

ALLEYCATS, FIXIES, AND DOUBLE RUSHES:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF NEW YORK CITY BIKE MESSENGERS

by

JEFFREY L. KIDDER

(Under the Direction of James J. Dowd)

ABSTRACT

This thesis covers four main areas. First, using the concept of global cities I explain why bicycle messengers came into existence and continue to exist within the information age. Second, I provide a brief history of the occupation, explain how the job works, and describe key aspects of messenger style. Third, I explore the dynamics of the job and offer an explanation for why such a vibrant and social world has developed around an often disparaged occupation. Fourth, the ritual importance of illegal street races is analyzed. This thesis seeks to highlight how global capitalism has created a pocket of resistance. Most importantly, these pockets of resistance are connected to a deeper understanding of reality construction. The rituals and sacred objects found within the messenger's social world counteract the pervasive doubt produced by the rationalization of the postmodern world.

INDEX WORDS: Bike messengers, Bicycles, Rationalization, Alienation, Rituals, Postmodernism, Spontaneous action, Flow, Edgework, Self-identity, Meaning construction

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the New York City bike messenger scene and all the people who shared their thoughts and time with me. Especially, Jason (for being an all around good dude), Ian (for saying such horrible things over the radio), and Shaye (for insights and smiles). Also, New York would have been far less enjoyable without Los Guerreros Sin Frenos: Alex, Alfred, François, Freddy, Hugo, Johnny, Jorge, Kike, and Shawn.

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I. INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY BIKE MESSENGERS?

My first exposure to messengers came in 2000 when I moved to Boston after graduating college. When I joined the Fenway Gold's Gym I was told about their spin class (a chic aerobic exercise involving stationary bicycles). "We have a spin class taught by a bike messenger. I don't know if you've seen them yet, but they are crazy!" Using a bike messenger as a selling point for an exercise class is an interesting tactic. Bicycle messengers are not aerobics instructors. Gold's Gym was attempting to cash in on the cultural capital of messengers. This is telling because it assumes that messengers have cultural capital. Coming from Greensboro, North Carolina, I was not aware of the messenger's currency.

It turns out that during my year in Boston, messengers frequently overlapped my life. When I went to punk shows they would be there on strange looking bikes with no brakes. It soon became clear that messenger's had a certain social status. They had the image of outlaws. I would hear alternative-type girls commenting about them, "Boys on bikes are so cute!" Or, as one of my friends snidely commented, "In Boston bike messengers are rock stars. They all hang out together. They have their own parties. They look down on you if you're not one of them." While my friend's remarks are perhaps a bit extreme, they do reflect the essence of what Gold's Gym had attempted to sell me: a sanitized glimpse into a wild and exciting life.

The more I came across bicycle messengers in Boston it became clear that messengers exist in a unique and vibrant social world. As I walked through downtown I would see these hardy young men and women speeding across intersections undeterred by cars, pedestrians, red lights, or freezing rain. I would see these same messengers gathered together eating lunch at Country Life or relaxing in Winthrop Square.¹ I heard stories about races these messengers held

¹ Country Life offers an all-you-can-eat vegetarian buffet, and is a popular restaurant among punks and bike messengers in Boston. Winthrop Square is a small plaza in the heart of Boston's business district, and functions as the official meeting place of messengers throughout the workday.

to see who was the fastest. As I casually sought to learn more about bicycle messengers it became clear that Boston messengers were not an anomaly. From Japan to Dublin to New York messengers across the globe participate within an international messenger ‘scene.’

There are countless sociological questions which could be asked of bicycle messengers. This thesis addresses four. First, using Sassen’s (1994) concept of global cities I explain why bike messengers came into existence and continue to exist within the information age (section III). Second, I provide a brief history of the occupation, explain how the job works, and describe key aspects of messenger style (section IV). Third, I explore the dynamics of the job and offer an explanation for why such a vibrant social world has developed around an often disparaged occupation (section V). The experience of alienation is central to my approach to this question. Following Batiuk and Sacks (1981), I view alienation as the overt constraint of action. I propose that messengers experience ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Through the flow experience bike messenger work allows for spontaneous action. Further, this spontaneity allows actions to feel ‘hyper-real’ (Lyng 1990) and, thus, counteracts the malaise of a ‘disenchanted world’ (see Weber 1970). In the fourth and final section of the analysis, I take up what I consider to be the most important aspect of the bicycle messenger social world—illegal street races (section VI). Using Geertz’s (1973) idea of deep play these races can be understood as morality tales. In other words, the values and meanings of the larger messenger world are reenacted on a smaller and idealized scale. Building on the work of Allan (1998), I argue that these races function as Durkheimian rituals (see Durkheim 1995). During these races the “I” and “me” fuse, reducing reflexivity and allowing social action to take on the ‘voice of God.’ Ultimately, by addressing these four issues my project has three main goals. First, through ethnographic details I wish to describe a unique and interesting social world. In the simplest sense, then, this thesis continues the tradition laid out by Blumer (1969). This is to say, an empirical sociology must focus on the processes of human group life. As Geertz (1973) has argued, the ethnographer’s duty is to record the myriad of ways in which humans live out their lives. Second, I seek to highlight how global capitalism has created a pocket of resistance. This is to say, bike

messengers, while serving the needs of world finance, operate outside Weber's iron cage. Messengers are by no means the only example of this, but in studying messengers we have a better understanding of capitalism, the alienation arising from it, and possible responses to it (see Batiuk and Sacks 1981). Third, and most importantly, I hope to connect this pocket of resistance to a deeper understanding of reality construction. In other words, the rituals and sacred objects found within the messenger's social world counteract the pervasive doubt produced by the overt rationalization of the postmodern world (see Allan 1998). Going back to the first goal, I hope to show that in recording people's lives we come to understand that despite the cultural forces tearing apart meaning, people still manage to live *meaningful* lives. By studying the rituals and symbols of the messenger world I seek to illuminate how people produce and reproduce reality in social action. The sign may be free-floating, as Derrida (1976) argues, but people's lives are still planted firmly on the ground.

II. METHODOLOGY

Positioning Myself as an Ethnographer

The research for this paper was conducted in New York City beginning in the summer of 2002. For approximately one year, I was employed as a bike courier for two messenger companies. The first company, Sprint Courier, 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. Being at these two companies allowed me to experience the extremes of employment within the messenger industry. While many messengers work for larger companies, the messenger industry is equally comprised of small 'fly-by-night' companies. As one *New York Times* writer noted, "Most of the services, which came and went almost as fast as the bikers rode, did not even bother to list themselves in the telephone book" (Tommason 1991: A1). Messengers often debate the various advantages and disadvantages of working for smaller or larger companies. In general, smaller companies are considered better. Working at these two very different companies allowed me to compare the extremes of the occupation.

Far more important to this research than the work hours themselves was the non-work time I was able to spend with messengers. It is during social gatherings and other off-work events that bicycle messengers discuss, debate, and display the 'what, when, where, and why' of being a messenger. I would hang 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 this social world. I was not viewed as an outsider. I was, however, viewed as a rookie, and such a distinction is 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 cannot know how two veteran messengers talk among themselves. Conversely, as a rookie I was exposed to the socialization process—the process of becoming a non-rookie.²

Because of my background in punk rock and lifelong interests in bicycles I did not feel like an outsider.³ While messengers should not be conflated with punk rockers, in many cities there is a high degree of overlap. As mentioned above, my first exposure to bicycle messengers was at punk shows in Boston. In a city like Boston where punks and bikes so fluidly mix, the occupation seemed like a logical extension of my larger punk values. In such a city, my personal conversion to many of the aspects of ‘urban cycling’ came completely naturally. For example, long before I became a messenger I remember getting into an argument with a fellow bike rider about ‘responsible riding.’ To his claim that I should be following traffic laws I snidely replied, “If I wanted to obey traffic laws I would drive a car.”⁴ Unlike Boston, messengers in New York do not share such an obvious connection with punk. Many of the messengers I met in New York, however, were somewhat associated with the punk music scene. Perhaps more important, messenger work, with its renegade image, shares an elective affinity with the ideals and attitudes of punk.

Mitchell (1993) has shown a need for the emic research practiced in this ethnography. According to Mitchell, it is not a lack of data that results in failed field work. It is an imbalance

² In this ethnography I do not explicitly detail the socialization process. Conversely, the ethnography itself is the result of socialization. The opinions and feelings captured in this ethnography have been framed by this process. This is to say, when veteran messengers spoke to me they spoke to me as a rookie. They did not simply speak what was on their mind, but what was on their mind was influenced by my status as a rookie. What is detailed below, therefore, would be fundamentally different if I was an awkward journalist running around with a pen and paper taking notes, or if I was a seasoned veteran. In both scenarios the content of the ethnography would be inherently changed (see Mitchell, 1993).

³ My participation in the segment of punk rock known as straight-edge, however, must be illuminated. Straight-edges abstain from cigarettes, alcohol, and illegal drugs. Such abstinence in a social world which highly values intoxication (see section VI), obviously creates a certain distance from myself and other participants. By regularly going to parties and bars I did, however, do my best to reduce this distance.

⁴ Perry (1995), a former professional cyclist, bicycle shop owner, and advocate of alternative transportation, provides “assertive rules of the road” (263). Among them: “Always remember that humanpower is more sacred than motorpower.” “Don’t allow cars to pass and turn in front of you... Speed up and force them to stop, or bang on their fenders and roof to make them think they’ve hit you.” “Obey stop signs and traffic rules only when necessary for public safety, to prevent ticketing, or according to customs of the road.” And, “Carry two forms of identification, your real ID for emergencies, false ID for police.”

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). This is to say, by actively participating in the life-world of those I am studying I have a far greater grasp of the ‘data’ than someone who has not lived these experiences (see Smith 1990). As Nelson (1969) has claimed, ethnographers can only understand actions through successful participation in those actions. At the same time, many messengers will probably contend that I am not a ‘real messenger.’ This could very well be true. I am perhaps no more than an interloper or an impostor. To such a criticism I can only offer the reply that what I offer here are not facts but interpretations (Geertz 1973). These interpretations, while arising from emic understanding, are etic. As a sociologist my analysis attempts to look beyond ‘native accounts’ and provide a more thorough understanding (see Denzin 1989). Ultimately, I cannot offer an objective account—only a well-analyzed one.

During the course of my fieldwork most of the messengers I came in contact with were unaware of my research. Messengers with whom I had recurring contact were informed of my sociological interest. To protect the identities of the various messengers discussed in this research, pseudonyms are used, the exception being quotes from messengers published in other sources. Data was collected through informal interviews collected during the workday, races, parties, and other social gatherings. In nearly every social situation couriers freely discuss various aspects of messenger life. As such, engaging couriers about their social world was remarkably easy and unobtrusive. Responses were jotted down in private and compiled in my fieldnotes in the evening. In total, my fieldnotes consist of 130 typed pages covering 272 days of participant observation.

In addition to participant observation and the informal interviews arising from participation, I have supplemented traditional ethnographic work with historical and contemporary documentation (see Strauss 1978). In the course of 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 are the New York Bike Messenger Association's (NYBMA) ten issues of *Urban Death Maze*, a 'zine⁵ produced from 1998 to 2001. Equally important are Travis Culley's (2002) and Rebecca "Lambchop" Reilly's (2000) memoirs about their lives as messengers.⁶ In addition, books, articles, and documentaries produced for mainstream audiences were also utilized. Of these resources the *New York Times*' plethora of articles on messengers proved immensely insightful. Peter Sutherland's (2001) wonderful documentary on New York City messengers was equally useful. The data for this paper is primarily derived from direct participant observation; however, quotations from other sources are used to reinforce my findings.

Situating My Ethnography

In discussing the validity of the present research, several issues must be raised. First, defining the term 'bike messenger' can be difficult. Since their invention, bicycles have been used for deliveries. This paper is therefore interested in what Reilly (2000) has dubbed the "modern bike messenger." The modern bicycle messenger is defined by providing 'on-demand' service. This is to say, bicycle messengers do not follow routes or schedules in the manner of UPS or Federal Express. The modern bicycle messenger can deliver any item under twenty-five pounds⁷ to any destination within Manhattan in less than a half-hour. Using this definition the

⁵ The NYBMA's production of *Urban Death Maze* provides an interesting connection to punk rock. 'Zines are originally a punk phenomena. The word "zine" is short for magazine. 'Zines are typically low budget, do-it-yourself, photocopied publications. While cheaply printing and distributing information (for example: a community newsletter) is common among nearly any group looking to disseminate information, 'zines have a distinctly different aesthetic criteria and a focus around not simply spreading facts, but advocating a lifestyle. Aside from its unwavering focus on bicycles and bike messengers, *Urban Death Maze*'s layout, image choices, and writing style would fit seamlessly in any punk rocker's 'zine collection.

⁶ There is an interesting controversy surrounding these two works. Reilly's book, *Nerves of Steel*, chronicles her eight years working (and living) as messenger. Despite its depth and detail Reilly has received virtually no mainstream attention. Her life's work, so to speak, was ignored by publishers, and she was forced to self-publish her writing. Culley's book, *The Immortal Class*, is a well-written account of the author's single year of messenger work. Culley has earned a rather high degree of critical acclaim. His book is readily available in major bookstores and was reviewed in the mainstream press. In the opinion of numerous messengers, Culley, a rookie, stole the publishing rights that truly belonged to Reilly. Despite this controversy, from a sociological perspective both books offer valuable insights.

⁷ Twenty-five pounds is a rather arbitrary number, but there are obvious limitations to the weight a messenger can carry. Most messenger companies consider anything over 15 pounds a 'truck job.' However, at Sprint, for instance, bikers regularly performed these deliveries. In my year as a messenger I delivered a 5x3 foot envelop (large flat packages are referred to as 'sails' and 'kites'), a box weighing well over 30 pounds, and a seemingly endless amount

thousands of individuals delivering food by bicycle in New York are not included in this discussion of bicycle messengers.⁸ Nor are the Western Union bikers who delivered telegraphs in most major U.S. cities at the turn of the century.⁹

Second, messengers in every city have unique messenger scenes. Of course, there are numerous similarities, but there are equally important differences. With this in mind, the generalizability of this research for messengers across the country (or world), may be limited. At the same time, however, my exposure to messengers from Boston, Washington, DC, and Philadelphia seems to indicate that the attitudes of resistance documented in this ethnography are, in fact, present throughout the worldwide messenger scene.

Third, the vast majority of my research is far removed from the lives of the ‘average’ New York courier. For the most part, I have focused on what I have dubbed ‘lifestyle messengers’—individuals who carry their messenger identity into all aspects of their lives. Against this concept of lifestyle messenger is the ‘occupational messenger’—individuals whose identity as messengers stops and starts with the workday. The difference between lifestyle messengers and occupational messengers is discussed in greater detail in section V. The most obvious distinction between lifestyle messengers and occupational messengers is racing. Basically, lifestyle messengers race (or at least socialize at races); occupational messengers do not. This will be discussed in section VI. It must be noted that the distinction I have drawn between occupational and lifestyle messengers is a distinction purposely avoided by many

of heavy model portfolios. A few messengers in New York ride cargo bikes. Cargo bikes have a special design involving a compartment for transporting several hundred pounds of cargo.

⁸ There is, in fact, a rather high degree of antagonism between food delivery bikers and bicycle messengers (see Reilly 2000). According to Matt, a messenger of several years, “They are the only bikers in this city who don’t look before they turn.” On one occasion Charles, a long-time messenger, filled in for the restaurant his wife worked at. Charles said of the experience, “It sucked. It was like getting demoted.” In explaining the story Charles and Roy, another veteran messenger, mocked the riding styles of food deliverers. Conversely, after two years of messenger work, Joan switched to food delivery and preferred it.

⁹ Reilly (2000) has shown that Western Union’s bikers functioned in a similar fashion to the modern messenger. This is to say, they not only delivered telegrams, but also picked up prescriptions and ran errands for customers. At the same time, however, they filled a different economic niche (see section III), and therefore a distinction must be made. It is interesting to note, however, that in several cities Western Union used bike deliveries well into the twentieth century. For example, the Soviet Embassy in Washington, DC used Western Union bikers to send encoded messages during the 1962 missile crisis (Oberdorfer, 1989).

messengers. As Jonathan, a veteran messenger told me, “It doesn’t matter. We’re all doing the same job in the end.” While the language I am using violates the spirit of this claim, I believe that such distinctions are too blatant to ignore.

A Typical Day

During my year in New York I lived in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. While my living in Williamsburg was coincidental, the neighborhood has historically been populated by messengers (Reilly 2000). I usually started working between nine and ten in the morning. However, many messengers start work before eight, but others might not start until the afternoon. Like many messengers I never took an official lunch break. I would grab food when I got a chance. Although I never took an official lunch break many days were punctuated with long periods of inactivity (waiting on “stand-by”). Some days I never got a single break while other days I was able to spend hours relaxing in Madison Square Park or reading in the public library. I usually ended my day between five and six. On slow days, however, I left earlier, and on busy days I might not leave until after seven.

Throughout the day messenger work is largely solitary. Because of New York’s immense size and huge messenger population couriers constantly cross paths. However, I might go several days without seeing a messenger with whom I was socially acquainted. Unless I was exceptionally rushed, when I did cross paths with an acquaintance (or a talkative stranger for that matter), I would spend a few minutes riding in the same direction chatting. Many of my informal interviews took place in this manner. On a personal note, working in an occupation where I was constantly subjected to road raging drivers, upset secretaries, and maladjusted building personnel, running into a friendly face, even if only for a second, provided a wonderful respite from the stress and frustration that often accompanies the job. For New York messengers, most socializing takes place after work. In the warmer months I would spend my evenings in Tompkin’s Square Park with other couriers relaxing after a day of work. On most Friday nights I would go to Sophie’s, an East Village bar that, like Tompkin’s, functions as an

official messenger hangout. Again, it is in these social settings that most of my interviews were conducted.

I moved to New York in what I considered to be excellent physical condition. This conditioning, however, proved to be inadequate. During my first few weeks of work I literally did nothing except ride, eat, and sleep. I also managed to damage my knees (a problem that continues to haunt me). This exceptional fatigue (and painful knees) was exacerbated by my original efforts to prove to 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 naive rookies eager to prove their mettle. I fell into the latter category and actually made more money by scaling down my hours. Still, even 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.¹⁰ It should be mentioned that while messengers are known for their ‘courier appetites’¹¹ and many have noted experiencing strong fatigue (see Reilly 2000; Culley 2002), other messengers seem far less affected by the workload.

¹⁰ The reader should not be misled by my vegetarian and (somewhat) nutritious diet. Most New York couriers are meat-eaters and not very concerned with healthy food. Cheap and greasy pizza, for instance, is a far more common lunch-time meal. I was told that one messenger’s favorite dinner consisted of four packets of Ramen Noodles and an entire stick of butter. At the same time, however, it must be noted that while a minority in New York, vegetarians are a notable presence in the worldwide messenger scene. The two largest races I attended (the Warriors Race, August 2002 and the NAC3, August 2003) offered vegetarian and vegan options at their accompanying parties/cookouts. As such, my dietary choices were not viewed as particularly strange or outlandish (perhaps simply foolish).

¹¹ Spike’s, a fast-food hotdog restaurant in Boston, has a running competition to see who can eat the most hotdogs. Basically, if you eat more hotdogs (or veggie dogs) than previous customers you get your picture placed on the wall and your meal for free. As of May 2003 the two “top dogs” were a female messenger from Philadelphia and a male messenger from New York. As another example, Scott, a Canadian messenger, considers his additional 1,300 caloric intake a business deduction, and after a 16 year battle, the courts finally agreed such a deduction is legal (“Fuel for Thought,” 1999).

Overall, I do not know if I can truly describe my feelings about working as a bike messenger. Many of my non-messenger friends do not get it. To them it just seems like a low-paying and dangerous job that only serves to make you cold, tired, and miserable. What these people do not see is what lies beyond that: the independence and the excitement. While this thesis touches on low pay, danger, and misery I focus far more on the other dimension. I would not discredit an analysis which centers on how messengers are taken advantage of or manipulated into serving corporate profit. Conversely, as the reader will see, I am far more interested in understanding why I found messenger work liberating. Why did I *not feel* exploited? Why did I willingly engage in an occupation which made me fall asleep before eleven at night, and why did I wake up happily each morning to do it again?

III. BICYCLE MESSENGERS AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

Capitalism, Cars, Congestion

Since the introduction of the modern bicycle in 1890 the United States has rapidly moved towards the ideals of personalized mobility (Tobin 1974). It was the velocipedomania at the turn of the century that brought about both the “good roads” movement and tourism (Hugill 1982; Perry 1995; Tobin 1974). When the Model T was introduced in 1909, Henry Ford’s skillful marketing coyly tapped into this burgeoning ideal of atomized travel (Hugill 1982). The culmination of the American ideal of personal mobility, realized through the automobile and the structural implementation of this ideal at the expense of other modes of transportation, has transformed the city environment (Freund and Martin 1996). Cities, which have always been abuzz with people hurrying from one destination to another, are now dominated by the automobile. Further, transportation between cities and between cities and suburbs is primarily mediated through limited-access highways.

Unlike European nations that have maintained viable rail options, in America the car has become a way of life (Freund and Martin,1996). For example, The US Census for 2000 shows that in New York, a city with excellent public transportation, 33 percent of the population commutes to work by private automobile. Conversely, in Los Angeles 81 percent of the population travels to work by private automobile. Congestion, even gridlock, is a constant state of affairs within metropolitan areas. “It is widely agreed that transport policy, worldwide, is in a state of crisis. Increasing car ownership and vehicle use have combined with lack of investment in public transport to create widespread congestion, and attempts to solve this by new road building have often been self-defeating because of the additional traffic generated” (Neale 1995: 447). Or, in the words of Shawn, a well known bicycle courier company owner, “In ten years the street will be a parking lot” (quoted in Reilly 2000: 15).

It is within this congestion that bike messengers thrive. Bicycles are faster than walkers and more mobile than motor vehicles. In dense urban environments bikes provide the quickest means of travel. In commuter races (i.e. races to determine the fastest commuting times for ordinary citizens) held throughout the world, bicyclists always beat walkers, subway riders, and cars (Perry 1995). The versatility of bicycles is derived from their ability to be parked virtually anywhere and to maneuver between and around cars, pedestrians, and other obstacles.

The bike courier industry first appeared in New York in the late 1960s (Reilly 2000). Offering unbeatable delivery speeds the messenger business continued to grow into the 1980s. By the mid-eighties the bicycle messenger had become a ubiquitous part of urban life for cities like Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. Why did the bicycle messenger industry take so long to establish? After all, the bicycle was over a hundred years old, and the malady of traffic congestion was a well-worn discussion (see Goodrich 1916). Further, the businesses which messengers served (law firms, banks, advertising agencies, film companies, etc) are by no means new. What is it about this point in history that created such a need? In the following section, I sketch the sociological outlines of a unique urban phenomenon by connecting Sassen's (1994) concept of the global city to the development and persistence of the bicycle messenger industry. Of particular interest is why the messengering occupation developed in some cities but not others.

Global Cities and Telematics

Telecommunications have been heralded as bringing a "death to distance" (Graham 1997). According to this argument, technology (primarily telematics: information and communication technologies and services) has freed both the individual and the business firm from a dependency on place. Sassen (1994) argues that telematics and the global capital enterprise which it fuels increases, not decreases, the importance of place. This argument is built from the social and economic changes occurring since the 1970s (namely a shift into a post-industrial economy). For Sassen these changes have affected the urban labor market. However,

the shift into a post-industrial economy has not brought an end to the city. While some firms have moved to suburban corporate campuses, other firms have intensified their presence within cities. Graham (1997) compares fax machines and the internet to the invention of the telephone. While the telephone enabled individuals to communicate at great distances, the impact of the phone was to help efficiently coordinate business within the same city (Gottman 1977). Like Sassen's argument for telematics, the telephone made the city larger. Sassen points out that the central business districts of New York, Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, Frankfurt, Sao Paulo, Hong Kong, and Sidney reached their highest densities ever in the 1980s.

Crucial to Sassen's (1994) analysis is an understanding that a post-industrial economy (finance and specialized services) still relies on production (not simply high-level technical expertise). This is to say, for example, international banking requires computers. The computers themselves might be assembled within a periphery nation, but they must be shipped to the core nation.¹² Once in the office the computers must be networked, maintained, and repaired. Moreover, the sale of these computers requires an advertising campaign. The banking office itself requires cleaning and maintenance. Telephones must be answered. Employees' children must be cared for. Each of these processes requires additional labor from various sources (people to load the truck, people to drive the truck, etc.). "A focus on production displaces the emphasis from expertise to work... The rapid growth of the financial industry and highly specialized services generate not only high-level technical and administrative jobs but also low-wage unskilled jobs" (Sassen 1994: 5).

In short, businesses still require a physical place to operate. Telecommunications cannot displace the necessity of face-to-face interactions. In the high-risk markets of the post-industrial economy the security afforded by meetings and social gatherings like business lunches and social ties from health clubs are increasingly important (Sassen 1994). The increased pace of business also increases the need for firms in dependent industries to locate near each other (Sassen 1994).

¹² In the typical conception of the world system (see Wallerstein, 1974) the primary focus is on production within the periphery (for exploitation by the core). Conversely, Sassen focuses on production within the core.

This is to say that there are distinct benefits of an international banking firm located near the firms which provide its legal and business services. The ‘death to distance’ argument claims that post-industrial cities, freed by telecommunications, will not develop dense downtown areas like New York and San Francisco. Both Sassen (1994) and Graham (1997) use Toronto as an example to disprove this myth. Despite the freedom allotted by telematics, Toronto has recently developed a dense business district. For Sassen, cities become the “key sites for the advanced services and telecommunications facilities necessary for the implementation and management of global economic operations” (1994: 19).

New York is a global city, and provides an excellent example of how the trends of post-industrial polarization can play out at the local level. In the United States, New York is the primary center for banking and finance. New York is a leading exporter in accounting, advertising, management consulting, and international legal services. During the 1980s employment in legal services, business services, and banking all increased dramatically while employment in manufacturing and transportation all declined (Sassen 1994). Manhattan is a dense hub of bustling activity. Viewed from Brooklyn the distinct business centers of Manhattan’s mid-town and downtown can be seen. Downtown specializes in finance while mid-town specializes in advertising and legal services. At the same time, the industrial vestiges of Brooklyn and Queens stand in stark contrast. This is to say, the glittery interests of finance, communications, entertainment, and tourism are not shaping the city equally (Zukin 1991).

Bicycle Messengers and the Global Economy

Arising from the history of bicycles, reacting against the congestion of automobile travel, and responding to the needs of advanced capitalism is the modern bike messenger. The dominance of finance in the world economy has accelerated the rate of transactions (Sassen 1994). In stock markets, foreign currency markets, and futures markets, fortunes can be gained or lost in seconds. Before the existence of the fax machine and e-mail a technological gap

existed. Firms required the immediate transfer of information but lacked the means. It was here—at the crossroads of the information age—that the modern bicycle courier was born.

Using Sassen's (1994) analysis of telematics and global cities the connection between bicycle messengers and the modern world-system becomes apparent. The growth of the messenger industry coincided with the growth of legal services, business services, and banking. Each of these industries is dependent upon each other and requires a high degree of communication and coordination. With the ability to move from mid-town to downtown in under 15 minutes, bicycle messengers provided the speed these firms needed to keep business flowing smoothly.

Understanding the existence of messengers in some cities and not in others illuminates aspects of both urban geography and the distribution of industries within the global economy. Eight US cities have over 100 working messengers: New York (2000), San Francisco (375), Washington, DC (350), Chicago (300), Philadelphia (200), Boston (150), Seattle (125), and Los Angeles (100).¹³ All eight cities are major metropolitan areas. However, the drastic difference between Los Angeles and New York, America's two largest cities, demonstrates that population size alone does not account for the existence of bicycle messengers. The density of a city is also important. With the exception of Los Angeles and Seattle, the major messenger cities have a population density of 10,000 people per square mile. In fact, of the U.S.'s 20 largest cities New York, San Francisco, Washington, DC, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston are the only major cities to have a population density of 10,000 or higher (Gibson 1998). New York has America's highest population density of nearly 24,000. Additionally, New York covers a much smaller land area when compared to Los Angeles. Not surprisingly, New York's relatively small and packed environment proves difficult for automobile traffic. Los Angeles, while known for its congested roadways, has a larger area and fewer people which allows for greater automotive travel and more difficulties for bike travel. These observations on density are even more relevant

¹³ There are no exact records kept on bicycle messengers (see section IV). These numbers are estimates provided by the International Federation of Bike Messengers Associations ("City Guide/Statistics," 2003).

in explaining why some of America's largest cities (like Dallas and Phoenix) have exceptionally small messenger populations.

Population size and density explain a great deal of why bicycle messengers exist in some cities and not in others. However, the industries operating within a city are also important. For example, Baltimore is larger than San Francisco, Washington, DC, Boston, and Seattle. Baltimore's density is over 9,000, but there are fewer than fifty messengers working in the city. This difference reflects the nature of the major businesses operating in Baltimore. New York and San Francisco, unlike Baltimore, are major possessors of commercial banking companies assets ("Service 500," 1993). Washington, DC is the second ranked to New York in the assets of diversified financial companies ("Service 500," 1993). Washington is also a major center for legal service—much of which benefits companies in New York (Sassen 1994). Like San Francisco, Boston is a major banking center. Without an anchoring in banking and financial and business services, the auxiliary industries such as advertising and legal services do not exist to any large degree in Baltimore.¹⁴

Conversely, Seattle's small population and low density (just over 6,000) poses an interesting anomaly. Like Baltimore, Seattle seemingly lacks the industries that would support a city that requires bicycle messengers. Seattle's large messenger population on the other hand, might be explained by the northwest's environmentally conscious attitudes. However, despite these minor discrepancies, the basic importance of size, density, and industry is apparent.

Taking these factors into account it becomes very clear why New York has the world's largest messenger population. Further, the location of messengers throughout New York City coincides with the agglomeration of businesses within the city. Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens all have business centers, but it is Manhattan that possesses the banking, financial, and business services. Consequently, bicycle messengers work almost exclusively in Manhattan. While bicycle messengers occasionally make trips to Long Island City, Queens and downtown

¹⁴ In contrast with Baltimore, London has a large population size, a high density, and an important stock market. It is, therefore, apparent why London has 1,000 bike couriers (the world's second highest population of messengers).

Brooklyn, these jobs account for a small portion of messenger work. Even within Manhattan, courier work is not geographically dispersed. With faxes and e-mails there is less messenger work in downtown Manhattan. By contrast, mid-town—with its connections to advertising—is exploding with work. The art and film studios in Tribeca and Chelsea also require messenger service. Conversely, Chinatown, the Lower Eastside, and Harlem have virtually no work. As an anecdotal bit of evidence, two other messengers and myself, looking for a party on the Lower Eastside one evening, could not find the address. As we stopped and consulted a map we laughed about how ironic it was that three messengers were lost in their own city. One messenger commented, “Yeah, but it’s the Lower Eastside. There’s no work here!”

I have found that for people outside the major messenger cities there is often surprise and confusion about the continued existence of bike messengers. As one friend from Athens asked, with a tinge of sarcasm, “People pay you to deliver things on your bicycle?” Or, as one professor asked, “What are they delivering? Why don’t they just use e-mail?” The advertising industry elucidates Sassen’s (1994) claim that firms in related industries require physical proximity. Further, the advertising industry provides an excellent example of how this physical proximity still requires the services of bicycle messengers. Advertising agencies, photographers, graphic designers, post-production companies, magazine publishers, clothing designers, fabric manufacturers, and printers exist in a network of communication that cannot be mediated through electronic data transfers. For instance, a photographer requires a dress for a photo shoot. The clothing designer who makes the dress requires fabric from a manufacturer. Once the photograph is developed it must be sent to the graphic designer. The designer, advertising agency, printer, etc. are, in turn, equally connected. Even with electronic data transfers photographs and other color-sensitive items cannot be sent through e-mail because there is no universal color calibration for computer monitors and printers. The original must therefore be sent so designers, post-production workers, and printers can see the exact color being reproduced. All of these firms, therefore, rely on bicycle messengers to send items quickly

through the network. In this way, even with the advent of telecommunication technologies, cities and the bicycle messenger industry still flourish.

IV. BIKE MESSENGERS AND NEW YORK CITY

A Brief History

In 1980 there were less than 500 bicycle messengers in New York City (McKillop 1985). By 1985 there were between 4000 to 7000. Because specific records on bicycle messengers are not kept and because so many courier companies operate off the books, exact numbers are not known and estimates vary widely. In the mid-80s—as the number of bike messengers exploded—couriers became known as, “the speeding bane of New York’s pedestrians and motorists” (Lyll 1987: 58). In the 1980s the *New York Times* and numerous other periodicals throughout the nation published articles attacking bicycle messengers’ flagrant disregard for traffic laws. The backlash at this time was truly remarkable. “Irresponsible bike messengers richly deserve our wholehearted contempt and an attache case or umbrella plunged into their spokes” (Rosenthal 1987: 50). New York Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward commented that bicyclists (namely messengers) were, “...scaring the public to death, and we’ve got to do something about it” (quoted in Finder 1987: A1). An editorial piece run in the *Times* rhetorically asked, “Are bike messengers capable of such contempt? You bet” (“Worm and the Apple,” 1983: 28). Councilwoman Carol Greitzer summed up the prevailing attitude by saying, “There isn’t a single person who doesn’t have a horror story to tell about what happened or nearly happened to them” (quoted in Purdum 1986: E6). Bob Levy, a columnist for the *Washington Post*, published a series of articles bashing DC messengers. “In my gentler moments, I’ve called them law-flouting, obscenity-spewing, bath-needing, wild-riding, pedestrian-smashing madmen” (1989: E4). Levy went so far as to accuse messengers of not only reckless riding, but causing an epidemic of bicycle theft throughout the city (1987) and, with no humor intended, the killing of innocent squirrels (1991).

In 1986 the New York City police started directly targeting messengers for traffic violations. In 1987 a bill was passed to ban bicycles on three major avenues from 10-4 on

weekdays (the bill was overturned at the eleventh hour by court ruling). Cities with the greatest backlash against messengers appear to be cities where messengers are largely minorities. Chicago, DC, and New York are the three cities with largest minority messenger populations (see Reilly 2000). They are also cities with very strong attitudes against messengers. For instance, I asked a former courier from Chicago, who originally worked in San Francisco, the biggest difference between the two cities. His first comment, without any deliberation, was that messengers in San Francisco were treated better. “In Chicago they treat you like dirt.” Likewise, I ask a messenger originally from Montreal about working in New York and again without thought the reply was, “Messengers in Montreal get much more respect.”

As messengers were being turned into villains they were also being turned into cultural icons. In 1986 *Quicksilver*, a movie starring Kevin Bacon as a former stockbroker turned free-spirited bicycle messenger, was released. As a writer for New York Magazine penned, “They 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). The mainstream press started referencing the occupation as the hip ‘straight job.’ “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). In 1995, CBS briefly aired a sit-com about New York messengers called *Double Rush* (the name given to jobs which must be delivered especially fast).

The implementation of the fax machine and later the internet cut deeply into bicycle messenger business. The number of courier companies has shrunk and the price competition among the remaining has grown (see Stewart 2004). The real wages of messengers have also been drastically reduced (Raab 1994). By the late 80s the media was signaling the death of the bicycle courier. Many journalists, in awe of the new fax technology, never even looked out their window to see that messengers were still zooming through the city. “So it’s already happened in

Manhattan, where there are virtually no bicycle messengers, just a lot of walkers...” (Kliman 1992: W14). Despite the death knell rung by many pundits the occupation has persisted into the new millennium.

Bike Messengers: “It’s Not Just an Adventure—It’s a Job”

The Job

The job description of a bicycle courier is in many respects remarkably simple. Stripped to its barest essentials a bicycle messenger makes a pick-up at one location and makes a drop-off at another location. Conversely, the myriad of factors effecting this otherwise simple exchange can become very convoluted.

Generally speaking, messengers are employed by a messenger company. Messenger companies range in size from one person operations to transnational corporations with thousands of employees. Firms requiring on-demand delivery service generally have accounts with specific messenger companies. When a package needs to be delivered they contact the messenger company and the messenger company dispatches the job, generally by radio, to a messenger.

Unlike many cities in the U.S., couriers in New York are not considered independent contractors. Legally companies must file their riders as employees. This change in status, brought about by an IRS shakedown, had far reaching effects on the industry (Tomasson 1991). Namely, by forcing companies to be responsible for worker’s compensation smaller companies were overtaken by their larger corporate rivals. Aside from having taxes removed from their paychecks, the shift to employee status has had very little effect on the individual messenger’s work relations. Like their independent contractor counterparts, most New York messengers are still paid per delivery (piece-rate). Also, like independent contractors most messengers have the option to decline runs. Further, messengers cherish their right to come and go as they please at work. For example, one evening Henry, a veteran messenger, was complaining about his company. Henry’s dispatcher had gotten upset with him missing several days of work. Upon hearing this Johan, another veteran messenger barked, “Taking days off is the solemn right of a

messenger!” To which Henry replied, “That is why I have this shitty job in the first place.” Along with the freedoms of a de facto independent contract status also comes the responsibilities. Namely, messengers have virtually no job security, no steady income, no benefits, and no health insurance. Further, even though messengers are now legally entitled to worker’s compensation very few use it for fear of reprisal.¹⁵

The Pay

Companies have a base-rate for deliveries. Rushes, larger packages, longer distances, wait-time, and late-night deliveries add on to this base-rate. Many companies also offer their larger clients discounted rates which subtract from the normal base-rate. Messengers make between 40-60 percent of the price paid for a job. Most messengers average between 3-5 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).¹⁶ A New York messenger averages around 16-26 deliveries a day. Business is usually slower in the summer and better in the winter. It is not uncommon for some messengers to not break 14 runs while others can do more than 40. Overall, a hundred dollars a day is considered a respectable day’s wage.

Dispatchers allocate jobs based on where a rider is located, the speed of that rider, the reliability of that rider, the seniority of that rider, and the dispatcher’s personal disposition to the rider (see Stewart 2004).¹⁷ Jobs worth more money and jobs which are easier are doled out by the dispatcher based on these criteria. In other words, fast and reliable couriers who have been

¹⁵ As explained below, the nature of the occupation easily allows for workers to be blacklisted. As one former Sprint courier told me, “They tried to fire me because I had to get stitches, and I wanted them to pay for it.”

¹⁶ At most companies oversize jobs garner an extra dollar or two in price. Rush jobs can tack on an additional two to four dollars. Double and triple rushes garner even more money. Also, cities are divided into zones with longer deliveries earning more money. Finally, most companies offer late-night service which generally doubles the price of the job. Therefore, a late-night, oversize, double rush going through four zones could be worth over forty dollars.

¹⁷ A dispatcher’s opinion of a rider has a lot to do with how much time the rider has taken off and how many runs they turn down. In other words, many messengers have the ‘right’ to skip days of work and decline jobs without technically losing their jobs. But, such behavior can drastically affect the messengers ability to generate income if such actions result in a dispatcher withholding runs from that rider. This is similar to the tactics used by managers at McDonald’s (Leidner, 1993). Instead of firing problem employees, McDonald’s managers drastically reduce the offending worker’s hours until the employee voluntarily quits.

with the company longer and who have not offended the dispatcher in some way will receive the sweeter jobs. Rookies will be given the worst jobs. The longer a rookie stays with a company she will progressively be dispatched better jobs at a more frequent rate. While time on the road is most certainly improving the rookie's skills, the allocation of jobs by the dispatcher serves to deepen the rift between rookie and veteran incomes. As such, the veteran can feel confident that their seniority has gained for them talents unmatched by the inexperienced. This system also allows rookies to notice a remarkable rate of 'progress' in their messenger skills.¹⁸

The Skills

Once a job is dispatched the real work of the bicycle messenger begins. The courier must locate the firm sending out the package. This requires an integral knowledge of the city. Mid-town is a grid that, once the number system is understood, is not too terribly difficult to understand. However, savvy veteran messengers not only know the system but know exact addresses (and which addresses do not exist on which streets). Beyond finding the building address, the company must be found within a building. This seemingly simple task can become exceptionally difficult. First, there are any number of mis-communications between the firm and the dispatcher and the dispatcher and the courier. Room numbers and floor numbers on orders are neglected or unknown. Instructions about who has the package or where someone left the package can be equally befuddling. Second, building security poses a myriad of problems. Every building has different procedures and entrances for messengers to use. Certain procedures can result in messengers waiting upwards of thirty minutes or more to make a pick-up or drop off.¹⁹

¹⁸ Burawoy (1979) noted a similar set of relations in his study of piece-rate factory work. "Newcomers are given jobs with the tightest rates, a practice that in the short run generates withdrawal and bitterness but in the long run reinforces commitment to the value of making out" (88). This is to say, once workers did start 'making out' they would view their success as an individual accomplishment generated through their own personal tenacity and skill.

¹⁹ It is worth mentioning that many of these supposed security measures have absolutely nothing to do with safety. In many cases building management is simply trying to keep the often haggard messenger segregated from the tenants. Further, the policy of forcing messengers to use service entrances is a source of constant frustration and anger for messengers (see Reilly 2000; Culley 2002).

Beyond knowledge of the city and its buildings, what separates bike messengers from other delivery jobs is the bicycle. Urban cycling is an exceptionally dangerous activity requiring a unique set of skills. For obvious reasons bicycling in congested traffic poses numerous dangers. The top three dangers are moving motor vehicles, vehicle doors that open into traffic lanes, and pedestrians. These dangers, which are intense in their own right, are compounded by the speed at which a messenger must move to keep her company, her clients, and her wallet satisfied. Urban cycling is a specialized riding style. Speed is not simply a factor of pedal rotation. In urban areas speed is largely determined by how little a biker has to stop and slow down. As Kid, a long-time messenger and dispatcher notes,

“Let me tell you something about being the best in New York. It’s not about being this fast. Yeah, I am fast and all that, but it’s not about being fast. It’s about having a sense of direction and where you are going. If you know where you are going, and you know how to get there—that’s the most important thing. You ain’t got to be fast. ‘Cuz, if you was fast, then you’d go to the Tour de France and earn some big money” (quoted in Sutherland 2001).

For a messenger a larger part of ‘knowing where you are going’ involves choosing ‘lines’ which require the least amount of stops (i.e. paths of least resistance through traffic). This involves avoiding jammed traffic, cutting through jaywalking pedestrians, and running red lights. A truly 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. The best messengers can slip through seemingly impenetrable walls of moving traffic seamlessly. For example, I was stopped at a red light on 23 Street at the intersection with Broadway and Fifth Avenue. It is a tricky intersection. The cars, trucks, and buses were pouring down Broadway in an endless stream. From out of nowhere Vinny, a veteran messenger, materializes on the other side of this flood of traffic. He had not been moving fast nor had a single car altered its speed. The space he slipped in between—a car and a city bus both moving at least 25 miles an hour—was not more than six feet. The look on his face was utter calm, but the look on my face

however was utter shock at what Vinny had done. Barring this almost magical ability, another common messenger tactic is to scream at pedestrians so they will move and to scare cars into stopping by nudging oneself into an intersection forcing the drivers to stop and allowing the biker to cross. While lacking the finesse of Vinny's style, the latter is just as effective.

The Dangers

Two of the most dangerous aspects of urban riding are opening car doors and pedestrians. The threat behind these two dangers is their unpredictability. Automobiles, while the most lethal danger, are largely predictable. This is to say, most cars stop at red lights, travel more or less in a straight line, and do not go the wrong way down one-way roads. This is not ignoring the fact that drivers *do* run red lights, go the wrong direction, and aimlessly swerve their vehicles. However, these actions are on the whole rare. Moreover, the physics of an automobile limits its ability to quickly change speed or direction. Pedestrians on the other hand can quickly come to a stop, speed up, and change direction. According to Nelson, "Pedestrians are unpredictable, our worst problem" (quoted in Geist 1983: B1). Car doors are equally unpredictable. Jeff, a messenger of five years comments, "I hate people who open their doors without looking" (quoted in *Messenger Style* 2000). Many experienced messengers claim the ability to foresee opening car doors, and there are most certainly indicators (see Reilly 2000), but overall an opening car door is far more difficult to predict than a truck about to turn left. Getting 'doored' is the quintessential urban cycling accident (Herman, Komanoff, Orcutt, and Perry 1993), and is considered the most serious danger facing a messenger.

Dennerlein and Meeker (2003) have shown that bike messengers work in one of America's most dangerous industries. The national average for injuries is 3.0 lost days of work per year for 100 workers. Meat packers average of 15.6 days of lost work. Messengers lose an average of 47. While more research needs to be done, this number is staggering. According to Reilly (2000) every messenger knows someone who has died on the road. As Kid states, "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" (quoted in Sutherland 2001). As I was told on my first day of the job at Sprint, "The odds are against you." A journalist working as a messenger for a week reported, "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).²⁰

For a reader with experience in cities, it is not difficult to imagine the terrain I have been describing. However, until one has really submersed themselves in the mix it is impossible to truly understand the daily realities of a bicycle messenger in New York City. Imagine, you are on a bicycle—a twenty pound machine with two wheels an inch wide. You are pedaling down Fifth Avenue surrounded by four lanes of cars. The cars are surging forward, changing lanes, buses pass and then decelerate merging with the curb to make a stop. Taxis swerve to make fares. The side of the road is lined with parked vehicles. Any one of the doors might open with no warning. Other bikers are weaving in and out of traffic. At every intersection pedestrians are posed to run across the road if they see any opportunity. With eyes glued on the cars chances are they do not even notice your bicycle barreling towards them. In your bag you have three packages. In your mind you have two more pick-ups. As one ton metal monsters swarm around you, a route must be developed in your head. First, you must determine in which order you will make your pick-ups and drops. Second, you must find a line. As traffic changes the line is lost and revised. Cars close in around you. You look for an opening and try to predict if this opening will be the most efficient. As you approach a red light you judge what the cars and pedestrians are doing. You calculate your speed and theirs. You try and read their postures and actions to figure out if they will turn left or right, stop or accelerate. You look for cops. Running a red light can result in a hundred dollar ticket. If the officer is feeling feisty she might write you a ticket for not having a warning bell or reflectors too. If you are on a track bike she might write you a ticket for that as well. Finally, after factoring all of this you realize its been utterly futile

²⁰ Cuerdon considered the work so risky he did, in fact, skip his fifth day of work fearing for his safety.

because your dispatcher just called and she has sent you back uptown for another package and now the order of your pick-ups and drops has been completely changed. You've been doing this all morning. You will continue doing this for the rest of the day, and tomorrow, and the day after that.

In the winter this scene is compounded with freezing temperatures, falling snow, and icy roads. Feet go numb from freezing water seeping into shoes. Hands ache and ears burn from the cold. In the spring and fall riders must face frigid rain which can turn a mildly cool day into a shivering nightmare as the water saps the warmth from the body. The summer is the easiest, but blistering heat can be hard to take. As one courier said, "It is dangerous enough in dry, warm weather, but on days like this [Boston snowstorm in February], it's a whole different story" (James, quoted in Grant 1994: 29).

Despite these dangers and physical demands, many bicycle messengers define the job as exceptionally fun. While the scene described above could easily result in the rider's death, injury, and general discomfort, it is also a scene of exhilaration. The ability to successfully navigate traffic is a point of pride for messengers. James, speaking on the same snowstorm above notes, "Sometimes, I kind of like it in a way. It can be exciting. There's this feeling of comradery on the streets. It's like we're all in this together" (quoted in Grant 1994: 29). On any given day in New York messengers can be seen playing in traffic: popping wheelies as they zoom up Madison Avenue, jumping off curbs, smiling and chatting with other messengers as they go about their day. "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).

There are many different types of people that choose to become messengers. Most messengers are men, and most messengers are under 30. In New York a vast majority of messengers are minorities and immigrants. For people with no formal education, criminal records, and drug addictions messenger work is often the best job option. While making good money as a messenger is the result of various factors discussed above, making some money as a

messenger is exceptionally easy. There are countless companies operating in New York that will hire basically any warm body able to pedal a bike. Moreover, the independent contractor roots of messenger work allow for people to easily move from company to company and to stop and start messenger work at their choosing.

Only a small percentage of messengers last more than a few months on the job. Even less last more than a year. Sprint claims that only 50 percent of rookie messengers stay past the first two months. Many of those do not even finish their first week. Generally speaking, a messenger is no longer considered a rookie after a full year of messenger work (Reilly 2000). While there is no definitive distinction, a messenger on the road for over five years is considered a veteran.

For most of New York's 2000 plus messengers being a bike courier is just a job. These messengers identify with the occupation to varying degrees, but their lifestyle is not directly influenced by being a bike messenger. For a few hundred of New York's messengers (approximately 10 percent) there is more to the job than simply a pay check. For these people being a messenger does not stop and start with the workday. For these couriers being a messenger is a way of life. For them, other messengers are not co-workers but part of an extended family—a family that extends across the globe (see Reilly 2000; Sutherland 2001). It is these messengers, whom I have crudely dubbed 'lifestyle messengers,' that this research will analyze at greatest length.

Messenger Style

The most salient feature of the bike messenger is style. Any number of people ride bicycles: competitive cyclists, commuters, joy riders, etc., but bike messengers, through their unique style, are distinguishable from other bike riders. In her memoirs Reilly (2000), a courier of over eight years, goes into great detail about identifying other couriers based on style. In retelling a story where a new dispatcher was doubting her experience Reilly recounts, "I looked like a bike messenger. If he didn't want to believe it that was his problem" (187). This is to say, couriers have a *look* and this look is intended to be identifiable to others. Further, messenger

style is not intended to look contrived, but is felt to be an extension of who one really is. Take Henry, for example. Henry used to be involved with the punk subculture. In speaking about the ‘crust punks’ who hang out in Tompkin’s Square Park, Henry is cynical. Henry claims that these punks portray an image which they do not live up to in real life. Henry juxtaposes these punks with messengers. “If I identify with any ‘scene’ at all I identify with the messenger scene. The people in the messenger scene aren’t fake. There aren’t kids walking around with radios and big bags *pretending* to be messengers. Everyone who hangs out whether they’ve been doing it for one month or ten years is doing the same job.” In his disillusionment with punk rock and his identification with messengers Henry cites authenticity, and this authenticity has to do with stylistic representations.

Bags and Clothes

The most obvious distinction between bicycle messengers and non-messengers is a messenger bag. A messenger bag is specifically designed for courier work. The traditional messenger bag has one strap slung over the shoulder and across the chest. This allows the messenger to pull the bag around to her front and insert and remove packages without taking the bag off. Bags are closed by a top flap and velcro for quick access. They are made from a heavy duty fabric and lined with water-proof material.

Beyond bags, clothing choices provide strong markers for who is or is not a courier. For many outsiders, especially people not from New York, the idea of bicycle messengers conjures up images of spandex and racing bikes. While some New York messengers dress in full cycling gear, they are a minority. Street clothing is far more typical. At the same time, however, the selective appropriation of cycling apparel is common. Cycling shoes, gloves, jerseys, and caps are frequently seen, but are used cautiously. Klaus, a long-time messenger, provides a telling example. I ran into Klaus in 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’s 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.”

While messengers prefer street clothes, these clothes have been modified. One such modification are long pants that have been either cutoff or rolled-up just past the ankles. Another interesting addition to the pants of many bike messengers are patches. The number of hours a messenger spends riding causes incredible wear on the seat of pants. To prolong the life of these clothes many couriers reinforce the thinning fabric with patches. Two of the messengers I met, Mike and William, were skilled sewers. Mike had constructed his own messenger bags and William actually participated in a sewing circle 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 rear of his pants. William used bright and contrasting colors to reinforce several pairs of his army surplus shorts. An important marker for lifestyle messengers is wearing these modified clothes during off-work hours. In Mitchell’s (1983) analysis of mountain climbers a nearly identical phenomenon is described. While not lacking in financial means, mountaineers frequently wear old, worn, and patched clothing. For Mitchell this was a matter of symbolically representing experience—the experience to have well-used clothes and the experience to improve on the original manufacturing. Like mountain climbers, messengers highly value skill and experience. These clothing choices, therefore, can be understood as symbolically denoting status.

One item conspicuously missing from many couriers’ wardrobes are helmets. At my first messenger race I overheard a conversation which sums up the prevailing attitude toward helmets. The wife of one of the race organizers was talking to another friend during the awards party. “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 message behind it. Veteran couriers do not

need to wear helmets because they ‘know how to handle themselves in traffic.’²¹ The story of Mike is illustrative. Mike, a rookie, had moved to New York and originally wore a helmet. In his first few weeks he had gotten into two serious accidents. One accident sent a pedestrian to the hospital. The other accident was with a car and his bicycle was completely destroyed. The latter accident also broke his helmet in two. In other words, his helmet by all counts saved him from a very serious head injury and perhaps saved his life. After this second accident 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.”

Bicycle messengers and helmets open up a serious question about messenger style. While all aspects of a messenger’s dress are charged with an aesthetic element it is easy to see their origins in necessity. Bags are needed to carry packages. Pants cut or rolled above the ankle keep the fabric from getting caught in the chain. The fact that many messengers do not wear helmets, on the other hand, has no apparent functionality. I have heard people use the excuse that in the summer helmets are too hot, but these couriers did not start wearing helmets as the weather cooled. The general courier disdain for helmets seems to be completely symbolic. Messengers refuse to wear helmets to demonstrate their skills and experience. Messengers readily admit the dangers present in their job (Dennerlein and Meeker 2003; Kugelmass 1981). Messengers candidly discuss the injuries and deaths of their friends and co-workers (see Culley 2002; Reilly 2000; Sutherland 2001). Conversely, messengers, while not ignoring these dangers, choose to confront them head on. As Eric, a messenger since 1988, states, “I’m not going to die riding. I’m way past even thinking about ever getting smashed. I mean, yeah, maybe my hand will get broken, maybe, but I’m not going to die, not doing this” (quoted in Sutherland 2001).

²¹ In a study of bicycle messenger injuries, Dennerlein and Meeker (2003) found that injury rates among messengers were comparable to injury rates among recreational cyclists. Despite the additional risks messengers take, their comparable injury rate is probably the result of better bicycle handling skills. These cycling skills are a matter of great pride for messengers (see Reilly 2000). For instance, while many messengers take part in Critical Mass (a monthly alternative transportation rally), the perceived lack of cycling skills among the other participants is a source of derision. As one messenger snidely remarked, “Most of these kids can’t ride.” In Kugelmass’s (1981) study of New York messengers, he argues that couriers intentionally refuse certain items (such a warm socks or bikes with multiple gears) to demonstrate that they are extraordinary individuals. This sort of demonstration can also be seen in the refusal of helmets.

Bikes

While not the most telling aspect of messenger style, a bicycle, obviously, is the most essential ingredient. In New York, frames are often covered with tape or wrapped with old inner-tubes. This serves the double purpose of saving the frame from being damaged by repeatedly locking and unlocking the bike. It also conceals brand names which might promote theft. The paint jobs themselves are often in serious disrepair. This is generally from the abuse a courier bike receives throughout the day. In fact, bicycles that are too nice are a source of derision. One messenger for instance continually brought up a rookie's purchase of an expensive ultra-light eight-spoke front wheel (compared to the more common, but heavier 28 to 36 spoke wheel). According to the criticizing messenger, "You can't work on that shit!" Again, the symbolic importance of having well used equipment (and the knowledge of which equipment can handle such use) can be seen.

The outward appearance of a messenger's bicycle, however, is no indication of its performance or value. Vinny has a bicycle which illustrates this point exactly. At first glance Vinny's bike is nothing special. In fact, it looks sort of run down. The paint has been sanded off leaving raw and unpolished metal. With no brand names it would be easy to write Vinny's bike off as something pulled out of a junk heap. Closer inspection reveals that Vinny's bicycle is actually worth thousands of dollars. The bike is a vintage Eddie Merckx track frame (a high-end manufacture) with top of the line track components. A look at Vinny's drive-train also reveals a meticulously cleaned machine.

Messengers generally ride one of three types of bicycles: mountain bikes, road bikes, or track bikes. Each bike has its advantages. The bicycle that is the most interesting and unique, however, is the track bike (also called a fixed-gear, fix, fixed, or fixie). Track bikes are considered the archetypical messenger bike. Track bikes are designed for racing on a velodrome (an oval track with banked corners). The most notable aspects of a track bike are its fixed gear and lack of brakes. The cog attached to a track bike's rear wheel is 'fixed' and cannot coast. In other words, if the rear wheel is moving so are the pedals (and vice versa). A fixed-gear allows

the rider to control the bicycle's speed through the pedals. This should not be confused with the coaster brakes found on children's bicycles. The sensation of riding a fixed is foreign to riders accustomed to freewheel bicycles. However, once the rider masters the required skills, fixies offer a new dimension of control and a different method for the rider to relate to her machine.

There are several practical reasons messengers adopted track bikes. First, track bikes require very little maintenance. Without brakes and multiple gears there is very little to break or tune-up. Further, since there are no brakes wheels can go further out of true (i.e. alignment) without causing any problems. Second, there is far less to steal off a track bike, and what there is to steal has a limited market. After all, aside from messengers and track racers not many people want to buy track bikes. Third, track bikes are exceptionally light. In any given price range a track bike will always be lighter than a bicycle weighed down with additional components. Fourth, and most important, track bikes denote skill and experience. Chuck, a messenger since the 1970s comments, "If anyone says anything to me about riding fixed they are just jealous because they can't do it." The symbolic importance of track bikes will be discussed in greater detail in section VI.

V. BICYCLE MESSENGERS AND SPONTANEOUS ACTION

Rationalization: Empty Pleasures in a Constrained World

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber (1958) envisioned the future as life in an iron cage. Within the cage, spiritualized values and meanings are superseded by capitalism's internal logic of accumulation. In this process Weber (1970) saw the 'disenchantment of the world.' To echo the words of Marx (1964), "the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasms, of philistine sentimentalism" have been drowned in "the icy water of egoistical calculation." Everything and everyone has been reduced to "callous cash payment" (61-62). 'Doing one's job' becomes a task with no higher purpose.²² From this perspective, alienation is not due solely to a separation of the producer from the means of production. The drudgery of work within socialist societies can attest to this (McIntosh 1983). It is the methods of production themselves—whether they be an assembly line or an office desk—which dislocate the producer from meaning (Dubin 1992). "The ultimate disappointment in rationalization is not its shrinking of complex and commanding tasks to be done but a more fundamental malaise. What is missing finally from rationalized society is not action but purpose, a sense of belonging to a unified, animated, spiritually encompassing world" (Mitchell 1983: 212). In Erikson's (1986) often cited presidential address to the American Sociological Association, alienation is 'disconnection' from the environment. People are alienated "when they lose their involvement in the activity of working itself and no longer experience it as a meaningful creation" (2). For Dubin (1992), the rationalization of the workplace has increasingly divested workers from their occupation.

²² This concept of alienation is also analogous to Simmel's (Arditi, 1996). "Where the division of labor prevails the achievement becomes incommensurable with the performer; the person can no longer find himself expressed in his work; its form becomes dissimilar to the subjective mind and appears only as a wholly specialized part of our being that is indifferent to the total unity of man" (Simmel, 1978: 455).

Synthesizing Marxian and Meadian concerns with spontaneity and constraint in human action, Batiuk and Sacks (1981) have proposed a unique understanding of alienation. For Marx (1963) the constraints of economic necessity drive the need for spontaneous production. For Mead (1962) the voice of society—the “me”—directs spontaneous action—the “I.” According to Marx, free and meaningful production has been usurped by the profit-oriented organization of labor under capitalism (alienation). Mead enhances Marx’s analysis by adding a deeper understanding of how individual action is taken. The “me” is shaped by the rationalized order and the “I,” while always in operation, is subsumed by extrinsic concerns (reification). Under the constraints of rationalization, action lacks spontaneity. The intrinsic rewards of our species-being (creation) are increasingly relegated into routinized behaviors revolving around credentialization and economic status—one-dimensional humanity (Marcuse 1964). Dubin’s (1992) concept of ‘central life interest’ is similar to Batiuk and Sacks’ analysis. For Dubin, work has exceedingly separated itself from the “I” and fallen into the realm of socially required (but emotionally flat) roles (the “me”). Lyng (1990) has applied Batiuk and Sacks’ analysis to ‘edgeworkers’—individuals who voluntarily engage in highly dangerous activities (skydivers, motorcycle racers, binge drug-users, etc.). For Lyng the essence of edgework is the fusion of the “I” and “me”—the meaningful realization of spontaneous action—as a reaction against an overly reified life. Lyng’s research closely resembles Mitchell’s (1983) application of ‘flow’ (see Csikszentmihalyi 1990) among mountain climbers.

Building on the work of Lasch’s *Culture of Narcissism* (1978), both Mitchell and Lyng focus on the realm of leisure activity. For Gecas (1994) and Dubin play and leisure have come to the fore in the experience of an authentic self. “[The] declining possibilities for creative self-realizing action in the institutional spheres can be compensated for in skillful leisure-time pursuits” (Gecas 1994: 146). In Shamblin’s (1972) and Wolfe’s (1990) ethnographies of outlaw motorcycle clubs, for example, working-class males disillusioned with their occupational potential turn to the risk and dangers of bike gangs for self-fulfilment. Among Mitchell’s (1983) far more affluent mountaineers similar motivations exist:

“Our security increases as we apply more leverage, but along with it we notice a growing isolation with the earth. We crowd into cities, which shut out the rhythms of the planet... Perceptions dull and we come to accept a blunting of feeling in the shadows of security... So, in reaction, we set sail on the wide seas without motors in hope of feeling the wind, we leave the Land Rover behind as we seek the desert to know the sun, searching for a remembered bright world... In the process we find not what our tools can do for us but what we are capable of feeling without them, of knowing directly. We learn how far our unaided effort can take us into the improbable world” (Chouinard 1977: 30).

In locating meaning—and ultimately self-identity—outside the occupational sphere, the individual is faced with an inherent contradiction: major sections of their lives will lack meanings which could relate to their concept of self. The solidification of capitalist logic within the life-world has, therefore, polarized constraint and spontaneity into what Gorz (1982) describes as the spheres of heteronomy and autonomy. Work is a duty devoid of play while play becomes increasingly nihilistic.²³ For Dubin, the separation of work and self-identity poses no inherent problems.²⁴ Conversely, following Marx and Weber (and other sociologists rooted in their traditions), I argue that an individual and her labor cannot be separated without severe consequences to the self.

Despite the increasing rationalization of the occupational sphere, not all jobs are devoid of joy. Obviously, many occupations provide the potential for flow—at least occasionally. Dishwashers, house painters, and scientists all have the potential to become engrossed within their tasks. However, the ability to sustain this optimal experience is in most cases severely limited (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Additionally, within the rational order individuals have trouble connecting action to purpose (Lyng 1990). Busing tables, filing papers, and riveting sheet metal

²³ Lyng and Snow (1986) have detailed the changing motivational orientations of skydivers. While they do not clearly demarcate the reasons, they attribute the edgework orientation to larger societal trends. Lyng’s latter work (1990) more explicitly connects edgework to an increased need for spontaneous action in an overly constraining world.

²⁴ Dubin, a hardened realist, also argues against making education enjoyable or relevant to students’ lives and instead advocates rote memorization in schools. Life in a complex society requires people accepting certain roles. For Dubin, some roles cannot (and for that matter, should not) be enjoyable. However, the division of labor allows individuals performing such roles to experience more emotionally satisfying activities after their required tasks have been met. While Dubin’s analysis of central life interest is useful, my argument is in direct opposition to his conclusions on this matter.

are far removed from most understandings of self-actualization. Maintaining a meaningful self-identity, then, increasingly requires boundary work—the separation of work and leisure activities (Nippert-Eng 1996).

Against this backdrop, I propose that bicycle messengers can be understood as having an exceptionally high degree of integration along Nippert-Eng’s continuum of boundary work. This is to say, messengers make virtually no distinction between their work identities and their leisure identities.²⁵ Or, in other words, self-actualization occurs equally in and out of work. This integration arises from spontaneous action—the fusion of the “I” and “me”. By working in a dangerous environment that necessitates complex and commanding tasks for survival (both economically and physically), bicycle messengers directly link action with purpose. This is to say, unlike in rationalized jobs, bike messengers are able to attach strong emotional commitment to their labor (see Dubin 1992). As Lyng (1990) points out, in an otherwise ambivalent world it is difficult to be noncommittal about one’s own death. In the following section, I hope to demonstrate how bicycle messengers forge meaningful identities that are intimately connected to their occupation (and conversely, how leisure activities are intimately connected to the work place). In a discipline that continues to be haunted by Weber’s iron cage, and in a society that increasingly feels disillusioned Monday through Friday, understanding how work can become reintegrated into a meaningful concept of the self is exceedingly important.²⁶

²⁵ This description should not be confused with assuming bicycle messengers are workaholics. The point here is not that messengers feel compelled to connect their own identity to a sense of purpose at work. To the contrary, I am proposing that, because of the optimal experiences possible during work, the labor itself appears meaningful. Further, to achieve this meaning messengers need not actually be working long or hard hours.

²⁶ It is important to note that leisure can be equally alienating. For Seligman (1965) leisure pursuits which do not challenge the reification of the capitalist structure only reinforce alienation. For Lasch (1978) rationalization is increasingly colonizing the realm of leisure, isolating individuals from the risk, daring, and uncertainty necessary for play. Likewise, a more critical approach to messenger work could easily challenge the self-realization potential of an industry so intimately connected to capitalism. However, disregarding the concept of false consciousness, I will argue that messengers’ work allows for less disjuncture within the constitution of the self.

“The Lure of Danger:” Bicycle Messengering as Spontaneity

Messengers, Money, and Motivation

Because of the dangers and discomforts in the messenger industry, the question must be asked, what motivates bicycle messengers to work under such conditions? Eric, a messenger since 1988, answers such a question rhetorically, “Did I mention rent? It could be that they like to eat” (quoted Sutherland 2001). Money is most certainly the strongest motivating factor for all messengers. One long-time messenger turned down my request for an interview by stating, “I’ve done a few of those and I’ve never gotten paid for them... This job is all about getting paid.” Messengers frequently ask other messengers the rates they are paid and the number of jobs they do in a day. The benefits of various companies are debated. The companies who pay their messengers the best are assumed to have the best riders and the riders who make the most are assumed to be the most talented messengers. As one boisterous messenger was often heard yelling as he careened through traffic, “Gotta make that dollar!” However, the actions and attitudes of many messengers in the face of such risks and hardships cannot be reduced to simple economic necessity.

The Urban Death Maze

The voluntary risk-taking accompanying messenger work is best understood as an instance of spontaneous action. While no action is completely spontaneous—all meaningful action is performed with a specified range of acceptable behavior—messenger work provides minimal constraints with a maximization of spontaneity. In negotiating traffic the messenger is engrossed in real-world calculus. For the messenger, the city provides an ever-shifting puzzle. It is an ‘urban death maze.’ The most talented of messengers can find efficient lines through seemingly blocked traffic. My field notes for May 29, 2003 are illustrative:

I rode behind Clinton [a veteran messenger] 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. Really, it was eerie how the path he chose just flowed before him.

As the above example shows, Clinton was able to negotiate traffic far better than I. When he turned off, I was left to make my own choices and those choices were not as efficient. In finding the right line, messengers engage in concrete metaphysics—the ability to predict traffic patterns. Additionally, one of the greatest skills a talented messenger can possess is the ability to run red lights. The best bike messengers have an exceptional understanding of time and space (see Stewart 2004). The previous example of Vinny slipping through impenetrable intersections is telling. Through an intimate knowledge of his own velocity and size, Vinny calculates the trajectory of the vehicles around him and confidently maneuvers between cars without disrupting the flow of traffic. It must be said, however, that couriers, by riding in this manner, take a dangerous situation and make it more dangerous.

The work of messengers requires packages being delivered (constraint), but the process of delivering these packages requires the skillful negotiation of constantly varying dangers (spontaneity). In this way, messengering can be seen as edgework (Lyng 1990), a state of heightened concentration that Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described as “flow.” While there are differences between edgework and flow, for this paper such a distinction is not essential. What is important is the fusion of the “I” and “me” under such conditions. When the “I” and the “me” work together without reflection, actions become supra-meaningful. This situation stands in sharp contrast to Sennett’s (1998) characterization of contemporary work. Working as a courier, a messenger acts spontaneously—she weaves in and out of cars, charges through red lights, but these actions fit within constraints—making deliveries and staying alive. Constraint within messenger work also takes on a stylistic component as well. While less important than survival itself, the manner in which one does survive also becomes an issue. In other words, as described

above, the type of bike messengers ride, the manner in which they ride, and the clothes they choose to wear while they ride all become relevant.²⁷

The Piece-Rate System

The spontaneous action of messenger work arises largely out of the piece-rate system. Messengers are paid on commission. The effects of the piece-rate system on worker consciousness is the main focus of *Manufacturing Consent* (Burawoy 1979). Borrowing from Marx, Burawoy claims that the piece-rate work develops individuality and a sense of liberty, independence, and self-control. In the course of his research Burawoy, a critical Marxist, found himself immersed in the game of making out. “The difference between making out and not making out was thus not measured in the few pennies of bonus they earned but in their prestige, sense of accomplishment, and pride. Playing the game eliminated much of the drudgery and boredom associated with industrial work” (89). The labor process as a game is intensified within messenger work (see Stewart 2004). Like Burawoy, working as a messenger I quickly found myself subsumed in the game. While money was certainly a factor, having a larger number of runs at the end of the day had a high degree of symbolic importance. Regardless of income, it demonstrated my ability to handle myself in traffic. Being able to handle one’s self in traffic is a major criterion of judgment. For example, a group of messengers were looking to form a team for a upcoming race in Boston. I was invited by the group to come riding one Sunday. It was an audition of sorts. We cut through Bushwick, Brooklyn to the Kissena Velodrome in Queens. After an hour of aggressive riding and not stopping for a single red light, Josè remarked, “Well, now we know that we’re all riders.”

²⁷ The importance of messenger style conforms to Fine’s (1992) focus on aesthetic choices in occupations. In forging meaningful lives, elements of style (not just technical proficiency) become important (to vary degrees) to all workers.

The time constraints of deliveries combined with the shifting dangers of traffic provide a nearly inexhaustible challenge—physically and mentally.²⁸ In this way the optimal experience of flow is achieved and the ‘experiential anarchy’ of edgework is possible. Bob, a messenger of two years, provides some illustrative points. Bob works for Sprint Courier. Occasionally Sprint contracts Bob out to a firm which requires a high volume of deliveries for the day. ‘Time-service’ work pays by the hour and requires far less riding than a normal day at Sprint. While requiring less output, time-service also pays well under the \$100 benchmark. For Bob, however, the crucial issue was excitement. “I had no motivation to pedal. [The firm] told me to take a break. I didn’t want to take a break! ...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.” 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 explains, “The money isn’t as good... You are 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.”

Messengering as Edgework

Under the constraints of the piece-rate system the spontaneity of messengers can reach extreme heights. Excerpts from a poem written under the *nom de plume* of MSG (2000) is indicative of the edgework/flow experience:

“I’m adDictEd To My BiKe.
My bike gets me high.
High about a foot off the asphalt when I fly.
Fly like I’m not afraid.
[...]
Cutting through 8 busy lanes and ONE red light,
as if looking for the Grim Reaper to fight.

²⁸ For Dubin (1992), work can become a central life interest when it involves creativity, personal responsibility, and uncertainty. Within messenger work couriers are faced with uncertainty (an uncertainty of traffic and an uncertainty in pay). In facing this uncertainty messengers must develop creative solutions, and they are solely responsible for these solutions.

I feel like a ninja on the run...
JuSt KiLLInG EVERYONE!
[...]” (32)

Jason (1999) provides an excellent explanation of concentration, skill, and joy in negotiating traffic:

“The line is not an easy thing to describe. It’s appeared randomly through intervention divine or demonic, rising above the filth of 57th St., filling my view. No one else can see it, it exists for me alone. If you see the line once a month of workdays you’re lucky. Disregarding it is not an option. I know what I’ve gotta do and nothing else matters. I go. The package I’m supposed to be picking up at 545 Fifth Avenue has become irrelevant. The line demands one hundred percent of my attention. I’m in complete harmony with my bicycle. The red lights are not an issue; the line go’s [sic] 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” (9).

Jason’s sensations of omnipotence are echoed by Lars (1999) in free form prose:

“I’m jacked the fuck up... I have achieved transcendence through caffeine. Taking body and spirit to the next level of existence. No longer mortal, ability to hear all, see all, seeing through solid objects. X-Ray vision quite useful in this profession. Can see right through the traffic to spot the potential hazards that lie ahead. Cannot feel legs as they rotate pedals effortlessly” (8).

Another example is Stan. A messenger of several years, Stan started working at a job that paid by the hour. Although he had a guaranteed wage, Stan constantly complained of boredom. He clearly missed the excitement of speeding through the city. Stan’s comments and feelings are the same as Culley’s (2002) experiences at his first messenger job. Despite his guaranteed salary,

Culley found waiting on standby frustrating and boring. It is when he was crunched for time and racing through the city that he found enjoyment in being a messenger.

Identification with the Occupation

As mentioned above, while many messengers work as couriers because they lack other options, some messengers strongly identify with the occupation. For these messengers, being a courier is not simply a job but a lifestyle. As an advert for the 2000 Cycle Messenger World Championships reads, “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” (*Urban Death Maze* 2000: 21). Rick, a messenger of three years, provides numerous reasons for being a messenger. Rick has always liked sports. Being a messenger allows Rick to “air-out.” He loves being outside and the job frees him from “sitting behind a desk being strangled.” In explaining the difference between messengers who ride out of necessity and messengers immersed in the lifestyle, Rick comments, “you can see these guys riding in the city—they are going to *work*. ...I’m going to work, but I love it! I’m chillin’, seeing people I know.” Or, as Henry explained, “Being a messenger is a fun job for the most part. When the weather’s nice, you’re outside all day. Hot girls! It is exciting” (see also Kugelmass 1981).

While most work as messengers less than five years, lifestyle messengers still race and attend messenger parties 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.” Lifestyle messengers currently ‘off the road’ often reminisce about their days being a messenger. The story of Tony is illustrative. Tony had worked as a messenger for two years. When his girlfriend became pregnant he decided he needed a job which offered more money and less danger. Working in the mail-room 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. “Lets go play!” “Play” for Tony meant speeding through traffic with reckless abandon. While his new job provided more money,

he could not stand it. In talking about messengering, Tony commented, “It’s tearing me up not doing it.” Steve, a retired messenger with over 10 years on the road and the owner of Mother’s Courier, provides another example. “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” (quoted in Sutherland 2001).²⁹ For Adam, a messenger of six years, the thought of leaving the industry is a source of guilt. After six winters, Adam is not sure he can take another, but he sounds dejected as he tells me about looking for a new job. As Eric explains, “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” (quoted in Sutherland 2001).

It is interesting to note the occupations many retired lifestyle messengers have chosen. Rob, for example, has started working as an EMT. When I ask him why he chose the job, he cited “being outside and moving around.” Helping people was not mentioned. Henry is in the process of applying to become a fireman. Like Rob he wants a job with more security than being a bike messenger, but he still wants a job that is exciting. Arnold has enlisted to become a Navy S.E.A.L. Again, like Rob and Henry, he craves excitement and adventure. Like Rob, he cites neither duty nor chivalry in his motivations. For Arnold the job is about the danger. Of course, these three men are not representative of all messengers. However, even among lifestyle messengers that move on to less thrilling jobs, there is often an element of creativity involved. For instance, many of the retired messengers I met are now working in graphic design, advertising, or the arts. For veteran messengers who continue to ride, it is more than likely the lack of satisfying job options which motivates their continuation in the occupation. This is to

²⁹ Personally, I can attest to similar feelings. After a year in New York, riding in other cities and towns (especially Athens, GA) seemed far less thrilling and I deeply missed the excitement. Further, I often find myself *creating* situations in traffic which will reproduce at least some semblance of the excitement I found in New York. I returned to New York for the 2003 Halloween race, and was honestly elated to be back in the mix of heavy and congested traffic.

say, that barring exciting and dangerous jobs or jobs in an artistic field, many messengers seemingly choose messenger work because it is more enjoyable than regular work.³⁰

Boundary Work and Authenticity

The rational order segments work and leisure. In the name of efficiency, play has been removed from the workplace. For Seligman (1965) the advancement of technology in the workplace has increasingly narrowed the freedom and mobility of the individual. “There is no sense of achievement in [work]: it consequently becomes a form of non-work impeding the growth of personality and man’s effort to offer viable solutions to his civilization” (342). Seligman’s critique has been more recently reformulated by Sennett (1998) who argues that advanced capitalism is corroding personal character. Despite the inherent alienation in the rationalized workplace, most people certainly find some degree of satisfaction in their employment. Fine (1992), for example, documents the various ways that restaurant workers inject their own individual panache—and consequently their own self-definitions—into their occupation. For Nippert-Eng (1996) the primary issue is how workers manage the boundaries between home and work. The fact that work and leisure are not mutually exclusive worlds, however, does not negate the fact that a person’s occupation no longer provides their primary source of identity. As Lasch (1978), Gecas (1994), and Dubin (1992) have noted, in advanced capitalist societies it is in leisure time that the ‘authentic self’ is truly realized. Surber (1983), for instance, found leisure pursuits exceedingly relevant to intrinsic satisfaction and self-identity for

³⁰ While beyond the scope of this thesis, there are two very important questions raised by this observation. First, how relevant is the creative impulse in individuals choosing messenger work? Given the extremely negative stereotypes of messengers (especially in New York) it would be interesting to explore the possibility that individuals are drawn to the occupation because it provides a creative release absent in most occupations. Second, considering this idea of excitement and creativity, what is the life course of the lifestyle messenger? Do messengers willingly move into non-flow occupations seamlessly or with frustration? Do some messengers resist moving into safer occupations for fear of losing the flow experience?

white-collar workers. Not surprisingly, Surber's findings are more relevant for the working class who have more limited occupational choices (see Shamblin 1972; Wolfe 1991).³¹

For lifestyle messengers, the boundary between work and leisure has been obliterated. A conversation held with Joan, a messenger of two years, is telling. Joan and I were traveling to Boston for the weekend to participate in 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 so I brought my 'civilian' clothes. In other words, I had packed street shoes in addition to my cycling shoes and I brought pants which were not covered in patches from months of excessive wear. Joan looked at me rather confused, "Just be yourself." For Joan, there is no distinction between her work clothes and her leisure clothes. She always dresses 'like a courier' because she *is* a courier. Or as Eric states, "...I talk about 'yeah I'm going to get out of this shit, blah, blah, blah.' And I wake up in the morning and I see those two wheels and I want to get out there and be on it again. I should just quit talking shit and just be like, '*I am a messenger* and I'm always going to be a messenger'" (quoted in Sutherland 2001).

Not all messenger are engrossed with the lifestyle. For example, two of Sprint's most prominent riders, Malcolm and Lester, are completely disassociated from the messenger 'scene.' In speaking about a messenger party Lester snidely remarked, "They all had their messenger clothes on, and their bags." To this Malcolm replied, "And they all rode their bikes too, right? On a Saturday night?!?" Both laughed. Malcolm added, "Can't you be normal for just one day!" Finally, Lester concluded by saying, "I see these kids every day. Why would I want to party with them too?" As this conversation makes clear, not all messengers self-identify as messengers. This is to say, Malcolm and Lester only have messenger identities during the workday. Both Malcolm and Lester, like many of Sprint's employees, store their bikes at Sprint's office and change out of their work clothes every night before taking the subway home.

³¹ Surber's overall findings are not in line with the argument present here. For Surber, a decline in work satisfaction and an increase in leisure pursuits are not related. For the purposes of this paper, however, what is relevant is Surber's empirical evidence of the increasing importance of leisure activities for the self-identity of white-collar workers.

Identities in Action

For a lifestyle messenger, the actions that Lester and Malcolm find so absurd provide the foundation upon which an individual identity is constructed. Most of the off-work time I spent with messengers during our late nights and weekends were spent on our bikes. We wore the same clothes after work as during work. We always carried our bags and radios. Even without the motivating factor of money, we tackled the streets in the same manner. In other words, even when we had nowhere to go and we were in no rush, we ran every red light we could, we squeezed through any traffic jam in our way. My field notes for 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 West Village] to Broadway and Montrose [Bushwick, Brooklyn]. The Corredores did not care. They just rode right out in front of cars and expected them to stop. Several times Henry was like, "These guys are crazy."

Some nights, after working eight to nine hours, a group of us would get together and do laps around Central Park. As Henry has claimed on multiple occasions, "Loving to ride your bike is the only reason to do this job."

The ultimate expression of the merger between work and leisure are illegal messenger street races, known as alleycats. Alleycats replicate the workday as a game (see Stewart 2004). Instead of focusing around wages, these events are organized around the thrills of urban cycling. A long-time messenger and graduate student, Ben, comments, "Why do we, in our leisure time, try and make races as much like work as possible? ...It doesn't happen anywhere else. The equivalent would be running a marathon while solving math problems" (quoted in Reilly 2000). I think it is useful to see alleycats as a form of 'deep play' (Geertz 1973). More importantly, alleycats and the parties that surround them function as rituals attaching messengers to the

messenger lifestyle. In alleycats, edgework—the values of excitement, chaos, and the ability to control these situations— come to the fore. Money and prizes, while certainly salient, are secondary to the thrills of the race itself. Alleycats will be discussed at length in the following section.

VI. BICYCLE MESSENGERS AND DURKHIEMIAN RITUALS

Rituals and Reality: Theoretical Background

At least since the appearance of Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) sociologists have shown a persistent interest in the myriad of ways in which to produce society. According to Berger and Luckmann, reality is not inherently connected with 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 which is continually threatened and must actively be maintained through social interactions. The contingencies of human reality are the focal concern of Garfinkel's ethnomethodological work (1967). While Berger and Luckmann discuss dereification, their work presumes a stable world. Once created, institutions—recreated through language—provide a meaningful reality which shelters the individual from existential terror. With the original publication of *Of Grammatology* in 1967 (Derrida 1976), the assumed stability of Berger and Luckmann's cosmos would soon come into serious question (see Lemert 1992). Advancement of the capitalist enterprise has produced a hyper-reflexive concept of the self (Giddens 1991) and social worlds that are increasingly fragmented, discontinuous, and chaotic (Harvey 1989). The self, adrift in a world dislocated from its past and unanchored to its present, faces limitless multiplicity (Gergen 1991). The self is thus reduced to a Goffmanian actor—a faceless agent constantly applying masks (Dowd 1991). Following Jameson (1984), Dowd argues the self is no longer a viable sociological concept. Reality has been replaced by simulacra (Baudrillard 1975) and the self, in turn, has been reduced to the consumption of various styles.

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.

Building from Durkheim, Allan contends that ultimately reality is emotional. In other words, for reality to be really real it must be *felt*. “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” (Durkheim 1995: 211). Affect-meaning is therefore the true foundation of world-building. The importance of affect-meaning is hinted at by Denzin’s focus on emic ethnography (1989), the internalized second-nature of Bourdieu’s habitus (1990), Dowd’s formation of social identity (1994), and is illustrated in Wolfe’s (1991) personal accounts of his experiences riding with outlaw motorcyclists. Affect-meaning is primarily produced during rituals. “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 1995: 217). In rituals the self is lost in collective effervescence and symbols become charged with meaning. “Because of the weight of [the forces], we have no choice but to locate them outside ourselves... [And further], just as society consecrates men, so it also consecrates things, including ideas” (Durkheim 1995: 214-215).

For Allan, the principle function of rituals is the dampening of reflexivity. It is the highly reflexive nature of postmodernism that produces pervasive doubt. In this sense culture pulls itself apart. The project of the Enlightenment—which might be summarized as continual questioning and constant revision—has become institutionalized. Bereft of ultimate reason, the end result of modernity is ambivalence (Bauman 1991). For Allan, the blasé attitude first described by Simmel (1971) and later revived by Bauman is countered through reduced reflexivity. By reducing reflexivity and at the same time designating symbols as sacred (beyond doubt), culture is able to stabilize itself. This belief is at the heart of Durkheim’s (1995) exploration of elementary religious life.

While Allan has proposed the most comprehensive work on affect-meaning, other theorists have come to similar conclusions. As mentioned above, other theorists have had similar interests in the reduction of reflexivity. However, the analysis of Csikszentmihalyi, Mitchell,

Lyng, Batiuk and Sacks, while pointing to the importance of reflexivity in human action, fail to connect the reduction of 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. However, Mitchell does not link the objectification of styles and actions within the flow experience. As such, a crucial theoretical connection has gone unexplored. Taking the work of Allan, I hope to demonstrate the importance of such a connection. Through analyzing bicycle messenger street races as Durkheimian rituals, I intend to trace the creation of affect-meaning. More specifically, I shall connect the fusion of the “I” and “me” (reduced reflexivity) with the consecration of objects and ideas as symbolic totems of messenger values. These symbols, in turn, allow for the power of the rituals to be transported beyond the ritual event and thus reinforce a messenger identity beyond the race environment into everyday life.

Alleycats: What They Are

As mentioned above, for most of New York’s 2000+ messengers, being a bike courier is just a job. These messengers identify with the occupation to varying degrees, but their lifestyle is not directly influenced by being a bicycle messenger. For a few hundred of New York’s messengers there is more to the job than simply a pay check. As one messenger explained, “It’s an addiction, like messengering. It’s part of my life” (Pit 1998: 23). Among lifestyle messengers races are major social occasions. Gertrude, a messenger of several years, has proclaimed, “I live for these things! It is all I want to do.”³² Races vary in size. Smaller alleycats attract local and regional riders. Larger championship races draw couriers from across

³² It is interesting to note that women are significantly over-represented among lifestyle messengers. Over half of the women messengers I encountered in New York were actively part of the messenger scene. Additionally, races always brought a comparatively large number of female riders into town. Most notably, the women I met in New York were avid travelers, regularly participating in races across the globe.

the world.³³ 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, DC. For what it is worth, it should be mentioned that, despite my personal excitement about racing, I am a horrible racer. I rarely place better than the 25th percentile.

A messenger's workday consists of making pick-ups and deliveries at various locations across the city. At each delivery, a manifest must be signed. Alleycats mimic this basic structure. Racers are given 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 pick-ups 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 her manifest signed. Some alleycats require messengers to perform certain tasks (like puncturing their own tires and replacing the tubes or doing push-ups) before their manifests will be signed. In the course of 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, are held on closed courses.

Championship races held on closed courses are a source of contention for many messengers. As Jonathan commented about the 2003 NAC3, "It's got nothing to do with the skills of being a messenger." Conversely, Metropoloco, a week-long messenger event held in New York before the 2000 Cycle Messenger World Championships (CMWC) in Philadelphia

³³ The first Cycle Messenger World Championships (CMWC) were held in Berlin in 1993, and have been held every year since. National championships were developed later. The European Cycle Messenger Championships (ECMC) started in 1996. The NAC3 were first held in 1998, and Australia held national championships in 1999 and 2000. National championships are separate events from the CMWC. Placement at a national events has no bearing on the CMWC.

was a “*real messenger race*” (Henry). Metropoloco was a real messenger race because it was held in city traffic and involved checkpoints that more accurately replicated real messenger work. Likewise, at the 2003 NAC3 there was an informally titled “anti-NAC3” alleycat held after the championship. Again, the point being 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 championships are organized by messengers themselves. 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, after I moved from New York, 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 whether the race is held in open traffic or on a closed-course, a messenger race is no ordinary bicycle race. As previously explained, there is hardly anyone wearing spandex or helmets.³⁴ 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 and titanium racing bikes with eight 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 bike a ‘yuppy’ uses to do laps around Central Park. For example, after work one day a group of us were hanging out in Central Park. A man with a titanium Litespeed approached us and asked which courier company would be the best to work for. A few people responded by rambling off a few company names. After he left, several messengers started laughing. Mike, a rookie messenger, snipped, “Yeah, I’d like to see him work on that bike!” As mentioned above, New York messenger bikes are dinged and scratched, covered in stickers. The

³⁴ Championships, unlike alleycats, are legal events and, for this reason, require helmets. Since helmets are so rarely worn by couriers this can result in disputes between organizers and racers. At the 2003 NAC3, for instance, organizers spent a great deal of time patrolling the various events and stopping riders attempting to ride without helmets.

scene surrounding a race looks like “a collision between the Tour de France field and the cast of Mad Max” (Wood 1994: 2). In an alleycat there are very few rules. Or as several people have said, ‘There are no rules.’

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 writes, “I jetted 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. This was before 12:30 AM” (“Messenger Mass Ride,” 1999: 3). It is worth mentioning that heavy drinking and binge drug use is very 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 or whether “real drug dealers will know to be there anyway.” At this same meeting a messenger was asked 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 any more. 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 come to races and do not even bother racing. The entire event is just seen as one huge 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.

Alleycats: What They Mean

The Conditions for Reduced Reflexivity

Durkheimian rituals require a common focus of attention, common emotional mood, ecological concentration, and interaction pace (Allan 1998). Additionally, network density, past ritual encounters, and anticipation all factor into a successful ritual setting (Allan and Kidder, unpublished). Alleycats meet all of these requirements.

Lifestyle messengers associate mostly among themselves. After-hour relaxation, parties, and weekends are spent largely with other messengers. The negative portrayals in the mass media, coupled with discriminatory and often hostile treatment by drivers, office workers, and security guards, adds to the effects of network density. Fights with drivers, or at least the potential to fight, is 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) “Whenever I think about not wearing it I find myself in a situation where I need it [as a weapon].” Messengers have a sense of struggling against the world—‘us against them.’ For example, one night after work 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 his side-view mirror smacked me across the back. If I had fallen over the odds of me being run over by his vehicle or the car to my left were exceptionally high. I explained to Henry that I could not believe that someone could hold another’s life in such low regard. To my story Henry, with over 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. 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.

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 many 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 in discussion. For example, while it happened four years prior to my arrival in New York, I heard several people retell the events of the 1998 Thanksgiving race. During the final sprint the second position rider reached forward grabbing the seat post of the leader and pulled him back as he propelled himself to the lead.³⁵ Similarly, the story of a well-known road bike rider winning a track bike only race was told to me on more than one occasion. Culley (2002) mentions a Chicago messenger who raced an entire alleycat against the flow of traffic and earned himself the award of ‘Chicago’s Most Dangerous Messenger.’ On another occasion, Charles recounted a Boston 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 their bikes to a strip club instead. Upon returning to New York, this story was constantly repeated 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

³⁵ This incident created a great deal of dispute (see “Alleycat Report,” 1998). By all accounts, the maneuver was reckless and mean-spirited. Conversely, several messengers contended that alleycats should have no rules and such behavior should be accepted. After some debate, the racer was disqualified.

prone to deep cynicism, illustrates this point, “I know this sounds gay, but I love traveling to other towns and racing. It is just so much fun!”³⁶

During a race there is an obvious focus of attention. This focus of attention is exceptionally high because the issue is not simply winning, but actually staying alive. Racing through city traffic (running red lights, dodging cars, missing pedestrians, avoiding potholes and other obstacles) requires a complete dedication of the senses. As Kid explained, urban cycling has less to do with leg power and much more to do with the ability to predict the behavior of traffic and calculating one’s own trajectory within that traffic. In this sense, a racer’s mind should always be at peak performance.

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 provide 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. 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. Moreover, there were hard feelings when they 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 New York City 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’m not here to win. I’m here to have a good time and hopefully cause some damage to this city.” During my time as a messenger, Vinny set up several “fun rides.”

³⁶ Readers of earlier drafts have commented on the machismo apparent in this ethnography. As previously stated, messengers are predominately young men. As such, there does exist certain attitudes of chauvinism, sexism, and homophobia. Research on this subject could prove very interesting. Although, such an analysis is beyond the scope of this thesis. I should add that whatever negative attributes might be part of the messenger’s social world, it is by no means exceptional. For such a dangerous and male-dominated occupation, I noticed far less hyper-masculinity than expected. For instance, Reilly (2000), while paying special attention to the additional hardships borne by women within the occupation also details the vast amounts of support (physical, emotional, and financial) present within courier communities across the United States. It is also worth noting that the two top-placing messengers in 2003 CMWC were both females.

While technically races, Vinny's rides specifically stressed the fun of racing over the competition of racing. After one of these races, there was a dispute about whether a rider should be disqualified. As one racer screamed at another, Vinny calmly ask, "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 hard feelings over not winning.

The start and finish of a messenger race are crowded areas littered with messengers, bikes, and bags. People mill about drinking and socializing. During the race the ecological concentration is generally low, but often racers ride in small packs and work together forcing their way through crowded intersections. The interaction pace during a race is slow, but before and after the race it is high. The pre-race and after-race events offer bookends to the race itself—anticipation of the race about to start and recounting the race that 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 which 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 which is important, but the social interactions that accompany the race. 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, etc., 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.

Dampened Reflexivity and the Weight of Society

For Durkheim (1995) the function of the ritual was to provide the voice of God—to make one's actions and behaviors appear supra-natural 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. The work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and Lyng (1990) demonstrates how the intense focus of attention found in events like alleycats result in reduced reflexivity. Compounding this dampening of reflexivity are the social interactions in which they are entwined. These actions are not happening in isolation, but instead occur within a group. Further, these actions are idealized expressions of messenger work—all the danger and excitement without dispatchers and clients getting in the way. Consider, for example, some scenes from Monster Track IV. There are over 120 track bikes lying across the ground and leaned against the fences of Tompkin's Square Park on a chilly Saturday afternoon. Over 120 messengers are lined up about fifty feet from their bikes standing in the grass. Some people are joking and talking. Others are staring straight ahead, their expressions lost in anticipation. The race will be started LeMans-style with racers sprinting to their bikes. My stomach is in my throat. The courier next to me is so excited he honestly looks like he might wet his pants. Finally the countdown starts. The messenger who set up the race, standing on a park bench, yells, "3-2-1-Go!" 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 do them in any order. The only rules for the race 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 Tompkin's Square Park first wins. I head north up Avenue A. There are about 30 riders in my immediate sight. As we turn left onto 14th Street and then right onto First, 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, and weaving in and out of cars, screaming at pedestrians to get out of the way. By the time I hit 80th Street, I'm feeling 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 Tompkin's.³⁷ I am delirious. I've stopped thinking about anything—save for finishing. A messenger from DC, lost in Manhattan, has taken my wheel 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 save the messengers who already finished. As the last of the racers comes in, people relax, drink beers, and talk amongst themselves.

This is deep play—the ordering of meanings within an encompassing structure (Geertz 1973). For Geertz, the Balinese ideals of “death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, [and] chance” are expressed within the cockfight (1973: 443). Alleycats should be read in the same manner. What it means *to be* a messenger are displayed and enacted at these events. These races portray danger and independence (excitement and autonomy). Further, performed within a state of flow, the messenger can feel the race as something outside her own creation. With regards to the flow experience, Jason's previous comments are notable, “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” (1999: 9). In other words, actions are reduced to instinct and those instincts are mobilized by a set of conditions which, because of their social context, seem objectively real. This is the “demon of oratorical inspiration” discussed by Durkheim (1995: 212). Building from the collective effervescence of

³⁷ For those familiar with Manhattan, it will be clear that this race covered a large portion of the island. Alleycats vary greatly in the mileage they cover. Monster Track IV was long for an alleycat. The 2002 Halloween race, for instance, was much shorter: although there were over twice as many checkpoints, they were all located below Houston St.

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 herself. 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 like I was 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 covered before red lights we simply flew past them. Where others feared the cars roaring beside them, we just swerved before them. 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 fool-hearted.

Designating the Sacred

The discrepancy between the image messengers hold of themselves—"New York's craziest," "New York's fastest," "outlaws," "rebels without brakes"—arise 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 1995: 230). Further, we can comprehend this religious force, "only in connection with a concrete object whose reality we feel intensely" (Durkheim 1995: 221).

Bicycles, messenger bags, clothing, manifests, etc., all become totems to the messenger who races. For instance, as described above, track bikes are considered the archetypical messenger bike. While a minority of messengers actually ride track bikes, they are considered *the* bike of choice among messengers. 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 away with a lot more.”

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’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 rookie would be riding a track bike. Over the last several years, track bikes have grown in popularity among non-messengers. Adam snidely commented one day that, “Track bikes are trendy now.” For Adam track bikes are a distinguishing feature of a messenger and their use among non-messengers is mildly irritating. The sacredness of bicycles can be further illustrated. 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 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 upon the impromptu art. José, one of the younger members of the group replied, “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.” “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...” (2000: 11). One evening after work, a group of messengers and myself were hanging out 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.” Equally so, I occasionally heard veteran messengers speak negatively about rookies who too quickly adapted 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 radios and bags, but about undeserving messengers wearing two hallmarks of messenger style.

This transmutation of effervescence occurs not only with objects but also on ideas. For example, speed and a disregard for traffic laws can be thought of as a purely economic matter during the workday. In a race, however, they become values in their own right—the values of excitement and autonomy. With regards to excitement, 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). Conversely, Arnold’s disinterest in winning and focus on chaos (causing “damage” to the city) can be understood as a focus on autonomy. This is a dynamic feature. Alleycats were created to simply 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. 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” (quoted in Sutherland 2001).

Alleycats have become institutionalized. Within this institutionalization, formerly ethereal ideals have been dramatized into a concrete reality. In other words, when a new courier enters the social world of the lifestyle messenger they enter 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). For instance, during the workday Rick would always have informal races with another messenger whom 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. The rationality of the race—“who’s the fastest”—as superceded the rationality of the occupation—“who’s the best courier.” The essential point here is that these values are not produced simply

through cognition (language), but also through the emotional charge acted out in alleycats and symbolized through its totems.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, for lifestyle messengers races serve as rituals which not only reflect messenger values, but produce affect-meaning which allows these values to be internalized as objectively real. Alleycats allow messengers to achieve a state of flow. Flow is an intrinsically enjoyable experience. However, the analysis must go further than that. The fusion of the “I” and “me” produce a sense of hyper-reality—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. In other words, the group is not acting under the rubric of unlimited choice, but instead the group is behaving in the only meaningful way possible. The ‘way *we* do things’ becomes the ‘way things *are*.’ 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 non-ritual life. The bicycle, for instance, becomes a symbol of autonomy and excitement. The racer comes to associate her bike with races. 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.

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, in spite of such theorization of fragmentation and multiplication, in *real life* people do continue to function. At the social world level, I proposed with Allan (1998) that meaning construction should be understood as not simply cognitive, but also a function of reduced reflexivity and the emotional charge given to actions and meanings within this state. In analyzing culture in this way, we can understand how people in the postmodern world still manage to forge meaningful lives.

A critical approach can be taken towards messenger work. After all, it is an extremely dangerous job in which the vast majority of workers have no benefits or health insurance.

Messenger companies, in a very literal sense, get rich off the backs of workers. Messengers' bodies are used and abused and discarded with only minimal compensation for their labor. As Burawoy (1979) observes, making out—regardless of why workers play the game—benefits the owning class.

A major purpose of this thesis has been to connect the idea of spontaneity and constraint to the construction of identities. More specifically, in defining messenger work as edgework (or flow), I have sought to illuminate how messengers fuse the spheres of work and leisure. By participating in (or for that matter creating) a work environment that is characterized by the elements of play (the fusion of the “I” and “me”), bicycle messengers live highly integrated lives. For the lifestyle messenger, the authentic-self is constituted both in and out of work. The work activities of messengers affect leisure activities. The formation of alleycats provides an excellent example of this. Conversely, the primacy of alleycats within the messenger lifestyle has inevitably affected work activities by emphasizing the values of excitement (Stewart 2004).

Weber's vision of a disenchanting world still haunts our lives almost a hundred years following the publication of his famous treatise on capitalism.³⁸ Within the iron cage, purpose and meaning are increasingly divorced from the individual's life. By allowing for spontaneous action (the fusion of the “I” and “me”) within the constraints of economical and physical survival, messengering offers action intimately connected to purpose—a re-enchanting world. This is no small issue, and it is perhaps a bit ironic that such an individually empowering job regresses labor relations back to the nineteenth century. While not a threat to the capitalist system, on an individual level, messenger work stands in sharp contrast to the alienation experienced in our rationalized society (Sennett 1998). To quote one messenger, “Personally, I

³⁸ “Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and work out its ideal in the world, material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history. To-day the spirit of religious asceticism—whether finally, who knows?—has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Where the fulfilment of the calling cannot directly be related to the highest spiritual and cultural values, or when, on the other hand, it need not be felt as economic compulsion, the individual generally abandons the attempts to justify it at all” (Weber, 1958: 181-182).

‘do messengering’ because of both extremes: 1) It’s just a job 2) It’s the job that I love” (Phoenix 2001: 26).

In this thesis I have addressed four topics. Using Sassen’s (1994) concept of global cities I have attempted to connect messengers to the post-industrial economy. Next, I have traced a brief history of the occupation and provided an explanation of the job. More importantly, following Batiuk and Sacks (1981) I have used Marx (1963) and Mead (1962) to view messengering as spontaneous action. I argue that by fusing the “I” and “me” messenger work charges production with a meaningful character often neglected in rationalized society (Weber 1958). Finally, I argue along with Allan (1998) the reduced reflexivity produced by the fusion of the “I” and “me” allows action actions to become supra-meaningful. During the deep play of alleycats, messengers are subsumed within a ritual atmosphere that reifies an otherwise contingent reality.

In the end this thesis has three main goals. First, following Blumer (1969) and Geertz (1973), I believe that it is essential for sociology to explore the life-worlds of those around us. I have, therefore, provided ethnographic details of the bike messenger social world. Second, I have attempted to connect this social world to rationalization. Namely, I have viewed lifestyle messengers as, by and large, reacting against the stagnation and conformity of the iron cage. Third, and most importantly, I attempted to explain how the messenger’s participation within the social world relates to reality construction. This is to say, I have argued that it is through ritual interactions that meanings and identities are forged by couriers. Ultimately, this third goal expands beyond messengers and into everyone’s daily life. As sociologist, we must seriously address the postmodern critique. At the same time, however, we cannot ignore the empirical realities of the world around us. In other words, despite what many postmodern theories have claimed, when we go out into the real world we find fully operable selves functioning within a concrete universe. By studying the rituals and symbols of the messenger world I have sought to illuminate how people produce and reproduce reality in social action.

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