failing health prompted Calvin’s departure from New York and his retirement (if you can call it that) from the occupation. I was told he moved to the South, closer to his family.

### **Darren**

Darren cut his chops messengering in Texas. He moved to Seattle already knowing several couriers from alleycats and championship races. Thirty-five years old and a veteran of the first Gulf War, Darren was a large white male. During my interview with him, he proudly informed me that 57 facial stitches was not a record number for him. Years earlier he was in a mountain biking accident resulting in 86 sutures in his face. That accident, however, while breaking his nose and orbital, did not claim teeth like his more recent mishap. Unfortunately, not long after our interview, Darren was once again in a serious accident—this time breaking his arm. I do not know if his injuries were the reason, but Darren stopped working as a full-time bike courier. He did, however, continue messengering sporadically, filling in for friends.

### **Efren**

Efren was a small Mexican male in his mid-20s. He made up for his tiny stature with stupefying displays of bravado and violence. Spending time with Efren

was always exciting and fun. He was boisterous and full of stories (most culminating in a fistfight). Efren worked as a messenger for three years, but was nearly retired by the time I met him in the spring of 2003. His real interest was in tattoos, a trade I've been told he moved into fulltime. Supposedly, Efren has, more or less, dropped out of the messenger scene, but when I knew him he loved alleycats and performing various tricks on his bike.

### **Henry**

I first met Henry in the summer of 2002 as I was trying to find the service entrance to a building. He helped me out, and days later I ran into him on the Williamsburg Bridge where he formally introduced himself. It was a pattern I would see repeated over and over again. If you were a messenger new to the city, Henry would make an effort to not only say hello, but to invite you to a bar or a party where you could meet more messengers. It is thanks to Henry that from my very beginnings in New York, I met many of the subculture's formidable members—the veteran couriers and alleycat organizers of the local scene. Henry was white and in his late 20s, and, beneath his warmth and congeniality, he was a rather intimidating fellow. Stocky and strong, he was not afraid to assert himself physically whenever he deemed necessary (and alcohol appeared to increase this necessity). He was also well read and quick-witted. Henry's gruff working-class masculinity was punctuated by thoughtfully liberal political beliefs. At the time, he had been a messenger for five years. Henry started work further down the east coast and moved to New York. Not

long after I met him, Henry began looking for more lucrative job options. Loving the physicality and excitement of messengering, Henry applied for a job with the New York Fire Department, but after a long application process did not secure a position. He briefly worked construction, but hated it (claiming that construction workers, unlike messengers, were “shitty people”). He returned to courier business, but on the administrative end.

### **Howie**

Howie was a white male in his early 30s. Aside from wanting to be a “bad boy” and working as a firefighter for the forestry department in the summer, Howie is a real bicycle aficionado. While I never made it to his home, I was told he had a professional quality workshop in his garage. He knew how to build wheels (one of the most complex aspects of bicycle mechanics) and enjoyed debating the finer points of which parts do or do not get greased on a bicycle. The last time I talked to Howie he was preparing for a motorcycle trip down the West Coast (from Washington State to Mexico).

### **Jack**

At the time I was in Seattle, Jack had been a Seattle messenger for over seven years. A white male in his mid-30s, Jack started as a car messenger, and when his vehicle broke down, he moved to bicycle delivery. Even before he made his transition to the bicycle, Jack was already active in the bike messenger community. He even

helped to form the Courier Association of Seattle (CAOS) and to organize the 2003 CMWC.

### **Joan**

Joan was still a teenager when she started messengering in 2002. She was a short, cute Asian-American girl whose smile and enthusiasm contrasted with her dreadlocked hair and grungy clothing. Originally from an affluent neighborhood in Boston, Joan was not only a courier but also an undergraduate at New York University. Like many of the younger messengers I met in New York, she quickly made a name for herself racing. In one of her first notable victories, Joan, well under the legal drinking age, actually won a year's supply of beer (365 bottles delivered to her apartment) at an alleycat sponsored by a local brewery. I have been told that since graduating, she left the messenger scene to pursue a more radical lifestyle hopping trains across the country.

### **José**

José was in his early 20s when I met him, and he had already been a messenger for three years. Originally from South America, José saw messengering as a way out of the poverty he grew up in. As I got to know him, he was starting to make a name for himself in the scene. He would go on to become one of New York's fastest racers (known throughout the world). José, along with many of the younger messengers in this study, actually stopped formally messengering about two years after I left New

York. Instead, he started working as a food delivery rider in one of New York's boroughs. José made the shift because he could make more money doing food delivery. However, José still considered himself a messenger and continued to participate in races and parties. When I last saw him, he was spearheading a co-operatively run food delivery service. His company had arrangements with numerous restaurants and he managed a handful of full-time riders. He was also expanding the co-op's activities to include traditional on-demand delivery services for Manhattan.

### **Kenny**

Kenny was in his mid-30s, and came from a white working class family in the Midwest. He was a former collegiate swimmer with a degree in graphic design. For his first few years out of college, Kenny worked primarily in design but was also a waiter and even a swim coach. Eventually, Kenny decided he would rather ride his bike for a living. He knew nothing about bike messengers, but knew he wanted to be active and knew he wanted to be his own boss. In 2001, after a good deal of research, Kenny moved to San Diego and started High Five Courier. The first years were rough. He had no office space and only a few clients. Kenny spent most of his days reading in parks downtown, and working in restaurants at night to cover his rent (he spent some of this time living on a docked boat). Eventually, High Five started to thrive; there was enough work to support another full-time rider and Kenny often enlisted other messengers for help throughout the day. More recently, Kenny started to look into retiring from the business, or at least moving into the office fulltime.

Kenny and his wife, Mary, are both practicing Christians (their faith is non-denominational and politically liberal). They rarely (if ever) swear and drink in moderation. Despite their diversion from messenger stereotypes, Kenny and Mary were both very active in the San Diego messenger scene. In 2006, for example, they both traveled to New York CMWC. They have also organized several local races.

### **Kyle**

Kyle, white and in his mid-20s, was a traveler and artist (in addition to working as a messenger and part-time audio engineer). He has spent time in some of the world's most exotic locations (always on a shoe-string budget), copiously photographing his experiences. Closer to home, in a project combining humor and sociological inquiry, Kyle spent days carrying around a digital recorder, capturing random elevator conversations. I do not know what Kyle eventually did with his soundtrack, but it is an idea born from a distinctly messenger sensibility—as couriers regularly overhear inane, odd, and perverse discussions while riding in elevators.

### **Marco**

Marco was a messenger with true spirit: eager to work and willing to put his life on the line (usually just for the hell of it). Marco was a Latino-Pacific Islander in his early 20s. When CLS started ranking its riders, Marco jumped at the opportunity to assert himself as the company's fastest, and he was truly gushing when he finally achieved the number one ranking. Marco's boisterous demeanor always helped liven

up the CLS office. I am indebted to Marco because even though he found my writing mind-numbingly boring, he still exuded as much enthusiasm for this research project as I did. After I left Seattle, Marco became increasingly active in the messenger subculture. He eventually moved to Boston to work as a messenger, but he soon quit (feeling his company treated him unfairly). He planned to return to messengering, but took up a job as a barista (at least temporarily).

### **Margot**

Margot was into bikes long before she became a messenger. It was her soon-to-be husband (a veteran Seattle messenger) who encouraged her to leave the restaurant industry and make her living on her bike. Covered in tattoos, Margot's timidly thoughtful demeanor contrasts with her outwardly menacing appearance. At the time of our interview, Margot was working on a messenger-themed comic chronicling absurdities of the job (largely about interactions with outsiders). For example, she had a story about a man in an elevator who asked her why messengers do not wear socks. It was not clear to Margot (or me) why this man believed messengers did not wear socks. Regardless, she simply replied, "Because it makes us faster."

### **Max**

While many Seattle messengers can put on an air of indifference to newcomers, Max was friendly from the first minute. A small man with a big personality, Max was eager to share stories about his day or express his thoughts or

(sometimes) just loudly sing a song stuck in his head. Max had been in the business since 1996. After many years on the road, Max moved into the office (as a manager) for some time, but had returned to the road when I met him. Max was in his early 30s, and he had a wife and a son. While Max socializes during the workday, and sometimes briefly after work, he had no interest in alleycats or messenger parties. I have been told that soon after I left Seattle, Max, again, hung up the bike (at least for a little bit).

### **Mike**

Mike was involved with the Portland messenger scene for some time. However, in Portland it was a hard to get a job. So, in 2003, Mike, a white punk rocker in his early 20s, moved to New York. He quickly found work and started hanging out with other messengers. Like José and Joan, once he started racing, he quickly made a name for himself. In addition to messengering, Mike helped open and run a bicycle shop in Manhattan. When I last saw him, Mike was doing food delivery in a New York Borough. Mike not only continued to race alleycats, but also had started to take part in more traditional forms of competitive cycling. Wanting to be a world-class sprinter on the velodrome, Mike had added at least twenty pounds of muscle to his frame. But, true to form, he balanced his very serious training regimen with a lifestyle involving intoxicated late-nights.

**Mitch**

Mitch is barely mentioned in this dissertation, which is unfortunate and unjust. He was an integral and charismatic part of the Seattle messenger scene. White and in his late 30s (although he looked much younger), Mitch is a very quiet man. His soft-spoken words, however, were thoughtful and clever. He was an observer and folk historian of both the messenger subculture and cycling more generally. During our interview, it was obvious that, like Sarah, he worried about wasting his potential. For example, he asked me what my parents thought of me being a messenger. He was clearly a man who could be doing a lot of other things, and during our talk it was obvious that his parents had never really come to terms with the choices he had made. I only knew Mitch for a tiny fraction of his twelve years on the road, but it seemed to me that in his time as a messenger he put his potential to good use (and I think it is safe to say that everyone riding downtown would agree).

**Nathan**

Nathan was the son of two Chinese immigrants, and a veteran Seattle messenger. He was also an enthusiastic traveler for messenger events. When the CMWC was in Sydney, Australia, Nathan took a month off of work to hang out with messengers and travel the continent. Nathan owned a lot of bikes, but the one he rode for work looked like a junker. Under his control, though, it did remarkable things. Not only was Nathan fast, he was known for doing wild tricks in traffic. Riding behind him in rush hour traffic, I watched Nathan go into a wheelie on his *front* wheel

(a trick known as a stoppie—the physics of which boggle the mind). He did this maneuver for almost a hundred feet before coming to a stop at a red light.

### **Rick**

Rick grew up in New York. He never considered being a messenger until he visited San Francisco. It was there that he decided he should work as a courier in New York. When I met Rick, he had been a messenger for three years. He was a white male in his early twenties. He was charismatic, especially with the ladies. In 2003, Rick and several other messengers started riding together to train for upcoming alleycats. At the time, Rick loved his job, but he also had aspirations of being a musician (or working as an audio engineer). I have not been in touch with Rick for years, but I have been told he started designing a clothing line, and that he continued to race and to socialize in the subculture.

### **Robin**

Robin is a slightly built man, white, and in his mid-20s. He once joked that he could not find arm warmers (which are a popular piece of cycling apparel) small enough to cling to his thin arms. He called them “cycling arms” and they were complemented by cycling legs that were fast—fast in alleycats, fast in making deliveries, and fast in traditional racing as well. Robin, in fact, was the star rider on a recreational racing team comprised of current and former Seattle messengers. Always into outdoor activities, Robin claimed that he started messengering because he liked

courier bags. The answer sounded like a joke to me, but he insisted that he *really* liked bags. And, it is true, months earlier, he had seen me with a new bag and he was eager to ask me questions about it (who made it, what it cost, what it could hold, etc.).

### **Rosie**

When I met Rosie, a Latino female in her early 30s, she was already happily off the road and working in her company's office. Only a few years earlier, however, she was probably Seattle's most prominent female rider. Thoughtful, with a warm smile, Rosie was always a joy to talk to. Rosie was kind enough to read two articles I published about my time in New York (and which, in revised form, constitute two chapters in this dissertation). I greatly appreciate her feedback.

### **Sarah**

Sarah was an Asian-American who started messengering in Seattle in 2002 (when she was in her early 20s). She had a master's degree in education, and had briefly worked in education. As we saw in chapter five, she was torn between her desire to use her knowledge to help better the world, and continuing to work as a courier. At the time, she decided that the satisfaction she got from teaching did not outweigh the self-fulfillment she found in messengering. During our interview, Sarah often described herself as cantankerous. However, whenever I crossed paths with her, Sarah always struck me as one of those eternally cheerful people (with a face full of smiles darting into traffic).

**Steve**

Steve surfed through traffic. Sometime he would scorch through the streets; other times he would appear to just be floating by. Fast or slow, though, Steve always looked calm and collected—“cool” in the most profound sense. Whatever he is doing, Steve was the kind of guy that made it look effortlessly smooth. He was white and in his early thirties—a staple of the Seattle scene for nearly eight years. Steve came into messengering through a girlfriend. Their relationship ended, but Steve’s love affair with bikes continued. He is a master of both micro and macro routing, and as an avid traveler for messenger events, Steve enjoyed comparing city topographies and traffic patterns. Steve also ran a small, but popular, messenger bag business.

**Tanya**

When I met Tanya she had a broken collarbone from a rather nasty high-speed cycling accident (which occurred from trying to make a rush delivery). White and in her early 20s, Tanya had only been a messenger for a few months. She was, however, already well-known and well-respected in the Seattle scene. With both an undergraduate degree from a top school and years of formal dance training, Tanya, clearly had other job options. But, she truly loved the messenger lifestyle. When asked how her day was going, Tanya was known to enthusiastically reply, “Livin’ the dream”—the dream of being a wild-riding messenger, that is.

**Vinny**

Vinny represented everything positive about New York messengering. Working since the early 1990s, Vinny had tirelessly supported both the occupation and the lifestyle. He was white, tall and lanky, with a punk rock haircut (even though he was well into his 30s). He had organized benefits, gathered corporate sponsorships for various events, and functioned as a media spokesperson. Known by messengers across the globe, Vinny still made a point to talk to rookie riders—to ask how they were doing and to make sure they knew about upcoming races and parties. During my time in New York, Vinny won several prominent races and organized several memorable ones himself. While Vinny loved the competition of alleycats, he always stressed fun as the only purpose of the events. Also, like Calvin, Vinny's experience on the bike gave him a seemingly supernatural control of his machine.

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