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Bike Messengers and the Really Real: Effervescence, Reflexivity, and Postmodern Identity

Jeffrey L. Kidder

University of California, San Diego

Out of more than two thousand bike messengers in New York City, a few hundred participate in alleycats—illegal races held in open traffic. Surrounding this racing scene is a vibrant messenger community. Messengers who race in or attend alleycats carry their messenger identity into all aspects of their lives. Through direct participant observation, this article proposes that alleycats function as Durkheimian rituals for these messengers. Alleycats express the central values of the social world. Lost in collective effervescence, the individual confronts these values as objectified truths, which allow messengers to form stable identities. Further, bicycles, messenger bags, and other objects become sacred symbols within this ritualization process. The ability of messengers to construct such nonreflexive identities is juxtaposed with theories about the self in postmodernity.

In *The Meaning of Culture*, Allan (1998) claims that reality construction is predicated on affect-meaning—the *felt* reality of culture. This stance comes from the application of Durkheim's theory of the role of rituals in producing meaning. Although the ecstatic religious rituals that interested Durkheim may be less evident in our time, any number of secular rituals exist that are similarly essential for creating meaning. Rituals in the Durkheimian sense are not static and archaic ceremonies. According to Collins's (2004) reading of Durkheim, a ritual is "a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality" (p. 7). The present article focuses on one example of such a meaning-generating secular ritual among bicycle messengers—"alleycats," or illegal races held in open traffic. While there are over two thousand messengers in New York City, only a few hundred participate in alleycats. Surrounding this racing scene is a vibrant messenger community. Bike messengers who race in or attend alleycats strongly identify with what can be conceptualized as a messenger lifestyle. That is to say, these individuals do not simply

Direct all correspondence to Jeffrey L. Kidder, Department of Sociology, 9500 Gilman Dr., University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, CA 92093-0533; e-mail: jkidder@ucsd.edu.

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work as messengers but carry their messenger identity into all aspects of their lives. Following Allan's (1998) and Collins's (2004) applications of Durkheimian theory, I argue that alleycats serve an essential social function. Like Geertz's (1973b) deep play, alleycats express the central values of the social world. Lost in collective effervescence, the individual confronts these values as objectified truths. Further, bicycles, messenger bags, and other objects become sacred symbols within this ritualization process.

BACKGROUND

At least since the appearance of Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality* (1966), sociologists have shown a persistent interest in how individuals interact to produce society. According to Berger and Luckmann, reality is not inherent in the physical properties of the natural universe but is, in their well-known phrasing, socially constructed. Separated from obdurate facts, humans must construct a meaningful cosmos. In this way, reality is filled with infinite potential. Conversely, this potentiality results in a *nomos* that is continually threatened and must be actively maintained through social interactions. The contingencies of human reality are the focus of Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodological work. While Berger and Luckmann discuss dereification, their work presumes a stable world. Once created, institutions—re-created through language—provide a meaningful reality that shelters the individual from existential terror.

Since the 1970s, social theory has become increasingly concerned with the *instability* of reality (Lemert 1992). This postmodern perspective arises from a critique of knowledge (see Lyotard [1979] 1984). For Giddens (1991), global capitalism, supported by scientific reason, is predicated on reflexivity. "The reflexivity of modernity has to be distinguished from the reflexive monitoring of action intrinsic to all human activity. Modernity's reflexivity refers to the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity, and material relations with nature, to chronic revision in the light of new information or knowledge" (p. 20). While not a postmodernist, Giddens highlights the consequences of late modernity for the individual. In Giddens's modernity, nothing is permanent, and everything is only true until further notice. For postmodernists, the hyperreflexive nature of the Enlightenment has created irreparable damage to the *nomos*. Or, as some postmodernists would prefer: irreparable damage has occurred to the *concept* of a *nomos* because meaning construction was never as benign a process as Berger and Luckmann assumed.

For Lyotard ([1979] 1984), language provides the social bond between individuals, but this bond is heterogeneous. That is, for postmodernists, knowledge is derived from nothing more than competing language games. Beliefs (e.g., religion, science) have turned into belief *systems* with no external point of reference in which to claim higher validity. This is compounded by Derrida's separation of the sign and the signifier. For Derrida ([1967] 1976), not only is language a game, communication itself is a never-ending process of textual reconstructions. True intentions, and ulti-

mately true meanings, can, therefore, not be ascertained. All beliefs are understood as temporal reformations of disjunctured readings. The reflexive nature of modernity has thus turned inward and brought its own validity into question. As Marx said, “All that is solid melts into air” (Marx and Engels [1848] 1964:63). The metanarrative of science—progression toward an enlightened future—has been subsumed by an institutionalization of doubt (Harvey 1989). “The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games” (Lyotard [1979] 1984:40). With the dissolution of the metanarrative, the individual—like the sign—is free-floating. The agent becomes the nexus for competing language games (Gergen 1971). As such, the self cannot maintain a coherent narrative, but instead is faced with endless multiplicities. The self is thus reduced to a Goffmanian actor—a faceless agent constantly applying masks (Dowd 1991). Reality has been replaced by simulacra (Baudrillard [1981] 1974)—the image of the image of reality via the mass media—and the self, in turn, has been reduced to the consumption of various styles and merely reflects these mediated images.

Allan (1998) has proposed an interesting reformulation of the postmodern critique. Accepting the conditions of postmodernity and its ramifications on self-identity, Allan argues that contemporary theories overemphasize the role of cognitive reason in reality construction. Gubrium and Holstein (2000), for example, equally challenge postmodernist claims about the dissolution of the self. However, in Gubrium and Holstein’s conception, the self remains salient through increasing discourse about identity in everyday life. While on the surface this emphasis on “grounding the postmodern self” (Gubrium and Holstein 1994) is similar to the argument presented here, their focus on language represents a vastly different approach to the topic.

Building from Durkheim, both Allan (1998) and Collins (2004) contend that, ultimately, reality is emotional (see also Giddens 1991). In other words, for reality to be “really real” (Geertz 1973a) it must be felt. As Durkheim ([1912] 1995) states, “The force of the collectivity is not wholly external; it does not move us entirely from outside. Indeed, because society can exist only in and by means of individual minds, it must enter into us and become organized within us” (211). Affect-meaning is therefore the true foundation of world building. The importance of affect-meaning may be glimpsed in the internalized second nature of Bourdieu’s ([1979] 1984) habitus, Denzin’s (1989) focus on emic ethnography, Flyvbjerg’s (2001) contextual sociology, and Geertz’s (1973a) description of religious performances.

The locus of affect-meaning is—as Durkheim emphasized—collective gatherings. “The very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated by their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation” (Durkheim [1912] 1995:217). Through collective rituals, the self is overcome by effervescence, and symbols become charged with meaning. 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” (p. 220). Further, the objects and ideas used in ritu-

als become consecrated symbols. "The symbol thus takes the place of the thing, and the emotions aroused are transferred to the symbol" (p. 221). In speaking of national identity, Durkheim notes, "The flag itself is treated as if it was that reality [i.e. the nation itself]" (p. 222).

For Allan, the principal function of rituals is the dampening of reflexivity. As the works of Lyotard and Derrida illustrate, it is the highly reflexive nature of postmodernism that produces pervasive doubt. In this sense, culture pulls itself apart (Gergen 1971; Harvey 1989; Jameson 1984). The death of the metanarrative and the proliferation of competing pluralities have resulted in ambivalence (Bauman 1991). For Allan, the blasé attitude first described by Simmel ([1903] 1971) and later revived by Bauman is countered through reduced reflexivity. By reducing reflexivity and at the same time designating symbols as sacred (i.e., beyond doubt), culture is able to stabilize itself. This is to say, in a world saturated with competing symbols, rituals "turn off" the reflexive process. By dampening reflexivity, the individual feels no need to question whether the symbols chosen are the *right* symbols; reality is thus rescued from pervasive doubt. For Allan, this is the heart of Durkheim's exploration of elementary religious life. "When a belief is shared unanimously by a people, to touch it—that is, to deny or question it—is forbidden" (Durkheim [1912] 1995:215). Further, "In light of Durkheim's model of rituals, we can take rituals as the missing link between group structure and group ideas. Rituals are the nodes of social structure, and it is in rituals that a group creates its symbols" (Collins 2004:26).

While Allan has proposed the most comprehensive work on affect-meaning, other theorists have come to similar conclusions. Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) notion of flow, while individualistic and not social, is similarly interested in the state of reduced reflexivity where the individual feels actions as instincts. According to Csikszentmihalyi, the flow experience is integral to happiness. Moreover, for Csikszentmihalyi the malaise of contemporary life results from a disconnection from the optimal experiences found in flow. It is to combat this disconnection that motivates mountaineers to attempt their difficult climbs. For Mitchell (1983), mountain climbing offers a release from the alienation and anomie of modern life. Like Mitchell's conclusion about mountaineers in flow, Lyng (1990) sees edgework as a response to alienated labor. Edgework is the X games of flow: what skydivers, test pilots, pill poppers, and others like them experience. In both flow and edgework, the individual tests his or her physical abilities. Engrossed in activity, Mead's ([1934] 1962) "I" (the spontaneous, inner-directed self) comes to the fore, while the "me" (the routinized behavior acquired in taking social roles) recedes. The very nature of the "I" inhibits reflexive thoughts. Actions in such a state appear unquestioningly natural.

While pointing to the importance of reflexivity in human action, the analysis of Csikszentmihalyi, Lyng, and Mitchell fails to connect reducing reflexivity to Durkheimian rituals. Lyng and Mitchell both locate such action within a context of meaning construction in a disjointed world, but the ability for such action to objectify reality is not explored. Mitchell explores the objectification of various aspects of

mountaineer style and behavior, but does not link the objectification of styles and actions within the flow experience. As such, a crucial theoretical connection remains unexplored. Taking the work of Allan, I propose to make such a connection. Through analyzing bike messenger street races as Durkheimian rituals, I trace the creation of affect-meaning. More specifically, I connect reduced reflexivity (i.e., the spontaneity of the “I”) with the consecration of objects and ideas as symbolic totems of messenger values. These symbols, in turn, allow for the power of the ritual to be transported beyond the ritual event, the alleycat, and thus reinforce a messenger identity in everyday life. Ultimately, this emphasis on rituals and affect-meaning highlights a serious flaw in current postmodern theories, which focus solely on the relationships between signs in the construction of meaning.

METHODS AND DATA

I conducted research for this article in New York City between the summer of 2002 and the summer of 2003. For approximately one year, I was employed as a bike messenger. More important than the work hours themselves for this research was the nonwork time I spent with messengers. It is during social gatherings and other nonwork events that messengers discuss, contest, and represent the meanings and symbols of their world. I hung out with messengers after work in parks and bars. I went to messenger parties. I raced in alleycats. I went on group rides with other messengers. In other words, I was as integrated as a sociologist could be in the “messenger community.” I was not viewed as an outsider, and, more important, because of my lifelong interest in bicycles, I did not feel like an outsider. I was, however, viewed as a rookie by other couriers, and such a distinction was no small matter. While I was accepted as a legitimate messenger, I had not earned the rights and status of a veteran messenger. This is both a pro and a con. As a rookie, I was only able to interact with other messengers as such. I could not step outside that role, and therefore, I know very little about how veteran messengers talk among themselves. For example, seasoned messengers put on a facade of indifference toward poor weather around both rookies and outsiders, but they appear to have no problems bemoaning cold and wet conditions with other veterans (see also Donnelly and Young 1988). Conversely, as a rookie I was exposed to the socialization process by which rookies become veteran insiders. Mitchell’s (2002) analysis of survivalists has demonstrated the utility of this approach. For Mitchell (1993), it is not a lack of data that results in failed fieldwork, but 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. It is this emotionality and shared experience that is the basis for authentic understanding (Denzin 1989).

During my fieldwork, most of the messengers with whom I interacted were unaware of my research. In an average day, a New York messenger comes into contact with hundreds of other riders. Working amid people engaged within a particular social world requires the sociologist to move as seamlessly as possible within that

social world. As such, the numerous individuals who indirectly helped me with this research could not all be expected to give “informed consent.” Messengers with whom I had recurring contact were informed of my sociological interest, and all were supportive of the undertaking. Becker (1951), Mitchell (2002), Ouellet (1994), and many other sociologists have also conducted such semicovert research. To ensure the privacy and protection of the individuals discussed in this research, I use pseudonyms, except for messengers quoted in other sources. I collected data through informal interviews conducted throughout the workday and at races, parties, and other social gatherings. In nearly every social situation, couriers freely discussed various aspects of messenger life. As such, I found engaging couriers about their social world remarkably easy and unobtrusive. I jotted down responses in private and compiled them in my field notes during the evening. For this research, I did not conduct formal interviews, relying instead on the ordinary interactions of daily messenger life. Using Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) approach to grounded theory, I analyzed and coded my field notes for recurring themes and trends.

In addition to participant observation and the informal interviews arising from participation, I supplement traditional ethnographic work with historical and contemporary documentation. During my research, I read as much of the literature produced by the bike messenger social world as I could find. The most notable of this literature is the New York Bike Messenger Association’s ten issues of *Urban Death Maze*, a desktop-published magazine produced from 1998 to 2001. Equally important are memoirs by Travis Culley (2002) and Rebecca “Lambchop” Reilly (2000) about their lives as messengers. I also utilized books, articles, and documentaries produced by outsiders for mainstream audiences. Of these resources, I found the *New York Times*’s plethora of articles on messengers immensely insightful. *Red Light Go* (2002) and *Pedal* (2001), two wonderful documentary films about New York City messengers, were equally useful. The data for this article are primarily derived from direct participant observation; quotations from other sources are used to reinforce my findings.

In discussing the validity of the present research, two issues must be raised. First, messengers in every city have unique communities. Of course, there are numerous similarities among messengers in the various cities, but there are equally important differences. With this in mind, parts of my research may be generalizable for messengers elsewhere, but I can claim to have knowledge only about New York City. Second, in focusing on emotion, the data used for this article can be considered inherently problematic. Emotions are much harder to gauge than behaviors. Mitchell (1993) has pointed out that the insiders of a group often guard against expressing their true emotions with outsiders. Conversely, the emotions of insiders are assumed to be shared and therefore are not discussed at length. As a researcher, then, the only possible avenue for understanding the affect-meaning of a social world is to participate in it. Smith (1990) has said, “An alternative sociology must preserve in it the presence, concerns, and experiences of the sociologist as knower and discoverer” (p. 23). As Wolf (1991) asserts, “An ethnographer who removes himself—

the ‘I’—from the ethnography only creates the illusion of objectivity” (p. 27). Further, “Combining participation and observation is the most effective way of achieving an understanding of a culture as it is experienced and lived by its participants” (p. 22). This article, therefore, is based on my particular experiences and my particular interpretations of others’ experiences. To echo Muggelton’s (2000) concerns about research, I hope that the picture I have constructed here appears accurate for the messengers who read this. At the same time, however, this is a work of sociology, and it has necessarily subjected messenger meanings to “an interpretive gloss” (p. 7). Since leaving New York, I have fallen out of touch with my key informants. However, on the few occasions when I have had opportunities to communicate with my informants, I have kept them informed of the status of the research and where they (or their pseudonym) have entered the work.

MESSING: THE JOB AND THE LIFESTYLE

The modern bike messenger appeared in large American cities in the early 1970s. As the speed of business and the congestion of urban areas increased together (see Sassen 2001), bicycles provided the fastest means to transport documents and packages across town. By the 1980s the bike messenger had become a cultural icon. Loved and hated, messengers were urban outlaws cherished yet berated within the popular media. “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). Conversely, a regular columnist for the *Washington Post* captured the other half of public sentiment about bike messengers: “In my gentler moments, I’ve called them law-flouting, obscenity-spewing, bath-needing, wild-riding, pedestrian-smashing madmen” (Levy 1989).

It is estimated that there are over two thousand bicycle messengers working in New York City. In 1975 there were approximately five hundred bike messengers, but by 1985 there were between four and seven thousand messengers (McKillop 1985). Because specific records are not kept and because so many courier companies operate off the books, no one knows exact numbers, and estimates vary widely. In the 1990s, fax machines and the Internet had cut deeply into the messenger business (Tommasson 1991). The number of courier companies shrank, and price competition among the remaining companies grew. However, despite the death knell rung by many pundits, the occupation of bike courier has persisted into the new millennium. For items that cannot be digitally transferred (e.g., model portfolios, legal documents, garment bags), bicycle messengers provide the best business solution. Bikes are often faster than motor vehicles in congested urban environments, can be parked virtually anywhere, and are more easily maneuvered amid cars, pedestrians, and other obstacles.

Like other wheeled vehicles, bicycles are subject to traffic laws; enforcement of these laws, however, is inconsistent and minimal. Bicycles are fined just like cars (except that the tickets do not affect one's insurance), and the cost of tickets can quickly add up. Taken at face value, one citation for running a red light (\$100) costs more than many messengers make in a day. For people already making a low wage, losing a day's pay is no small matter. But not running red lights is not a profitable option. Many messengers, therefore, simply outrun the police. As one messenger told me, "They can't catch me. I just ride by them giving them the middle finger." Messengers also learn to avoid intersections where police might be waiting. On several occasions, couriers warned me about intersections where bike cops—the police officers usually responsible for bicycle citations—could be found. Some messengers provide faulty information to police to prevent the fine from being attached to their record. Additionally, many messengers do not have driver's licenses, so traffic fines are of little concern. As another messenger informed me, "In five years I have never paid a single ticket." Of course, in addition to these avoidance strategies, it must be made clear that, obviously, many messengers simply pay their fines.

The work is dangerous. One study shows that messengers have an injury rate three times higher than meatpackers (Dennerlein and Meeker 2003). A journalist working as a messenger for a week reported, "I'm scared. . . . The odds are against me" (Cuerdon 1990:84). During my fieldwork, most of the messengers I knew had at least one minor (and some not so minor) collision with automobiles or pedestrians. Messengers also work in all weather conditions. As one Boston messenger commented, "It is dangerous enough in dry, warm weather, but on days like this [February snowstorm], it's a whole different story" (James, quoted in Grant 1994:29). One positive aspect of working in bad weather is minimal police enforcement; bike cops do not ride in the cold or the rain. As Chuck, a veteran messenger, told me in the early spring, "We are going to have to start worrying about the cops soon. These last few months [during an unusually cold winter] I swear we could have gotten away with murder." Or, as Micky exclaimed one rainy afternoon, "I love these days. You don't have to worry about bike cops or anything."

Messengers in New York are predominately black or Hispanic, and many are recent immigrants. The occupation is also almost exclusively male. Many messengers are culled from the lumpen proletariat; they are individuals with few options for generating an income. For these messengers, being a bike courier is usually "just a job." They may identify with the occupation to some degree, but being a bicycle messenger does not directly influence their lifestyle. For a few hundred of New York's messengers, however, there is more to the job than simply a paycheck. Among this group, being a messenger does not stop and start with the workday—it is a way of life. "It's an addiction. . . . It's part of my life" (Pit 1998b:23). Whites and females are overrepresented among lifestyle messengers. The majority of female messengers observed on the job participated in the lifestyle. Whites, while a minority within the occupation, are a majority in the lifestyle. For these messengers, working as a courier offers autonomy and excitement. As one messenger said, "It is the

greatest job in the world. I hope I am doing it until I'm 50. The only other thing I'd really like to be is a stuntman" (unnamed messenger, quoted in Duvall 1991:22). Or as Tony, a messenger of two years, told me, "I've done every sort of job, and being a messenger is the only job I like."

Among "lifestyle messengers," races are major social occasions. Gertrude, a messenger of several years, proclaimed, "I live for these things! It is all I want to do." Races vary in size. Smaller alleycats attract local and regional riders. Larger championship races draw couriers from across the world. I participated in seven races during my year as a messenger: four in New York, two in Boston, and the 2003 North American Cycle Courier Championships (NAC3) in Washington, D.C.

An item particularly important to all messengers is, not surprisingly, their bicycle. The three most common are mountain, road, and track bikes. The first two need no introduction. A track bike, on the other hand, is a more exotic piece of equipment. Also known as a fixed gear, fix, fixie, and fixed, a track bike is specifically designed for riding on a velodrome (an oval race track with banked corners). Track bikes have no brakes, and a rigid geometry (good for speed and quick handling, but harder on the rider's body). A fixed gear means that the bicycle does not have a freewheel (i.e., if the rear wheel is spinning, so are the pedals). With fixes 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 should not be confused with coaster brakes found on children's bikes.

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. First, there is very little to steal from it. Second, being able to control the bike's speed through the pedals offers a huge degree of control in traffic and on wet or snowy roads. Third, unencumbered by additional components, fixes are exceptionally light. Fourth, there is very little that can break or needs to be tuned up. Fifth, fixed-gear bikes are just plain fun to ride. It is hard to explain to someone who has never ridden one, but as one messenger said about the benefits of learning to ride fixed, "It will be absolutely amazing" (Pit 1998a:6). Joan, a messenger of two years, claimed that a fixed bicycle "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 noninitiated. 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 away with a lot more."

ALLEYCATS: WHAT THEY ARE

A messenger's workday consists of making pickups and deliveries at various locations throughout the city. At each delivery, a manifest must be signed by the receiver. Alleycats mimic this basic structure. Race organizers give racers a manifest with a list of checkpoints. Some races require a specific order, and other races allow the

courier to determine the best possible route. During the workday, messengers can generally determine the order of their pickups and the routes they take. However, this is not always the case. Some deliveries require certain priorities. Races vary, then, just like actual work. At each checkpoint, the racer must have his or her manifest signed. Some alleycats require messengers to perform certain tasks (e.g., like puncturing a tire and replacing the tube, or doing push-ups) before their manifests will be signed. During a workday delivery, any number of things may go wrong: mechanical difficulties, mislabeled packages, clients who are unavailable, trouble with security guards, etc. In many ways, the best couriers are not the fastest on the road but the fastest at solving problems. Again, the tasks some races require help further replicate work. Alleycats are held in open traffic—just like during work. Racers swarm into the streets speeding through red lights, swerving around cars, screaming at pedestrians. Larger races, like the world and national championships, however, are held on closed courses (i.e., not in the street).

Championship races held on closed courses are controversial. As Matt told me about the 2000 Cycle Messenger World Championships (CMWC) held in Philadelphia, “I wasn’t too impressed with it. It is a closed track. There are checkpoints, but it is an all-out race. And, you have these ringers there who wouldn’t be there if it wasn’t a closed track. They are bike racers and maybe they work a few days a month. They are like [in funny European accent], ‘What, race in the street?’” Or, as Jonathan, a veteran rider from New York, commented about the 2003 NAC3, “It has nothing to do with the skills of being a messenger.” Conversely, for Henry, *Metropoloco*, a weeklong messenger event held in New York before the 2000 CMWC, was a “*real messenger race*.” *Metropoloco* was a real messenger race because it was held in city traffic and involved checkpoints that more accurately replicated actual messenger work. Likewise, at the 2003 NAC3 there was an informally titled “anti-NAC3” alleycat held after the championship. Again, the point was that real messengers race in traffic. Despite these pejorative comments, the reader should not assume that most messengers have only negative feelings toward the championship races. This is obviously not true, since messengers themselves organize the championships. Further, both Henry and Jonathan are actively involved in championship events. While some messengers do not participate in championship races because they are not “real” enough, many other messengers do. World and national champions are also held in high regard. For example, a group of messengers who regularly trained for races proudly informed me that they had been riding with last year’s winner of the NAC3.

Regardless of where the race is held, a messenger race is no ordinary bicycle race. There are very few rules. Or as several people have said, “There are no rules.” Hardly any racer will be wearing spandex or even 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 shoulders. The bicycles are not carbon fiber or titanium racing bikes with sixteen-spoke wheels. They are solid bikes used and abused every day at work. For couriers, there is a major distinction between a

messenger's bike and the bicycle a "yuppie" uses to do laps around Central Park. For example, after work one day a group of us was hanging out in Central Park. A man with a titanium Litespeed (i.e., a very expensive road bike) approached us and asked which courier company would be the best to work for. A few of the messengers disinterestedly rambled off some company names. After he left, Mike, a rookie messenger, laughingly snipped, "Yeah, I'd like to see him work on that bike!" New York messenger bikes are dinged and scratched, covered in stickers. The scene surrounding a race looks like "a collision between the Tour de France field and the cast of *Mad Max*" (Wood 1994:2).

Races are always concluded (and often started) with a party. Drinking and other intoxicants are a major component of the race environment. As one messenger wrote, "I jettied after the beer ran out and before the fights broke out. I was so drunk I crashed into the sides of the bridge on my way home and then puked my guts into my toilet bowl." ("Messenger Mass Ride" 1999:3). It is worth mentioning that heavy drinking and binge drug use is common within the messenger world. I attended a planning meeting for an upcoming race, and among the issues discussed was whether drug dealers should be formally invited, since "real drug dealers will know to be there anyway." At this same meeting, Henry asked another messenger what had happened to him the previous night. His reply was, "I don't remember. All I know is I woke up with bloody sheets and a wobbly front wheel."

In hanging out with messengers, one often overhears that someone has given up drinking (or some other drug). This abstinence is always temporary and usually does not mean avoiding all alcohol, but simply attempting to curb one's excessive intake. For example, a former dispatcher proudly explained to me one evening that he was not drinking anymore. He said this, without the slightest intention of irony, as he nursed a pint of Guinness. For him, not drinking meant simply not drinking until he blacks out. Many messengers attend races and do not even bother to race, choosing to enjoy the partylike atmosphere surrounding the event. As a group of Philadelphia messengers said to me after an alleycat in Boston, "We didn't race, but we came for the party."

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 had alternative rides for messengers with less interest in competing and more interesting in drinking. This is analogous to Donnelly and Young's (1985) analysis of rugby—players must balance the desire to win and the thrill of competition with the contradictory norms of fraternal bonding and inebriation.

ALLEYCATS: WHAT THEY MEAN

The Conditions for Reduced Reflexivity

Durkheimian rituals require a common focus of attention, common emotional mood, high ecological concentration, and fast interaction pace (Allan 1998; Collins 2004). It is by gathering together and performing the same acts with one's fellows that

the bonds of solidarity—and, ultimately, reality itself—are formed. Additionally, network density, past ritual encounters, and anticipation all factor into a successful ritual setting (Allan 1998). Preexisting social bonds, foreknowledge of what to expect, and excitement over the coming ritual facilitate the actions about to take place. As 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” (p. 134). As in Collins’s (2004) anecdotes on New Year’s Eve celebrations, assumptions about what is acceptable behavior allow certain social gatherings to break down walls of decorum and encourage interactions that focus attention and synchronize 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” (p. 3). Alleycats meet all of the requirements needed to “charge up” emotions.

Lifestyle messengers have a high network density; they spend most of their after-hour relaxation, parties, and weekends with other messengers. The negative portrayals in the mass media, coupled with discriminatory and often hostile treatment by drivers, office workers, and security guards, add to the effects of this network density. Fights with drivers, or at least the potential for fights, are ever present. Reilly (2000) chronicles countless physical confrontations with drivers. Andreas, a messenger of four years, in speaking about his bike lock (a six-pound chain worn around his waist), said, “Whenever I think about not wearing it I find myself in a situation where I need it [as a weapon].” As Efren, who stopped messengering after three years, told me about his confrontations with drivers, “That is one of the reasons I stopped being a messenger. I was getting stressed out all the time, fighting everyone.” Messengers have a sense of struggling against the world—“us against them.” One night after work, for example, I recounted a story of a delivery van driver who had intentionally swerved his vehicle into me. He bumped my rear wheel and passed so close that his side-view mirror smacked me across the back. If I had fallen over, the odds of being run over by his vehicle or the car to my left were exceptionally high. I told Henry that I could not believe that someone could hold another’s life in such low regard. To my story Henry, with five years of experience on the road, replied, “Can’t believe it? Why not? This shit happens every day!” For Henry, the generalized other is a threat to the messenger’s life.

Socializing with other messengers is seen as a necessity because they are the only other people who can understand what a messenger lives through—Goffman’s (1963) concept of “the own.” A messenger who held an elevator door open for me one day explained that he did not mind waiting for me because “other messengers have always looked out for me.” A “community of messengers” protecting each other is a common thread in conversations. For Andreas, a well-educated and politically radical messenger, the community aspects of being a messenger were his primary reasons for continuing to work as a courier. In stressing the bond between couriers, Henry told me about his trip to Budapest with several other New York messengers.

“We rolled up in there didn’t know anything about the city. Didn’t know anyone. We went to this one area where messengers were hanging out and in minutes we had an apartment key: ‘Stay as long as you like,’ directions, stuff to do.”

When messengers hang out, they spend a great deal of time discussing past races. Accidents, amazing feats, and wild behavior are common topics. For example, on several occasions the various head injuries of one particularly accident-prone messenger were discussed and laughed over. Likewise, messengers who performed in some special (or exceedingly dangerous) way were often brought up. For example, during the final sprint of one race, the second-position rider reached forward and grabbed the seat post of the leader, pulling him back as he propelled himself to the lead. Similarly, a well-known messenger who always worked on a road bike showed up at a race on a track bike and, much to the dismay of everyone, managed to win the race. In Henry’s words, “The guy’s just a maniac.” Culley (2002) mentions a Chicago messenger who raced an entire alleycat against the flow of traffic and earned himself the title of “world’s most dangerous messenger.” Charles, a former Boston messenger, recounted a race where people were jumping off ramps on their track bikes only to crash into the ground. A group of us laughed as he talked about the wild accidents he saw that night. In addition to the race itself, the chaos surrounding the race receives the most attention. For instance, during a race in Montreal nearly every New York messenger dropped out of the race after the second checkpoint and rode to a strip club instead. On returning to New York, Henry repeated this story often with much glee. These talks keep past ritual encounters active in the memories of messengers. They also lead to anticipation of future races. The positive comments from Henry, a messenger generally prone to deep cynicism, illustrates this point: “I know this sounds cheesy, but I love traveling to other towns and racing. It is just so much fun!”

During a race, the messengers’ concentration is exceptionally high because the issue is not simply winning but actually staying alive. A bicycle—a simple, light-weight machine propelled on two thin tires—offers no external protection (with the exception of a helmet, which few messengers wear). Racing through city traffic (e.g., running red lights, dodging cars, missing pedestrians, avoiding potholes and other obstacles) requires a complete dedication of the senses. In fact, urban cycling has less to do with leg power and much more to do with the ability to predict the behavior of traffic and calculate one’s own trajectory within that traffic. In this sense, a racer’s mind should always be at peak performance. Because bicycles are so much smaller than cars, drivers are often unaware of cyclists on the road. Inserted into the mix of heavy, fast-moving cars, trucks, and buses, bikers must navigate motor vehicles erratically changing lanes, accelerating, and stopping. Additionally, the roadway is lined with parked vehicles. Their doors can open unexpectedly, sending the biker headfirst to the pavement. At every intersection, pedestrians are poised to run across the road if they see a break in the traffic; with eyes glued on the cars, they often do not even notice a bicycle speeding toward them. The cyclist’s line of travel, therefore, is in continual revision. As Jay wrote in a poem about messenger work,

“I calculate angles and make my move” (Moglia 2000:10). Or as Joe explained about his seemingly kamikaze behavior in traffic, “If I see a line, I go for it.”

The mood of an alleycat is festive competition. Many racers have no intentions of winning. An alleycat is more about having fun with fellow messengers and demonstrating your skills in urban cycling. Prizes occupy an interesting space in races. The value of the awards provides a definite motivating factor in personal justifications for racing. The \$500 cash prize for the “anti-NAC3” alleycat, for instance, provided lively discussion throughout the day of the race. For a team race in Boston, a group of New Yorkers spent several weeks training because they wanted the first prize—a \$400 set of wheels for each rider on the team. After the race, there were hard feelings when the team did not take first place. Conversely, prizes are mentioned far less in recounting past races. As Rob, a veteran messenger and organizer of several prominent races, said, “Winning doesn’t matter. It is about having fun. No one remembers or cares who wins.” Or as Arnold, a former New York City messenger, exclaimed at the 2002 Halloween alleycat, “I don’t want to win. I just want to get drunk and hopefully cause some damage to this city.”

During my time as a messenger, Vinny, a longtime New York messenger, set up several “fun rides.” While technically races, Vinny’s rides specifically stressed fun over competition. After one race, there was a dispute about whether a rider should be disqualified. As one racer screamed at another, Vinny calmly asked, “Did you have fun? Then what are you worried about? The point was to have fun.” Despite the organizer’s claim of a “fun ride,” the grand prize—365 bottles of beer—certainly prompted many riders to take the event very seriously. But even “serious” riders have fun, and, with the exception of the one disgruntled racer, there appeared to be no misgivings among the other messengers about not winning. In fact, Jonathan—a courier who often places very well in races—commented after an alleycat where he finished in the lower percentile, “That was the most fun I’ve ever had at a race.”

The start and finish of a race are crowded areas littered with messengers, bikes, and bags. People mill about drinking and socializing. During the race the ecological concentration (i.e., the density of ritual participants) is generally low, but often racers ride in small packs and work together to force their way through crowded intersections. The interaction pace (i.e., the rate at which participants interact) during a race is slow, but before and after the race it is fast. The prerace and postrace events offer bookends to the race itself—anticipation of the race about to start and recounting the race just finished. Mitchell (1983) illustrates that such socialization allows subjective experiences to be shared and understood within a group context. As Mitchell stresses, it is not the mountains themselves that fill the climber with awe and the pride of accomplishment; it is the time climbers spend with other mountaineers where meanings are truly made. Likewise, it is not the race itself that is important, but the social interactions that accompany it. Moreover, the race itself is a social interaction that embodies the values and meanings of the workday. As the debate over open-versus-closed courses and winning-versus-just-racing shows, meaning for

the lifestyle messenger is not fixed. Just as Mitchell's mountaineers debate the various climbing ideologies, new technologies, routes of ascent, and so forth, messengers negotiate a contested field. However, just as mountain climbers—despite their different orientations—internalize an idea of what mountain climbing is and what being a mountain climber means, so do messengers internalize ideas about bike messengering.

Dampened Reflexivity and the Weight of Society

For Durkheim ([1912] 1995) the function of the ritual was to provide the voice of God—to make one's actions and behaviors appear supranatural and beyond question. The reflexive nature of ordinary human thought stands as a barrier to this process. According to Allan (1998), reality construction requires the dampening of reflexive thought. As Collins (2004) states, "Action itself always reduces reflexivity, and induces a belief in the symbols and symbolically frames objects that fill out attention at that moment" (p. 97). The work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and Lyng (1990) demonstrates how the intense focus of attention found in events like alleycats results in reduced reflexivity. Compounding this dampening of reflexivity are the social interactions in which they are entwined. These actions do not occur in isolation but instead take place within the group. As Durkheim ([1912] 1995) notes, "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" (p. 232). Further, these actions are idealized expressions of messenger work—all the danger and excitement without dispatchers and clients getting in the way. As Durkheim commented about religion, "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" (p. 227).

Consider, for example, some scenes from *Monster Track IV*. There are over 120 track bikes lying on the ground or against the fences of Tompkins Square Park on a chilly Saturday afternoon. Over 120 messengers are standing in a line on the grass about fifty feet from their bikes. Some people are joking and talking. Others are staring straight ahead, their expressions lost in anticipation. The race will be started *Le Mans*-style with racers sprinting to their bikes. My stomach is in my throat. The countdown starts; the messenger who set up the race, standing on a park bench, yells, "Three, two, one, go!" By the count of two, every messenger takes off. People are jumping fences, screaming, tripping, trying madly to reach their bike first. On their bikes, people peel off in different directions. There are four checkpoints for this race. The riders can go to them in any order. The only rules are your bike must be a track bike and you must have your manifest signed at each checkpoint. Barring those two stipulations, whoever makes it back to the park first wins.

I head north up Avenue A. There are about thirty riders in my immediate sight. As we turn left onto 14th Street and then right onto First Avenue, bystanders stop dead in their tracks. We are a swarm of men and women speeding through the city,

not stopping for a single red light, weaving in and out of cars, screaming at pedestrians to get out of the way. By the time I hit 80th Street, I'm fatigued. The pack has thinned out, but I still see racers in front of me, and I can hear the churning of chains beside me. When I get to the first checkpoint, there are bikes thrown across the ground. Racers are crowded around the organizer signing the manifests. With their manifest signed, people jump back onto their bikes and are off again. Three checkpoints later, I'm racing from the financial district back to Tompkins. I am delirious. I've stopped thinking about anything—save for finishing. A messenger from D.C., lost in Manhattan, is riding behind me to find his way through Chinatown and the Lower East Side. I see a messenger from Boston a block ahead of me, and I strain to put more power behind each pedal stroke. Flying up Avenue B, I try my best to keep my speed as I work my way through red lights. I know I cannot win this race. There will be no prizes or money for me at the finish line. Still, for the last hour, I have taken more risks than I would on any given workday. At the finish line there are no cheers. No spectators but the messengers who already have finished. As the last of the racers comes in, people relax, drink beers, and talk among themselves.

This is deep play—the ordering of meanings within an encompassing structure that extends beyond instrumental rationalization (Geertz 1973b). For Geertz, the Balinese ideals of “death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, [and] chance” are expressed within the cockfight (p. 443). Alleycats should be read in the same manner. What it means *to be* a messenger is displayed and enacted at these events. Edward, in justifying the actions of couriers to outsiders, stated, “You don't know about our life and how we live. . . . This is our life.” These races portray excitement and autonomy. Further, performed within a state of flow, the messenger can feel the race as something outside his or her own creation. Alleycats are not simply subjectively meaningful. Created through social interactions, they take on an objective quality—Berger and Luckmann's (1966) reification. That is, the messenger partakes in a social world where the thrills and dangers of racing are taken for granted. He or she shares these experiences with others, and these experiences therefore become concrete. At the same time, this bond is not simply cognitive and rational. To the contrary, produced in a state of flow, it has a corporeal quality.

With regard to the flow experience, Jason (1999) explained, “All extraneous thoughts have left me. My mind is in such a state of absolute clarity that I don't even have to think about my next move. My bike moves by itself perfectly in tune with my instincts” (p. 9). 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. This is the “demon of oratorical inspiration” discussed by Durkheim ([1912] 1995:212). 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 himself or herself. “It is then no longer a mere individual who speaks but a group incarnated and personified” (p. 212).

On a personal level, I experienced both extremes of this process. Enveloped in the emotions of the group and astounded by the skills of those around me, I found myself in awe of what we were doing at Monster Track. Like the title of Culley's (2002) book about his life as a messenger, I felt as if I were part of an "immortal class." I felt that we all understood a secret about this city. We could travel faster than anyone around us. While others cowered before red lights, we simply flew past them. Where others feared the cars roaring beside them, we just swerved before them. I experienced the group solidarity that Collins (2004) attributes to ritual participation. Conversely, as a sociologist, I was forced to step outside this reality. As outsiders passed through the park, I listened to their comments. They did not see us as immortals. To them we were strangely dressed men and women playing with children's toys. Our skills were useless to them, and our bravery simply foolhardy. These outsiders were disconnected from our collective effervescence and consequently did not share in the reality we created.

Designating the Sacred

The discrepancy between outsiders and the image messengers hold of themselves—"New York's craziest," "New York's fastest," "outlaws," "rebels without brakes"—arises not only from the ritualized solidification of the social world. Equally important is the ritual's ability to consecrate objects into sacred symbols. Rituals transmute the collective effervescence onto the objects of the ritual act. "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" (Durkheim [1912] 1995:230). Further, we can comprehend this religious force "only in connection with a concrete object whose reality we feel intensely" (p. 221). As Collins (2004) notes, symbols act like batteries, carrying the energy of the ritual into everyday life. By recalling feelings after the assembly is over, symbols keep emotions "perpetually alive and fresh" (Durkheim [1912] 1995:222). For Geertz (1973a), the ritual's primary importance is its ability to extend beyond the actual performance and influence mundane life.

Bicycles, messenger bags, clothing, manifests, and so forth all become totems to the messenger who races. The fact I rode a track bike caused confusion among people who would have otherwise (and rightly) labeled me as a rookie. On several occasions, messengers did double takes when they discovered I was on a track bike. As one messenger I had 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 rookie would be riding a track bike. Over the last several years, track bikes have grown in popularity among nonmessengers. Adam, a messenger of six years, snidely commented one day, "Track bikes are trendy now." For Adam track bikes are a distinguishing feature of a messenger—they are a "membership symbol" (Collins 2004)—and their use among "civilians" was mildly irritating. As Audrey

told me, "Every time I see someone on a track bike I feel like I should know them." One evening after work, I was hanging out with a group of messengers at Columbus Circle when 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."

The sacredness of bicycles can be further illustrated. Eight messengers and I had met in Central Park for a day of riding. On our way up to the Bronx, we rode to a statue for a picture. We all hung our bikes across the 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 on the impromptu art. José, one of the younger members of the group, remarked, "Beautiful." We were not simply looking at welded steel, two wheels, and some gears. We were staring at something bigger—our livelihood, our recreation, our very lives. *Urban Death Maze* offers "The Biker's Creed" (2000): "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" (p. 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 hostility and humor that experienced messengers exude toward neophytes on track bikes is an effort to protect the object from the desecration of outsiders. As Henry huffed on 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, I occasionally heard veteran messengers speak negatively about rookies who too quickly adopted various symbols of the messenger. For instance, one evening Henry jokingly commented that two rookies had arrived at the party 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 bags and radios 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 important 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.

The effervescence of the alleycat not only occurs with objects but spills over onto ideas as well. For example, speed and a disregard for traffic laws can be thought of as a purely economic matter during the workday. Alleycats were created to settle

arguments about who could claim rights as the fastest messenger. As Johnny, an organizer of the first Monster Track race, states, “This is what we do for a living, you know. . . . 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” (quoted in Sutherland 2001). For lifestyle messengers, the behaviors valorized in races become values in their own right—the values of excitement and autonomy. As one messenger has explained about alleycats: “I could care less about who’s the best courier. I just want to know who’s the fastest” (Nesbit 2000:20). At a race in Boston, several longtime local messengers disputed the legitimacy of a less-established racer’s claims of being an actual messenger (i.e., that he was working as a messenger). In speaking about this conflict, Joan scoffed, “He’s fast as shit! What does it matter if he’s a messenger? He’s a fast urban cyclist.” Speed and the ability to handle traffic are defining aspects of how messengers view themselves. For the lifestyle messenger (at least in New York), these are not simply traits that help them earn money; they are traits that exemplify who they really are (see also Wheaton 2004). This is illustrated by the fact that messengers always break traffic laws—even when they are not working and are in no particular hurry. For example, when inviting me to hang out one weekend, Stan explained, “We are trying to do stuff on the weekends: races, whatever, trying to keep stuff going. . . . Ride around and cause havoc.”

Alleycats have become institutionalized. Within this institutionalization, formerly ethereal ideals have been dramatized into a concrete reality. When a new courier enters the social world of the lifestyle messenger, he or she enters into an objectified cosmos (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In this way, the values in the race are carried back into the workday, and the values of the workday are returned to the races (see Stewart 2004). Like Geertz’s (1973a) religious performances, they are models *of* and models *for* reality. This is a dynamic feature. The race, which was originally just a reflection of work, has come to define messenger life. For instance, during the workday Rick, a messenger of three years, would often race informally against one of his foes, an older messenger named Greg. “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. The rationality of the race (“who’s the fastest”) has superseded the rationality of the occupation (“who’s the best courier”). The essential point here is that these values are not produced simply through cognition (i.e., language) but also through the emotional charge acted out in alleycats and symbolized through its totems. That is, while riding fast and aggressively has a simply symbolic quality—proving oneself as a skilled messenger—there is also an affective component. Riding like one is racing (when not actually racing) brings the effervescence of the race into mundane life. Speeding through streets, messengers reaffirm to themselves that they are part of the group. Just as Christians reading the Bible in isolation recall the power of the congregation, messengers swerving between cars insert these actions into the

schema of their social world. Produced collectively, and reaffirmed individually, messengers can thus feel confident that their actions have meaning that is in no need of conscious introspection.

CONCLUSION

Of New York City's two thousand messengers, a few hundred have developed a unique social world comprising a distinctive messenger lifestyle. For this smaller set of messengers, races serve as rituals that reflect and shape messenger values. More important, these races produce affect-meaning, allowing messenger values to be internalized as objectively real. Alleycats induce in the participants a state of flow. Although flow is an intrinsically enjoyable experience, the analysis must go further than that. The spontaneity of the "I" produces a sense of hyperreality—separate and more intimate than normal reflexive thought (Lyng 1990). Social interactions in this state are equally unquestioned. The actions of the group are perceived as instinctual reactions. The behavior of the group is seen not as arbitrary but as necessary: its members are behaving in the only meaningful way possible. The "way we do things" becomes the "way things *are*." As Edward stated, "This is how we live." For Edward, there is no need to elaborate, and not even the shattering of his own femur from a collision with a car can bring his actions into question.

This process is compounded by the designation of sacred symbols. These symbols serve a dual purpose. They transfer the affect-meaning of the ritual into nonritual life. The bicycle, for instance, becomes a symbol of autonomy and excitement. The racer comes to associate the bike with races. This is an essential point of Allan (1998), Collins (2004), and Durkheim ([1912] 1995). "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" (Durkheim [1912] 1995:221). The reality of the races can, therefore, be recalled through the image of the bike. Symbols in turn heighten the ritual experience. Bicycles gathered at a race site increase anticipation and focus attention. This is seen in the contemplation of the bicycles dangling from the statue and the adaptation of the U.S. Marines' rifle creed to bikes.

In focusing on affect-meaning, I have sought to highlight an often-overlooked aspect of reality production. The postmodern critique has exposed inherent problems with the formation of stable identities and meanings. However, despite such theorization of fragmentation and multiplication, in *real life* people do continue to function. At the social world level, I proposed with Allan that meaning construction should be understood as not simply cognitive: it is a function of reduced reflexivity and the emotional charge given to actions, objects, and ideas within this state. Bike messengers provide one example, among countless other social worlds, where individuals maintain stable identities. Through alleycats, couriers develop affective bonds to not only each other but the beliefs and values of the messenger lifestyle. This nonreflexive acceptance of the group's norms anchored in emotionality promotes the maintenance of firm identities. In analyzing culture in this way, we can understand how people in the postmodern world still manage to forge meaningful lives.

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