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**Identification and commitment: The Harley-Davidson
motorcycle as a contested symbolic resource**

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San Jose State University, 1994

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IDENTIFICATION AND COMMITMENT:
THE HARLEY-DAVIDSON MOTORCYCLE AS A CONTESTED SYMBOLIC RESOURCE

A Thesis

Presented To

The Faculty of the Department of Communication Studies
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Richard Jefferson Webb

August, 1994

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Richard Jefferson Webb

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Shawn Spano", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Shawn Spano

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ABSTRACT

IDENTIFICATION AND COMMITMENT: THE HARLEY-DAVIDSON MOTORCYCLE AS A CONTESTED SYMBOLIC RESOURCE

by Richard J. Webb

This thesis examines the arguments by which subcultural members validate their own and invalidate competing interpretations of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle as a symbolic resource. In-depth interviews with Harley-Davidson owners revealed that similar interpretations produced identification among owners; dissimilar interpretations produced division. Dissimilar interpretations were evaluated by subjects' assessments of the perceived commitment of others to (1) riding and (2) working on their motorcycles.

As a contribution to the theoretical framework of Cultural Studies, the explicit objective of this study was to push a theoretical assertion to a level at which it has rarely been substantiated, i.e., that cultural life is a dialectical phenomenon. Previous Cultural Studies projects present oppositional reformulations of symbolic resources as subcultural resistance to dominant cultural hegemony; few have considered the processes by which those resources are reclaimed as dominant cultural property.

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It is with genuine respect and the sincerest gratitude for their cooperation that I dedicate this study to my informants. May they always find freedom in the wind.

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CHAPTER ONE
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

In the final few moments of Fonda and Hopper's (1969) cult classic *Easy Rider*, Wyatt and Billy are blown from the seats of their Harley-Davidson motorcycles by shotgun blasts from a passing pickup truck:

Driver: Hey, Roy, look at them ginks!

Roy: Pull alongside, we'll scare the hell out of 'em. [To Billy] Want me to blow your brains out? Why don't you get a haircut?
(Fonda, Hopper, & Southern, 1969, pp. 184-185).

With no more lengthy a preamble, Roy shoots. His "motive" for the murder of two unknown motorcyclists appears to be a general contempt for people who look and behave unlike residents of the rural Louisiana countryside. Within this cultural microcosm, long hair, outlandish clothing, and customized motorcycles symbolize immorality, irresponsibility, and presumably all that is otherwise wrong with the world. The scene can be considered a metaphor for cultural clash on a larger scale, in which difference is treated as subordination by those with a vested interest in the established social order.

On that larger scale, age, class, gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation constitute foci for the repression and domination of those who exist on the margins or outside the borders of the dominant Eurocentric patriarchal culture. Those on the margins have few alternatives but to employ the symbolic resources of the dominant culture, but they attempt to liberate alternative worldviews by reinventing symbolic composition and meaning. It is therefore easy to understand why, in a perceived climate of repression and intolerance for difference, those on the margins resist the colonization of

their symbolic resources. The ability to control the presentation and meaning of symbolic resources is an important source of power, vital for those whose history and identity are otherwise delegitimized. In other words, language, music, ritual, and physical objects constitute contested domains over which various groups vie for ownership and control, and in which the power and identity of individuals and their competing cultures are established, resisted, and defended. "The tensions between dominant and subordinate groups can be found reflected in the surfaces of subculture--in the styles made up of mundane objects which have a double meaning" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 2).

A variety of means are employed in attempts to dominate the discourse of those on the margins and, by reducing the varieties of discourse, reduce the bases for protest and social change. Those who threaten to disturb existing distributions of authority and privilege are disempowered to the extent that their symbolic resources and cultural expressions can be colonized by supporters of the established order. However, "an overreliance on ideology critique has limited our ability to understand how people actively participate in the dominant culture through processes of accommodation, negotiation, and even resistance" (Giroux, 1992, p. 195). Research is needed which reports and interprets those processes as the symbolic activity of opposing cultural participants, through which expansion of and resistance to dominant cultural hegemony are accomplished. "The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 17).

Symbolic resources and cultural expressions, then, represent sites of struggle in which discursive and nondiscursive practices are used to construct meanings which affirm or deny the conflicting values and interests of competing social groups. For the purposes of the present study, the language of colonization and liberation provides a vocabulary for describing this struggle. Dominant groups enhance and protect their authority and privilege by overdetermining the meaning of symbolic resources. Commodification and the "corporate capture of public expression" (Schiller, 1989, p. 89) concentrate inordinate cultural influence within an exclusive universe of discourse. *Symbolic liberation* describes attempts to recenter marginalized identities by "opening up the world of objects to new and covertly oppositional readings" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 102). Much of the recent work in Cultural Studies, an emergent critical framework predominantly associated with the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in England, has focused upon the cultural practices of various subordinated groups, which reconstitute the symbolic resources of the dominant culture (Grossberg, 1992; Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1987, 1988; Willis, 1977, 1978, 1990). This reconstitution is accomplished by presenting symbolic resources in new ways which violate the original intentions of the dominant culture. Generally, these studies illuminate the ways in which resistance to marginalization and dominant cultural hegemony is practiced by repressed subcultural memberships through interpretations of the ordinary which are calculated to shock and repel those with more vested interests in the established standards of the dominant culture. In the literature of Cultural Studies, this symbolic activity is referred to as *bricolage*, a term generally credited to Levi-Strauss (1966).

But what happens when shock, fear, or revulsion give way to interest or approval; when the dominant cultural elite cross subcultural borders and colonize the expanded territory of the symbolic artifact? *Symbolic colonization* describes the process by which the dominant culture reclaims or appropriates these resources. When the symbolic resources of marginalized groups are made to surrender their oppositional meanings, a new struggle emerges over their ownership and the power to define their significance (Grossberg, 1992). Whether the struggle remains centered upon the original resource in question, or whether disputants withdraw and search for new symbolic domains to colonize or liberate, depends upon the significance of the originally contested symbolic resource.

Statement of the Problem

One interesting and scarcely considered site of such struggle is the Harley-Davidson motorcycle. I originally became aware of the existence of a problem while attending a motorcycle parts swap meet in 1985, when a conflict arose between two groups of Harley-Davidson riders. One group, riders of customized motorcycles powered by then-common "Panhead" and "Shovelhead" motors, began chastising and ridiculing another group riding brand new "Evolution" series motorcycles. At the time, the newly redesigned motors had just been introduced and had not gained wide acceptance among "traditional" Harley-Davidson enthusiasts, who, for the moment, should be understood as members of a distinctive counterculture (Posnansky, 1989). The conflict appeared to concern a perceived violation of cultural territory. The traditionalists objected both to the appearance of the expensive, new, factory-stock (i.e., unmodified) motorcycles; and to their riders, whose clothing, grooming, speech, and demeanor were inconsistent with the codes

generally taken for granted at gatherings of this sort. Immediately following the incident, a number of the traditionalists appeared to agree that the others lacked an essential degree of commitment to the "biker lifestyle" and therefore could not be considered "real" bikers.

Although the new motors rapidly gained acceptance among the large majority of enthusiasts, tension often emerges whenever counterculture bikers encounter, or even talk about, the "new breed" of Harley-Davidson owners. In an attempt to understand the dynamics and implications of this conflict, this study presents the Harley-Davidson motorcycle as a contested symbolic resource, then compares and contrasts the discursive practices through which contestants validate their own and invalidate opposing interpretive claims. More specifically, this conflict is investigated against the theoretical backdrop of Cultural Studies, which argues that the cultural significance of symbolic resources is not irresistibly predetermined. Instead, the cultural sites at which meaning is created are highly localized. Multiple readings may exist simultaneously, except to the extent that privileged interpretations garner the complicit support of the public through control of the apparatus of the established culture industry (Schiller, 1989).

Conceptual Parameters

This section establishes parameters for the terms *culture*, *symbol*, and *identification* as used in the present study. Because their theoretical utility to a number of disciplines has expanded the range of their potential meanings, such clarification is advisable.

Culture

Culture is most readily defined as the "civilization, customs, artistic achievements, etc., of a people, especially at a certain stage of its development

or history" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989a, Vol. 4, p. 121). A comprehensive discussion of the various interpretations and extensions of the concept is neither crucial to the purpose nor within the scope of this study (see Carbaugh 1988; Conquergood, 1991; Geertz, 1973; Philipsen, 1987, 1992; Rosaldo, 1989; Van Maanen, 1988). Grossberg (1992), under the influence of Williams (1958), is perhaps most helpful in attempting to articulate the sense in which the term is generally used within the framework of Cultural Studies. Linking "the various concepts of culture . . . to the emergence of 'the modern'. . . where 'the modern' is understood as a particular articulation of historical processes, structures of experience and cultural practices" (Grossberg, 1992, p. 23), we may consider culture itself to be a particular convergence of historical processes and structures of experience expressed through symbolic activity.

As a symbolic domain, a *dominant culture* may comprise a number of *subcultures*, or tributary cultures, which diverge and overlap in a variety of ways contributing to cultural richness and symbolic variety, but which essentially conserve and stabilize dominant cultural values and institutions. A *counterculture* may be considered a subset of the class of subcultures, with the important distinction "that [it] rejects established social values and practices, [endorsing] a mode of life opposed to the conventional or dominant" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989b, Vol. 3, p. 1025). Because the experiences of individuals and groups consist of elements which are commonly understood within a given historical context, dominant cultures emerge which articulate those understandings through the symbolic activity of their members. Because experiences often differ in ways through which dominant meanings become problematic, subcultures and countercultures articulate views which are marginalized in the discourse of the dominant culture.

Despite the less discriminating sense in which the word *subculture* is generally used in the literature of the human sciences, the distinction between a subculture and a counterculture is meaningful and, for the purposes of the present study, significant. Countercultures, as do all subcultures, depend upon the symbolic resources of the dominant culture, and conserve many of its predominant interpretations. Beyond certain limits, however, the symbolic activity of a counterculture is inherently oppositional, and the communicative tensions it produces deserve special and explicit consideration. In particular, this study divides the broader subculture of Harley-Davidson owners into a counterculture whose symbolic activities often violate the values and behavioral norms of the dominant culture, and an emergent subculture whose appearance undermines the counterculture critique.

Symbol

A *symbol* "is constituted from a semantic perspective such that it provides a meaning by means of a meaning. In it a primary, literal, worldly, often physical meaning refers back to a figurative, spiritual, often existential, ontological meaning which is in no way given outside this indirect designation" (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 28). There is no limit to the range of phenomena which may constitute symbols, but the "symbolic does not reside in this or that symbol" (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 59). The symbolic resides in a relationship between phenomena, discourse, and allegory, created by the cultural practices of people in specific historical contexts.

For the purposes of the present study, a distinction is made between a symbol or symbolic resource, and symbolic activity. Cronkhite (1986) contends that it is a focus on symbolic *activity* which distinguishes Communi-

cation Studies from other disciplines, which study the varieties of symbolic phenomena, such as Linguistics, Anthropology, Psychology, and Sociology.

My own preference would be to define the domain as including primarily pragmatic functions of symbolic activity, the effects of symbol systems upon those who use them. Pragmatic functions include, for me, the effects of symbols in achieving understanding and belief, as well as their effects upon and interactions with the perceptions, cognitions, social systems, and cultures of their users (Cronkhite, 1986, p. 236).

The pragmatic functions of symbolic activity depend upon a complex but constrained process of negotiation. The constraint is a result of the generative force of symbols (Burke, 1953), i.e., their power to influence, as well as be influenced by, their users. A symbol may, "by its power of formula" (Burke, 1953, p. 58), cause its users to reproduce explicit interpretations. For Ricoeur (1974), the *substance* of symbols is indestructible: "they constitute the *revealing* substrate of speech which lives among men. In short, the symbol *gives rise to thought*" (p. 299). More than thoughts and interpretations are at stake here, however. The generative power of symbols gives rise to and reproduces cultures and social systems themselves (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). Subcultures and countercultures in particular may emerge and evolve as complex social constructions through the generative power of symbolic resources, as well as through decisions on the part of people who devise or choose symbols for the purpose of identifying cultural groups (Cohen, 1980).

What is negotiable is the allure of the symbol, a product of the method of its presentation, or *style* (Burke, 1953), and the needs and dispositions of individuals. Disposition describes the condition resulting from being born into a social context possessing specific cultural determinants (such as class, language, and value hierarchies), and is reflected, for example, in whether one is drawn to motorcycles, metaphysics, or marriage. Although symbolic

activity is definitive of the human condition, the centrality of specific symbols in individual and cultural lives varies considerably. Most symbols fail to capture our conscious attention, "unless some new element of appeal is to be found there" (Burke, 1953, p. 61). Some, however, are of central importance to specific cultural groups. Methods of presentation which transform the significance of symbols for various groups may be expected to produce changes in the identity of those groups and their members. When those changes are controlled from outside a group for whom the symbol is central, profound tensions are likely to emerge.

This study examines the social processes through which the symbolic significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle has evolved, with particular attention to transformative presentations by various cultural users. Changes in the presentation of the symbol produce changes in the composition and culture of its users, and in the range of its possible interpretations. More specifically, this study highlights the communicative practices by which the motorcycle as a symbolic phenomenon is linked to ontological categories of individual and cultural identification.

Identification

Identification is a process closely tied to identity, which Cheney and Tompkins (1987) define as "what is commonly taken as representative of a person or group" (p. 5). "We form selves or identities through various properties or substances, including physical objects, occupations, friends, activities, beliefs, and values" (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1985, p. 158). The substance of these various phenomena, through which identities are formed, is entirely symbolic. Identification results from the appropriation of the symbolic substance of identity, not merely in the sense of acquiring, but particularly in the

sense of investing in, personal and cultural relationships (Cheney & Tompkins 1987), a process of sharing that Burke (1950) described as *consubstantiality*. "Consubstantiality . . . allows for communication because of the shared meaning it creates for the symbols used" (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 180).

One way in which identity-formation occurs is through the selection and management of commitments (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987). In fact, commitment, "the pledging or binding of the individual to behavioral acts" (Kiesler, 1971, p. 30), constitutes an investment of self based upon personal interpretations and evaluations of symbolic resources. Congruent interpretations and equivalent commitments among individuals permit identification. When interpretations and commitments conflict, identification with others is diminished and symbolic investments are placed at risk, the consequences of which depend upon the significance of the investment.

The importance of the link between identification and commitment is that "each may be used as a perspective from which to [critically] examine the other" (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987, p. 11). Hauser (1986) contends that "identification is a *dialectical* term. A dialectical term is one that implies its opposite. . . . To be attracted to one view implies that you forgo its opposing views" (p. 133). The implications with respect to the present study are revealed by Klemencic (1994), who notes that the increasing tendency to label others produces harmful divisions within the motorcycling community. For example, some new arrivals to the Harley-Davidson scene are labeled Yuppie Bikers or RUB's (Rich, Urban Bikers) by the popular press, by others who identify themselves differently, and sometimes even by themselves. The traditionalists are Scooter Trash or Outlaw Bikers, "which does not [necessarily] refer to gang members but, instead, is a label for hard-core, my-Harley-is-my-life loner types"

(Klemencic, 1994, p. 2). The label *biker*, which for many connotes the *outlaw* biker, is one of many contested signifiers. "I can't think of another recreational activity where labels have become so prevalent . . . Let's not forget that we have the same common bond. We're Motorcyclists, or better yet, Enthusiasts, plain and simple. Regardless of brand, income, or sex" (Klemencik, 1994, p. 2).

There is, however, nothing "plain and simple" in this sense about the importance of brand, income, or sex. These words literally represent themes which figure prominently in the identity-formation of many Harley-Davidson owners. The clash between subculture and counterculture may be the result of incommensurate interpretations of the symbolic significance of the motorcycle. Harley-Davidson ownership itself is less a factor in producing identification than are the specific cultural practices to which the motorcycle is put. This study examines those cultural practices and the rival interpretations by which the subculture of RUBs and the counterculture of outlaws can be identified and distinguished from (and by) each other. More specifically, it attempts to uncover the symbolic themes through which Harley-Davidson owners construct their identities and identify with or distinguish themselves from other owners. In talking about their identities, individuals describe the conditions under which identification is made possible.

Review of the Literature

This section first summarizes the findings of previous researchers which bear on the cultural significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle. Second, it discusses the formation of the prevailing association between the motorcycle and the outlaw biker counterculture. Third, it presents the symbolic activity of the counterculture as bricolage. Fourth, it introduces the

emergent subculture of rich, urban bikers. Finally, it surveys the struggle for symbolic ownership of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle, and presents the research questions that directed the course of the present study.

A Sociological Perspective

On a fundamental level, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle is a commodity, a mode of personal transportation produced for sale by a comparatively small U.S. manufacturer. Its association with various groups and events, however, constitutes the historical process by which its symbolic significance has evolved.¹ It reflects a complex set of relations between capital, labor, and the marketplace (Middlehurst, 1990; Wright, 1987). Its success as a racer has contributed to its enduring status as a symbol of power (Bolfert, 1991; Middlehurst, 1990; Wright, 1987). Its adoption for use by the armed forces and by police departments across the country linked it symbolically to the culture of uniformed authority and American supremacy (Bolfert, 1991; Wright, 1987).

Its most profound contemporary signification, however, derives from its association with the counterculture of outlaw bikers. The bikes and their riders reflexively generate an aura of working-class machismo, toughness, power, danger, and immorality. Outlaw bikers have been analyzed as a reactive subculture, exhibiting the frustration reactions normally restrained in members of the lower or working class (Montgomery, 1976, 1977; Watson, 1980). Unable or unwilling to subscribe to conventional standards of behavior or models of success, reactive subcultures are "motivated to lash out at the middle class, or to emulate its success ladder" (Montgomery, 1976, p. 334), albeit according to deviant criteria. There is, in fact, considerable evidence to support this interpretation of the biker counterculture, particularly as it appeared during the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's. During that time, ownership of a Harley-

Davidson motorcycle strongly suggested that the owner was an enthusiast in a veritably fanatical sense. Roadside breakdowns were an inevitability, so mechanical competence and a willingness to get burned, bruised, and dirty were prerequisites. For many, this willingness was in fact an inclination which expressed masculine strength, earthiness, self-sufficiency, and disregard for comfort and appearance. Ownership also implied adherence to a complex code of values, perhaps epitomized by a recognition of other bikers as "brothers," a relational expression that persists to this day. Among brothers, showing "class" substantiates one's commitment to the values of the community, generally through "righteous" behavior that often simultaneously offends the sensibilities of the respectable middle class (Montgomery, 1976; Posnansky, 1989; Watson, 1982).

True class can be gross, outrageous, touching, violent, beautiful, sad, and funny. It can be as smooth as Kojak's head, or as hairy as Madonna's underarms. The only requirements: it's gotta be real and it's gotta have heart. If you've been ridin' the Biker highway for a coupla or so years--you probably know what I'm talking about. It's instinctive and personal. More than likely, your idea of class won't be the same as that of a Gucci-Loafered Beverly Hills money-grubber (Hangman, 1986, p. 10).

Today, however, with "Big Twin" Harley-Davidsons priced in the \$15,000 range and prominent business and entertainment personalities redefining the biker image, the subculture appears much less reactive and far from status-frustrated.

Others have compared bikers to cults, creeds, or religious sects (Hopper & Moore, 1983; Middlehurst, 1990; Watson, 1982). A sect may be defined as

a small fellowship of converts who seek to realize the good life in a highly stylized and specialized way. A sect does not attempt to win the world; rather, it seeks exclusiveness. It is convinced that it alone has found the answer to the way people should live. At times, sects prescribe specific patterns of dress and set themselves apart from the rest of the world through fervent, ritualistic activities. In essence, a sect

rejects the popular or mainstream social environment in which it exists (Hopper & Moore, 1983, p. 62).

The comparison is persuasive in many respects. However, for the purposes of the present study, there is no need to overemphasize the distinction; interpretations of outlaw bikers as a religious sect and as a reactive subculture overlap considerably. The ambiguity of the difference is reflected by Hopper and Moore (1983), who have subheaded a section of their report, "Outlaw Culture as Religion" (p. 62, *italics added*), by Watson (1982), who explicitly describes bikers as a subculture, but employs the term "sect" in a metaphorical sense for descriptive and analytical purposes, and by Willis (1978), who, in a study which focused upon an English motorcycle club, introduces the concept of "profane"--commonly understood as the opposite of sacred--culture. Central to both sect and culture interpretations, however, is the Harley-Davidson motorcycle, which is a symbol as commanding of loyalty as The Flag is to a patriot, and of devotion as The Cross is to a Christian. "[T]he motorcycle is almost literally a sacred object, having the power to transport them beyond ordinary experiences . . . The favorite motorcycle of outlaws is the Harley-Davidson 74" (Hopper & Moore, 1983, p. 60).

In addition to their extraordinary commitment to the Harley-Davidson motorcycle, outlaw bikers have tended to identify themselves, with a mixture of pride and hopelessness, as outcasts from society (Reynolds, 1967; Watson, 1980, 1982). "Although intergang fights are often vicious and deadly, all outlaw groups feel a sense of brotherhood which separates them from 'citizens' or non-members" (Hopper & Moore, 1983, p. 59). Thus, the predominant anti-social symbolic significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle would appear to be linked inferentially to those who most passionately identify with it.

Mass Media Mythology

General public acceptance of the sociopathic biker stereotype has been assisted considerably by the efforts of the popular media. As a result, those most attracted to the bikes have tended to share the sense of social alienation epitomized by outlaw club members. "[T]he media not only provide groups with substantive images of other groups, they also relay back to working-class people a 'picture' of their own lives which is 'contained' or 'framed' by the ideological discourses which surround and situate it" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 85). Kramer and Benedek's (1953) *The Wild One*, a motion picture starring Marlon Brando and Lee Marvin, made the original media contribution to this image. A Hollywood interpretation of the July 4, 1947 convergence upon Hollister, California by several thousand motorcyclists, *The Wild One* portrays bikers as demonic invaders, bent on violence and drunkenness. Thompson (1967) describes the Monterey, California run on Labor Day in 1964, for which "the Hell's Angels would soon be known and feared throughout the land. Their blood, booze, and semen-flecked image would be familiar to readers of *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, *Time*, *True*, *Esquire*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*" (p. 24). Fonda and Hopper's (1969) *Easy Rider* presents bikers as counterculture heroes, but introduces them as drug smugglers and dooms them to a violent end.² Despite their frequent portrayal as members of gangs, a strong, underlying association with the mythic "rugged individual" pervades the popular image of the outlaw biker. Often self-described as "loners" or "independents," bikers, especially those who are *not* affiliated with outlaw clubs, take pride in their self-sufficiency and present themselves as modern

day cowboys, warriors, or adventurers, recurring images in the immensely popular biker artwork of David Mann (Bail, 1987).

Men and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

Within the counterculture, Harley-Davidson motorcycles are physically re-presented in various forms as expressions of alienation from and contempt for dominant cultural standards of status and appropriate behavior. Among the largest and heaviest of two-wheeled vehicles, they tend to make physical and technical demands upon their owners that repel casual users and simultaneously affirm the interests and competencies of working-class males. Bricolage often begins with the process of "chopping" a factory-built bike, the initial approach to which consists of stripping the motorcycle of all superfluous parts. Usually the first things to go are the mufflers, which enables the motor to produce more horsepower and a socially offensive, generally illegal sound pressure level. When combined with the reduction in weight resulting from the removal of trim and accessories, the chopper becomes fast enough to afford thrills and an element of personal danger which appeal powerfully to the fatalism and machismo of the stereotypical outlaw (Thompson, 1969). Willis (1978) interprets the process of reconstructing commonplace artifacts along radical lines as the formation of profane culture. By redefining the ordinary as intimidating or incomprehensible to members of the dominant culture,

oppressed, subordinate or minority groups can have a hand in the construction of their own vibrant cultures and are not merely dupes: the fall guys in a social system stacked overwhelmingly against them and dominated by capitalist media and commercial provision. Not only this, but their *profane* creativity shows us the only route for radical *cultural* change (Willis, 1978, p. 1).

Bikers as *bricoleurs* have, in fact, transformed the meaning of the motorcycle from a simple commodity and means of personal conveyance into a

"menacing symbol of group solidarity" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 104) and a threat to the peace and security of the dominant culture. Willis (1978) describes this as evidence of "the *dialectic* of cultural life . . . Despite their objective privilege and their power in material production of all kinds, the dominant class is least suited to see and explore the unexpected, the double edge, the revolutionary in what it produces" (pp. 2, 5). However, he appears to leave unaddressed the *dialectic reversal* which is a major concern of the present study, i.e., the reclamation and re-presentation of the revolutionary as dominant cultural property. Symbolic colonization persistently takes the form of commodifying and marketing the symbolic resources of marginalized social groups. "Ideas that hold the promise of producing social criticism are insinuated into products in an attempt to subordinate the dynamics of social struggle to the production of new lifestyles . . . blurring the lines between popular cultures of resistance and the culture of commerce and commercialization" (Giroux, 1994, pp. 12, 15). The commodification of offensive or intimidating symbols is often a matter of erasing history and re-centering the market value of the object.

Symbol Under Siege

The symbolic significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle currently appears to be undergoing just such a transformation. Once the nearly universal signifier for members of the outlaw counterculture, it has within the last few years become a status symbol for the wealthy and the trend-conscious. Until recently, Harley-Davidson motorcycles rarely appeared in popular media representations outside the context of biker-oriented product promotions or in association with outlaws and renegades. It is now fairly common to find them pictured in advertisements for products and services such as personal apparel, credit cards, cosmetics, floral arrangements and consumer electronics, and to

be featured as the recreational choice of business and entertainment celebrities in places like *Newsweek*, *People*, and the *National Enquirer*, and on television's *Arts and Entertainment*, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, and *Entertainment Tonight*.

Part of this is due to significant product improvements incorporated since the 1984 model year, which essentially invited the mechanically incompetent to own and operate what formerly was a reputedly unreliable and messy machine. Partly it accompanied the patriotic rhetoric and resurgence of American self-esteem promoted during the Reagan administration: as the only surviving U. S. motorcycle manufacturer, Harley-Davidson is uniquely capable of capitalizing on the "Buy American" imperative.

Its sudden trendiness has also been due in part to the popularization of the associated renegade image, noticeably influenced by the music-video explosion (Delasho, 1993). Long-haired, leather-jacketed rock stars on customized Harley-Davidsons made visually exciting and rhetorically powerful statements aimed at the vast American television audience. Rock stars share much with outlaw bikers in terms of popular stereotypes: drug and alcohol abuse, sexual athleticism, and a rebelliousness communicated in part through the high-decibel noise produced by electric amplifiers and unmuffled exhaust pipes.

Unlike stereotypical bikers, however, rock stars are simultaneously popular and dominant cultural heroes: young, but wealthy; unconventional, but with vested interests in the commercial culture industry. As arguably the most influential of the U.S. popular culture's style setters, they have helped to popularize the Harley-Davidson motorcycle by bridging the gap between outlaws and "legitimate" citizens. Burke's (1950) discussion of the persuasive

function of *mystery* is informative in this regard. The prevalence of biker fashions among rock stars, and the intensive marketing of those fashions to the public, conceal not only the essential differences between outlaw bikers and rock stars, but between rock stars and their fans. The possibilities for identification with the biker image expand, persuading new participants to make the required investment in props and costumes (see Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1985, p. 177). Lasch (1984) contends that, in a society based on mass consumption, lifestyle paraphernalia constitutes the essence of personal identity:

Both as a worker and as a consumer, the individual learns not merely to measure himself against others but to see himself through others' eyes. He learns the self-image he projects accounts for more than accumulated skills and experience. Since he will be judged, both by his colleagues and superiors at work and by the strangers he encounters on the street, according to his possessions, his clothes, and his 'personality' --not, as in the nineteenth century, by his 'character'--he adopts a theatrical view of his own 'performance, on and off the job (Lasch, 1984, p. 30).

A desire to emulate entertainment idols therefore suggests some reason for the recent popularity of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle. Stripped of its predominant association with authentic outlaws, it constitutes fertile symbolic ground, powerfully contested by the dominant culture. Commonly involving a \$15,000 investment, and not infrequently \$25,000 to \$50,000, the emerging interpretation of Harley-Davidson ownership excludes the poor and replaces former countercultural reservations against upper-class status with the ethic of consumption and power to consume. RUB clubs like the Lynch Mob (Delasho, 1993), composed of Merrill Lynch financiers, and the "Gotham City Riders, a blue-blood club fast getting a reputation in Manhattan for acts of outright sophistication" (McDonald, 1992), have acquired the high-profile media exposure formerly reserved for villains like Hell's Angels. The process of re-presenting Harley-Davidson motorcycles and the people who ride them

reinforces the hegemonic discourses of commercialism and personal status, and attempts to rewrite history without the oppositional commentary of the counterculture. "The hybridized space of popular culture is where the conflicts over the related issues of memory, identity, and representation are being most intensely fought over as part of a broader attempt by dominant groups to secure cultural hegemony" (Giroux, 1994, p. 27)

At the site of the conflict, the dominant group has secured the complicit support of the counterculture. Outlaw bikers themselves have increasingly engaged in efforts intended to improve their public relations image. For example, hard on the heels of the glorification of their excesses in the popular press and on film, and linked to the *nouveau riche* self-esteem which accompanies the sudden acquisition of wealth and power, "[t]he Hell's Angels, who define the fringe for several generations of dropouts, are trying desperately to change their image. Financial success fosters in the Angels a desire to be loved. They won't alter what they do, they just want people to see them differently" (Levigne, 1987, p. 145). Finally, it seems, tired of police harassment, unemployment, and the fear and loathing of the public at large, the outlaw counterculture increasingly emphasizes its involvement with such charitable affairs as Thanksgiving food drives and Christmas-time toy runs. It would be difficult to find a recent issue of *Easyriders*, the "world's largest-selling motorcycle magazine" (which caters exclusively to Harley-Davidson enthusiasts), in which the counterculture biker is not depicted as the victim of irrational hatred on the part of government bureaucrats, law enforcement officials, and paranoid automobile drivers.

By validating the use of Harley-Davidson motorcycles for charitable purposes, and democratizing their victimization in terms RUB's can generally

relate to, outlaws relinquish their control of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle as a symbolic resource. When the outlaws themselves subvert their image as desperadoes, when David Crosby, John Cougar, and Bruce Springsteen climb aboard Harleys without a tow truck following behind to pick up the pieces, and when no single purchase more immediately identifies the consumer as a Yankee Doodle dandy, the central symbol of the outlaw biker counterculture must be understood to have begun its dialectical swing back into the possession and rhetorical control of the dominant culture.

The Dialectic of Symbolic Appropriation

The formation of countercultures around identity-affirming symbolic systems serves not only to unify marginalized or disaffected individuals, but to reify their implicit critiques of the dominant culture. The ability of the dominant culture, therefore, to control the symbols of the counterculture serves to silence that critique. Grossberg (1992), discussing the new conservatism and its attacks upon rock music and the popular culture of rock, exposes a conflict quite similar to the struggle over the symbolic significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle. Following the vilification of established cultural musical forms and the emergence of a counterculture, dominant interests--which are inherently conservative--responded in three different ways:

The first demands a complete and total rejection of rock music and culture; the second attempts to discriminate between the acceptable and the unacceptable, to police the boundary by locating rock within the relations of domestic power; the third attempts to appropriate rock and challenge "youth culture's" claim of "ownership" (Grossberg, 1992, p. 4).

In terms of the outlaw biker image, community leaders and law enforcement officials continue to clamor for the elimination of the organized outlaw clubs³ and, with the encouragement of the insurance industry, largely

support extensive restrictions on motorcycles and motorcycling in general. Metaphors of war closely approximated the relations between culture and counterculture, at least until the outlaw clubs began lowering their profiles. With the state of emergency averted, distinctions were clarified between outlaw clubs and touring groups, between owner-constructed custom bikes and factory-built custom bikes, between black leather jackets and crash helmets.

But it is clearly in the third strategy, the appropriation of that which identifies the counterculture, that the dialectic nature of the struggle for symbolic ownership is revealed. This reappropriation or co-optation attempts "to achieve a stable equilibrium that is still unequal and still tilted in favor of the dominant group" (King, 1976, p. 132). Romanticizing and demystifying countercultures and commercializing their symbols and rituals has proven potential for disrupting boundaries and diluting the oppositional character of such groups with an infusion of popular approval. Lyotard (1984), wondering if the "aim of the project of modernity [is] the constitution of sociocultural unity within which all the elements of daily life and thought would take their places as in an organic whole" (p. 72), noted the articulation of a cultural and intellectual insecurity in the widespread "urge to put an end to experimentation, in the arts and elsewhere" (p. 71). Furthermore, creativity is to be replaced by productivity; artists become social workers whose task is to repair a damaged cultural identity.

In the diverse invitations to suspend artistic experimentation, there is an identical call for order, a desire for unity, for identity, for security, or popularity (in the sense of *Offentlichkeit*, of "finding a public"). Artists and writers must be brought back into the bosom of the community, or at least, if the latter is considered to be ill, they must be assigned the task of healing it (Lyotard, 1984, p. 73).

Those counterculture *bricoleurs* whose experiments involved motorcycles as artistic media have been, on the one hand, displaced due to the popularity of factory-built "custom" motorcycles, and on the other, in a few noteworthy cases, have been enjoined by the consumer elite to formularize their visions and to offer them up to the highest bidder. Hebdige (1979) refers to the conversion of subcultural signs into mass-produced objects as the commodity form of cultural incorporation: "Once removed from their private contexts by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests who produce them on a mass scale, they become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 96).

Symbolic colonization is also achieved in a more conventionally rhetorical sense, through what Hebdige (1979) refers to as the ideological form of cultural incorporation: the essential otherness of the counterculture is simply ignored or denied. The incomprehensible or intimidating elements of counterculture style are, for example, juxtaposed with portrayals of outlaws handing toys to children on Christmas or suffering the common frustrations and humiliations of contemporary life. King (1976) suggests that this may "undermine the self-confidence of the challenger . . . strengthen the club spirit of the old group by flattering its weakened sense of superiority . . . [and] cause third parties outside either group to see the emergent group as an aggregation of social clowns" (p. 129). Dominant interests, which Willis (1978) argues are ill-equipped to perceive or regulate the revolutionary in that which they produce, nevertheless retain their power to communicate interpretations of outlaw style which undermine countercultural critiques.

When countercultural symbols lose their oppositional significance and become objects of general interest and fashion, they contribute to the stability

of the established universe of discourse as they are appropriated and dispersed throughout the dominant culture. Subsequently, many of those whose values, privileges, and power were anathema to the biker culture now purchase admission into what was previously conceived of as a forbidden, or at least frightening and repulsive, lifestyle. Even those who are unable to afford the price of an actual motorcycle are enabled to participate through the purchase of silkscreened T-shirts, leather jackets, biker jewelry, or tattoos.

"As long as we separate our symbolic selves from our real selves in ways that can be consumed, bought and paid for with cash or the imaginary cash we euphemistically refer to as 'credit cards,' then the exchange of symbols of money for symbols of self is viewed as not merely an equitable exchange, but an exchange that should be culturally endorsed. 'How much did it cost you?' is a question that has developed a whole new set of meanings" (Goodall, 1989, p. 98).

Research Questions

Although outlaw bikers share cultural perspectives with rock 'n' roll musicians (Thompson, 1967; Willis, 1978), hippies, and other "bohemians" (Watson, 1980, p. 37), these tend to reflect counterculture similarities such as "frequent unemployment and disdain for cleanliness, orderliness, and other concerns of conventional culture . . . outsider status, the use of drugs, and the seeking of cheap rent" (Watson, 1980, pp. 36-37). However limited or opportunistic, counterculture relationships are acknowledged because of a common opposition to norms of social respectability. No such alliance is logical, however, with the new subculture of Harley-Davidson owners, whose middle- and upper-class respectability validates conventional social norms and values, and expressly rejects the critique of the counterculture.

As the increasing price of the already expensive Harley-Davidson motorcycle, and the endorsement of the product and the trappings of the biker lifestyle by celebrities and professionals, combine to exclude outlaws and

attract RUB's, the symbolic act of Harley ownership presents new alternatives for identity formation. How these new alternatives interact with those which are established is revealed in the relations between outlaws and RUB's. Why these relations should take the form of conflict and how that conflict is perceived and expressed should be revealed in the discourse of various individual Harley-Davidson owners. This study, therefore, asks the following research questions:

RQ1: What thematic categories of identification are revealed in the discourse of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners?

RQ2: How are alternative identities evaluated in the discourse of individual Harley-Davidson owners?

CHAPTER TWO

METHOD

In order to answer the research questions, the discourse of a researcher-selected group of Harley-Davidson owners was tape recorded, transcribed, and examined for themes, metaphors, and evidence of underlying values and assumptions which bear on the issue of opposing interpretations of the symbolic significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle.

Sample

Although the characteristics which distinguish individual Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners as outlaw bikers or as rich, urban bikers may be debated, there are attributes which generally permit any such individual to be located along a theoretical continuum reflecting subcultural affiliation. One such characteristic is communicative competence. Pacheco (1991) notes that "the Harley-Davidson realm, like any other domain that's rich in history and tradition, is indeed another world with its own language and nuances" (p. 10). Cultural insiders tend to display a greater degree of familiarity with the arcane vocabulary, discursive style, and culture-specific knowledge base of the Harley-Davidson realm. Their adherence to a range of communicative rules and codes allows a more specific, if still tentative, measure of commitment to subculture-specific values and practices.

Nonverbal communication provides similar information. Wardrobe is increasingly less informative due to the recent surge in the popularity of biker styles and the ease with which clothing changes can be made. Certain wardrobe and ornamentation choices, however, continue to communicate specific cultural messages with little chance of misinterpretation. Personal grooming,

tattooing (amount and specific design), and body piercing provide clues to identity and commitment of similar reliability.

Preliminary categorization of owner commitment and subcultural affiliation may also be tentatively based upon specific forms of personal involvement with the motorcycle itself. Beyond the initial act of purchase, symbolic activity on the part of the motorcycle owner is assumed to occur in at least one of two ways: either through work resulting in the personalization of the motorcycle itself, or through the act of actually riding it. Without the symbolic activity of mechanical work or extensive riding, owners relegate the bike to a status of marginal subcultural and symbolic significance. It remains, in other words, a commodity whose rhetorical power is essentially delivered complete in a form determined by its corporate producer.

With this information in mind, eight research subjects were purposively selected in the interest of representing a broad range of perspectives. Four specific qualities were considered in making the selections. First, ownership status: six are current owners of at least one Harley-Davidson motorcycle, and two are former owners who very recently sold their Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Second, mechanical inclination: subjects range from those who fabricate their own parts and build their own motorcycles to those who return their motorcycles to a dealership for routine maintenance. Third, riding miles accumulated: subjects range from those who ride as much as 2,000 miles per month to those who ride less than a thousand miles a year. Fourth, lifestyle, as indicated by my own observations and prior knowledge of the subject, or as reported by common acquaintances. The following brief descriptions of the informants serve to locate them along a theoretical continuum, with outlaws at one end and rich, urban bikers at the other.

John

Age: 56

Occupation: Welder, metal fabricator

Current motorcycle: 1985 Kawasaki Ninja

John's former motorcycle was a 96 cu. in. Panhead, once featured in *Hot Cycle* magazine (see Squalo, 1991). He built and rode Harley-Davidson motorcycles for 20 years, manufacturing many of his parts by hand. In most respects, he best represents the outlaw counterculture biker. John has long hair, a beard, tattoos, and a barrel chest. He often rides more than 1500 miles in a month. He recently completed his second term in prison for narcotics sales. His decision to sell all of his Harley-Davidson parts and to purchase a Japanese sport bike, however, followed a deliberate rejection of the popularization of Harley-Davidson motorcycles among upscale, law-abiding citizens.

Walt

Age: 44

Occupation: Nuclear maintenance mechanic

Current motorcycle: 1990 Harley-Davidson "Fat Boy"

Walt also can be described as an outlaw biker. When necessary, he rebuilds his motorcycles in the living room of his home, which is a showcase for Harley-Davidson memorabilia. He rides more than any of the other informants, as much as 30,000 miles in a year. He occasionally buys and sells illegally acquired motorcycle parts and firearms, although he is a well-paid, skilled laborer. He is powerfully built and liberally adorned with tattoos. He also walks with a limp, the result of a motorcycle accident which shattered his leg but which dampened his enthusiasm for riding not in the least.

Dave

Age: 39

Occupation: Automotive mechanic

Current motorcycles: Hand-built "Sportster" and "Shovelhead"

Dave is a counterculture biker as well, although less inclined than John or Walt to engage in crime for fun or profit. He began building his Sportster about 15 years ago, machining many of his own parts. To refer to Dave as a "mechanic," actually, invites misinterpretation. He works for a prominent automotive racing group, building a variety of race cars and high-performance street automobiles. The Shovelhead he is currently working on will displace 109 cu. in. and is composed of exotic materials and hand-made components. His motorcycles appear to represent the primary symbolic resource through which Dave constructs and expresses his identity.

Art

Age: 42

Occupation: Business owner, metal fabricator

Current motorcycle: 1991 Harley-Davidson "Heritage Softail Classic"

Art would be situated near the midpoint of the outlaw-RUB continuum. During his early and mid twenties, Art was involved to some extent with the outlaw counterculture, but sold his first Harley following the birth of his son. He is a skilled machinist but, as the owner of a manufacturing business, he is no longer directly dependent upon this skill. His motorcycle is immaculate and tastefully customized, but not at all radical in appearance or performance. He rides less than 2000 miles annually.

Gene

Age: 50

Occupation: Graphic artist

Current motorcycle: 1989 Harley-Davidson "Heritage Softail Classic"

Gene describes himself as the "farthest thing" from an outlaw biker. His white-collar occupation, expensive suburban home, and comparatively refined communication style appear to support the claim. He pays a professional mechanic to service his bike, which is luxuriously ornamented with fur, fringe, and chrome. Gene departs somewhat from the RUB norm, however, by virtue of the fact that he rides between 1500 and 2000 miles per month.

Al

Age: 48

Occupation: Business owner, mechanical engineer

Current motorcycles: 1989 Harley-Davidson "Sportster"

1990 Harley-Davidson "Heritage Softail Classic"

In addition to his two Harley-Davidson motorcycles, Al owns an old Triumph Bonneville ("in pieces"), and a number of Japanese street and dirt bikes. He is not a committed rider, nor has he been motivated to personalize or modify his Harleys. He appears to collect motorcycles (and automobiles) because of an appreciation for their mechanical elegance and overall form.

Dan

Age: 31

Occupation: Sales manager

Current motorcycle: 1991 Harley-Davidson "Sportster"

Dan most closely approximates the rich, urban biker profile (or "yuppie" biker, if that more precisely connotes an up-and-coming RUB). He is very clean-cut and courteous, and explicitly identified himself as a business professional, not a cultural renegade. More particularly, he expressed a compulsion to change and improve the image of Harley-Davidson motorcycles and their riders by providing a more positive personal example.

Bob

Age: 47

Occupation: Insurance agent

Current motorcycle: 1989 Kawasaki Concourse

Bob recently sold his second motorcycle, a 1989 Harley-Davidson "Low Rider." During the two years he owned it, he rode it only 1500 miles. Bob brought his motorcycle to the same local repair shop that Gene used for routine servicing. Bob is very professional and conservative in appearance and opinion, an apparent model of honesty, industry, and morality. He provides remarkably specific support for claims made by John, Walt, and Dave that "RUBs" only buy Harleys in order to be able to say that they own them. Bob's perspective as a former RUB, however, is concentrated upon the same crisis in meaning as John's. In other words, his rejection of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle emphasizes its disputed symbolic significance, and his discourse illuminates the differences in RUB and outlaw viewpoints that underlie the hostility between these groups.

Collection of Data

Following models provided by Willis (1977, 1978, 1990), informants were interviewed individually in a loosely structured format which was intended to maximize their freedom to express themselves, to encourage reflection, narration, and elaboration, and to minimize my influence on the course the conversations were to take. As a result, while certain questions and comments served to focus the conversations upon the topic of Harley-Davidson ownership, no two interactions shared identical formats. Each interview was tape recorded. All occurred between March 27 and May 6, 1994. Six were in person; two were conducted over the telephone. Appendix B provides a list of the questions which guided the interviews.

Although this cannot be considered a formal ethnography, my own familiarity with the culture of Harley-Davidson owners contributed in a number of ways to the development and implementation of this study. I began riding Harley-Davidson motorcycles and regularly associating with other owners in 1982. I completed my first custom-built motorcycle in 1986 and rode

it extensively for four years. A second custom project has been underway since 1991 and is nearing completion. Whenever possible, I have continued to truck my fairly extensive collection of used parts to regional swap meets, and among my friends and associates are members of outlaw motorcycle clubs, restoration enthusiasts, race bike builders, touring riders, and individual customizers. I have had little difficulty being accepted by a broad variety of Harley-Davidson owners, RUB informants included. There can be no question that these experiences influenced the articulation of the problem under consideration, the process by which informants were selected and interviews conducted, and the analysis and interpretation of research results.

Development of Categories

No individual unit of analysis dominated in terms of importance to the study. Individual words, phrases, sentences, and complex narrative structures each in turn comprised interpretable data. What marked an utterance as significant was the extent to which it expressed (a) some sense of the subject's recognition of the symbolic significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle; (b) personal identification with and degree of commitment to Harley-Davidson ownership, and to the expressed or implied referents for which, to each, it stands; and (c) favorable or unfavorable evaluations of the perceived commitment of others to significant cultural values and practices.

Following each interview, a complete transcription of questions and responses was produced, and each transcript was reproduced on a different color paper. Analytical categories initially emerged during the process of typing, and were clarified and confirmed as the study progressed. More specifically, by the time the third interview had been completed, the

"(1) recurrence, (2) repetition, and (3) forcefulness" (Owen, 1984, p. 275) of a number of words, phrases, metaphors, and descriptions invited the preliminary articulation of the thematic categories of *freedom*, *nostalgia*, and *masculinity*. Data were categorized after literally cutting the color-coded transcripts into coherent fragments of various lengths and highlighting significant words and expressions. For example, I was surprised to find that several informants discussed motorcycle riding as a form of therapy, and extended the psychiatric metaphor by referring to an inner child whose pleasure resulted from a momentary liberation from adult repression and responsibility. All instances of psychiatric metaphors were grouped together and the key words "therapy" and "inner child" were highlighted. This collection of responses was located with others whose subject was the symbolic significance of the motorcycle, and within the more specific thematic category of freedom. There was virtually no ambiguity concerning freedom or masculinity, either as categorical headings or as characteristics of informants' discourse. Nostalgia as a category includes expressions of nationalism and traditionalism which, aside from generally being linked in the discourse of informants, were noticeably sentimental and reminiscent in character. Greater and lesser degrees of concurrence among informants generated subdivisions within each category reflecting common and contrasting interpretations of the broader identifying terms.

Perceived commitment provided the standard against which alternative subcultural identities were evaluated by informants. Because a significant financial investment is an accepted presumption of Harley-Davidson ownership, it generally fails to indicate levels of individual commitment within the associated community. How individual owners use their motorcycles in specific cultural practices was considered to mean far more. Not surprisingly, riding

the motorcycle emerged as the essential symbolic activity and the foremost expression of ownership commitment. Other than riding, the practice of maintaining, servicing, and improving the motorcycle through personal effort provided another standard against which individual commitment was measured.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SYMBOLIC SUBSTANCE OF IDENTIFICATION

Introduction

Research Question One presupposes the symbolic significance and rhetorical influence of Harley-Davidson motorcycles, but asks, what thematic categories of identification are revealed in the discourse of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners? In doing so, it initiates a search for the cultural boundaries within which identification, bricolage, and symbolic colonization occur.

Three broad categories emerged from the data, and are presented here under the headings Freedom, Nostalgia, and Masculinity. Within each category, the discursive consistencies between outlaws and RUBs are presented, and contrasting interpretations are identified through which countercultural and subcultural identities may be distinguished.

Results and Discussion

Freedom

Harley-Davidson's well-known 1970's advertising campaign presented its product as "The Great American Freedom Machine." On the surface level, informants agreed that the experience of riding provides a liberating sense of personal power and mobility. On a deeper level, what emerged were variant experiences of repression and, subsequently, different interpretations of freedom. In other words, although the Harley-Davidson motorcycle symbolizes freedom, distinct individual needs produced opposing interpretations of how and why the motorcycle as a symbolic resource worked as it did.

Freedom as a Generic Category

When specifically asked about the symbolic significance of their motorcycles, informants' responses were almost uniformly immediate and explicit:

Gene: Freedom. To me, it symbolizes a form of freedom.

John: Freedom.

Dave: Well, it might symbolize freedom of the road. You're not caged in, you're just riding in the wind. I don't know, the biggest thing it might just symbolize is freedom.

Bob: I think it symbolizes, uhh, the, freedom.

Dan: It is freedom. It's just the freedom of the ride. It's my freedom of choice of a vehicle that I would like to ride.

Although the concept of freedom provides a surface consistency among these owners, how freedom is "symbolized" by the Harley-Davidson motorcycle is a less evident situation. The simplest explanation is suggested by Dave, who notes the absence of physical confinement distinguishing motorcycles from other forms of motorized transportation. In the lexicon of the counterculture, automobiles are "cages" and their drivers are "cagers." Escape from enclosure or confinement revives the intimate relationship between motorcyclists and the world through which they move, liberating the senses and evoking the emotions. Informants noted improved visual and olfactory perception, feelings of sensitivity or "oneness" with the road and the motorcycle, and stimulation (evaluated favorably by six and unfavorably by two) from exposure to wind turbulence, temperature extremes, and precipitation.

It is important to realize that motorcycles represent freedom for riders of all brands, not only Harley-Davidson riders. Harley-Davidson motorcycles are unique, however, in a number of respects. Although a variety of factors influence the choice to buy a Harley-Davidson, once that purchase is made,

"motorcycle" becomes virtually synonymous with the Harley name in these owners' minds.

Contrasting Interpretations of Freedom

The cage metaphor suggests a parallel comparison between responsibility and slavery. Informants claimed that riding a Harley-Davidson provided an escape from the stresses of daily life and encroaching maturity, although the nature of the stress and the pragmatic function of the motorcycle were interpreted somewhat differently. Underlying these differences are apparently incommensurate views of the world, in which what constitutes reality and fantasy for each group is inverted in the perspective of the other.

Stress Reduction and the Rich, Urban Biker. The preponderance of recent media attention concerning the emergence of rich, urban bikers as a subculture focuses upon the human costs of work and maturity, and the liberating effects of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle: "It is a release from the anguish of work . . . We are trying to recapture our youth . . . 'It is a change of life,' Ms. Cohen said of her husband's obsession. 'It could be another woman,' she added, laughing . . . It gives you a sense of freedom, even though you don't really have any . . ." (Billard, 1992).

Perhaps because Dan was the youngest participant in the study, he expressed the greatest awareness of encroaching maturity and was the only one to imply that motorcycling, rather than restoring lost youth, is a young person's activity:

Dan: For instance, if you look at the commercial on ESPN, you'll see an old man rocking in his rocking chair, and a Harley-Davidson rides by. And the old man says, "I once wanted to own one of those, but I can't." You get the feeling that he couldn't because he was too old. Before you're too old, own a Harley-Davidson. A lot of these kind of marketing advertisements appeal to a lot of people because a lot of people, like my boss, who kind of have this feeling, well, you want to just say you rode

it, may have this little something, inner child, so to speak, that wants to ride a Harley-Davidson.

There is an implication that advanced age is accompanied by increased responsibility, loss of a sense of adventure, preoccupation with an image of respectability, and a decrease in physical strength, balance, and reflexes. Each may be interpreted as an intrusion upon personal freedom. Aging and this associated loss of freedom are apparently inevitable, so it is imperative that the inner child experience the freedom of motorcycling while the physical body has the capacity to deliver it.

Satisfying the desires of the inner child was a recurring theme in the discourse of RUB informants. Riding a motorcycle restores the sense of playfulness and adventure exchanged by many for personal security and a luxurious material standard of living, and so provides symbolic escape from the economic, social, and political imperatives that mandate that exchange. The implication that upper- and middle-class lifestyles are "gilded cages" secured by psychological and behavioral repression is not an unprecedented idea, but is generally submerged in the ideology of the dominant culture. Gene and Art separately expressed this interpretation of freedom through a similar psychiatric metaphor, in which the bike-as-therapist enables them to liberate a repressed inner child:

Gene: When I get on the bike, the world goes away. The bills, you know, the day to day problems and things that you have to deal with just disappear for an hour, or two hours, or six, whatever the length of time that I'm on the bike. You have to pay attention to what you're doing, so for the time that I'm on the bike and out on a ride, it's like therapy. The world goes away, and I come back relaxed. My wife says I'm going through my second childhood. And she's probably right, she is probably right.

Art: I don't really ride that much anymore. It's kinda more like therapy than anything. It used to be I liked riding, and I liked getting in all kinds of trouble riding, you know? 'Go out and party a lot. But now it's

more therapy than anything. A lot of people are into their second childhoods, too. They got the money now, and they can afford a bike, you know? Used to be everybody just wanted a nice Porsche or something. Seems like now all they want is a Harley-Davidson.

It is interesting to note that liberation of the inner child occurs through the removal of external, physical restraints. Exposure of the body (to the elements, to the public, to danger) may represent a transformation of the prison within which the inner child is confined or enclosed. Significantly, for RUBs the "cure" for repression follows consumption, while for outlaws it involves creation. Generally, buying a motorcycle incurs financial debt (a metaphorical prison), and dependence upon commodities marginalizes inner human resources. Outlaws, as will be discussed in detail below, more often construct, rebuild, or restore motorcycles, forms of creation which affirm human imagination and individual skills, and translate work into the language of play. The fact that the therapeutic metaphor appeared explicitly only in the discourse of RUBs may suggest that their need for psychic liberation is greater, or is less effectively satisfied by Harley-Davidson ownership, than that of the outlaws.

From this perspective, the singular intensity with which counter-culture bikers oppose mandatory crash helmet legislation becomes more understandable. Crash helmets intensify the sense of physical confinement riders intentionally try to escape. A tragic example of how safety legislation malfunctions occurred in January, 1992, following passage of California's first mandatory helmet law:

The California helmet law took its first victim within days after it went into effect. A bro who valued his freedom more than a life in chains strapped on his helmet and shot himself in the head. He left a note that said, "Now, I can't ever ride again." The bro's wife said he rode his Harley--like most Harley riders do--as a form of therapy, as a way of clearing out the tensions and frustrations that build up

during the day. When he couldn't get rid of them any more--well, they got to him ("Liberty or Death," 1992).

Gene's suggestion that "the world goes away" is somewhat ironic, since he, like many riders, also suggests that motorcycles bring the world up close, permitting far more intimate contact with sights, sounds, smells, and feelings than automobiles do. For Dan, Art and Gene, however, the world in the wind is the therapeutic world of lost childhood, not the real world of adult problems and obligations.

Outlaws as Freedom Fighters. For others, these world views are reversed. The real world is the world of sensory pleasure and ultimate freedom. Subservience and social restraint comprise a nightmare world to be resisted as far as possible. Motorcycles help outlaw bikers enact their rejection of social conventions and their desire to play by rules of their own choosing.

John: Motorcycles and me probably mean a whole different thing than motorcycles and a legitimate, well, not legitimate but, uh, upstanding, law-abiding citizen.

RW: What would be the difference?

John: Well, probably it means freedom to them, too. But it just depends how far they want to take their freedom. I always say, I'm into self-indulgence and I have very little discipline. So, it means that if I want to get up today and do nothing, then I have to be in a lifestyle that will support getting up today and doing nothing. And what will support that kind of lifestyle other than crime? I don't know any other lifestyle that will allow you to do what you want to do whenever you want to do it, unless you have a whole bunch of money and you're good at the stock market.

John sets up an interesting dichotomy in his suggestion that freedom, as the ability to do whatever is desired, is the privilege of the successful criminal or investor. Unifying these alleged opposites, financial independence confers upon both criminals and investors a certain freedom to indulge

themselves. John continued, however, by criticizing outlaws and RUBs who sacrifice personal freedom in order to belong to repressive organizations:

John: I got offered a membership in the Red and White,⁴ and I didn't want to be in that because they would take away my freedom. It always amazed me how all these wild, crazy people that are totally undisciplined would belong to an organization that could tell them when they could ride, how they could ride, and what they could ride. Now how could they call themselves free-thinking and free-spirited people, but yet allow somebody else or another regime to dictate to them? How free are they? How really, truly free are they if they got an organization that tells 'em when they can come and go, and how, what, when, where, and why? But yet at the same time they're supposed to be free spirits and outlaws, you know? They're not. They're just like people that get accepted into these religious sects. They're just being manipulated, just being controlled and manipulated by a different force. And I rebel against all that stuff. Maybe life would have been easier if I would've fit somewhere. But I never did fit anywhere. That's why I didn't become an H-A, that's why I didn't become a H.O.G.⁵ member, that's why I didn't go over here and ride with these guys, I didn't go over there and ride with those guys, I went over here and rode with me. I did what I wanted to do, when I wanted to do it, and how I wanted to do it.

Most outlaw clubs have rigid rules and a formal, hierarchical structure (Reynolds, 1967; Thompson, 1967; Watson, 1980). These organizations confound self-evident notions of freedom, insisting that true freedom is to be found through identification with the group (Watson, 1980). In exchange for obedience to the regulations of the group, club members can count on support when in trouble and retribution when wronged. On the other hand, "upstanding, law-abiding citizens," whose business acumen has given them the disposable income and leisure time necessary to purchase and ride Harley-Davidson motorcycles, join respectable clubs like the Harley Owners Group. Suspiciously similar in structure, albeit different in civic responsibility, H.O.G. collects dues, excludes riders of anything other than Harley-Davidson motorcycles, marginalizes the role of women (segregating them within an "auxiliary" organization), and organizes group rides in which members are

encouraged to wear club insignia and to ride in formation. Club officers are privileged, decorated, and authorized to establish club itineraries and enforce club regulations. For John, the costs in personal freedom outweigh the alleged benefits of camaraderie in any such organization. Although his original statement appears to equate freedom with financial independence, it comes to imply a code of personal behavior which rejects authority of presumably every variety.

The motorcycle itself is linked on a symbolic level to John's inclination to reject the high-status, high-income occupations from which he feels excluded. More specifically, it represents rejection of the pressures that would force him into a life of difficult labor and minimal social and economic rewards, and the arbitrary restrictions upon free enterprise that, in his case, refuse to allow him to define himself as an unlicensed pharmaceutical retailer:

John: Now, it's probably not fair to blame Harley-Davidson for me being a drug dealer and spending time in prison because I rode a black Harley and sold drugs. But it all just goes together . . . I mean, I know that you can ride a Harley-Davidson and not sell drugs. I mean, most of the guys that ride Harley-Davidsons don't sell drugs. But that's where me and Harley-Davidsons were at. Selling drugs and riding a black Harley-Davidson and being a gangster all meant the same thing to me. Whether I myself couldn't do anything better than that with it is my problem.

John's Harley-Davidson was a symbolic weapon with which to defend himself against the repressive demands of a social order in which his options were institutionally restricted. It affirmed his difference, not his accordance with social demands. In the cultural war he fought, however, the power of the symbol to deliver his freedom was overcome by the superior arsenal of the dominant culture; John was arrested for narcotics offenses, and went to prison--twice. Ironically, in order to protect the more fundamental freedom of physical liberty, John literally had to abandon the black Harley-Davidson as

a symbol in order to redefine his identity as former--but not current--outlaw: He sold it, and bought a green Kawasaki. Others within the counterculture manage to modify their behavior--or more ably avoid the police--but continue to ride only as long as it enhances their sense of freedom.

Nostalgia

Although no informants specifically used the term in reference to themselves, "nostalgia" most satisfactorily describes the discursive link between their sentimental expressions of traditionalism and American ethnocentrism. Grounded in reminiscence, loyal to tradition, and proud of American supremacy, the heritage of Harley-Davidson motorcycling essentially unifies the discourse of outlaws and RUBs alike.

Although their enthusiasm for tradition seems equivalent, outlaws and RUBs possess significantly different knowledge bases. There is a level at which the outlaws discuss tradition that seems inaccessible to RUBs. Because the symbolic activity of the counterculture has been central in the lives of some for many years, they express a nostalgic regret that the commitment to values and standards of behavior which defined former cultural boundaries has been diluted. In contrast, the RUBs enthusiastically parade in full regalia, proud to support America's only motorcycle manufacturer and reaffirm its contributions to the American heritage, in much the same way that the Society for Creative Anachronisms preserves the legacy of our premodern ancestors at Renaissance Faires throughout the United States.

The Harley Mystique

In the discourse of Harley riders, loyalty and tradition are frequently associated. Harley-Davidson's unique position as the only U.S. manufacturer of large-displacement road bikes is glorified by the fact that the company is the

oldest surviving manufacturer of motorcycles in the world. Because it is American, loyalty to the brand is often rationalized by owners as an expression of patriotism. Because today's motorcycles are lineal descendants of those introduced in 1903, aficionados of their idiomatic style and unsophisticated technology consider themselves traditionalists. The discursive link between American ethnocentrism and traditionalism is explicitly nostalgic, and is often articulated as the "Harley mystique."

The Harley mystique appeared in the discourse of several informants, who were attempting to identify the singular appeal of the motorcycles with their American heritage. Certainly the historical influence and longevity of the manufacturer and its product line contribute to its unique cultural presence, but Wright (1987) contends that not even company administrators can explain the mystical aura and fanatic devotion surrounding the Harley-Davidson motorcycle; Ford has been around for a long time, too.

Gene: It's an American made bike, it's kind of a tradition. There's, I suppose, some mystique about the Harleys.

RW: Do you know what that mystique would be?

Gene: No, I'm not sure what it is. Whether it's the fact that it's the last American made bike, I don't know. But it seems that almost every one I talk to that has anything to do with bikes--other than my son--would like to have a Harley, aspires to have a Harley . . . I've had elderly people, you know, in their eighties come up and say, "Yeah, I rode a Harley back in 1926." And I enjoy that. I like talking to people, and it's kinda fun when people come up and want to know about the bike, or kids come up and you can tell they'd like to sit on it, so you sit 'em up there. Other than that, I'm not sure what the mystique is.

Dave's articulation of the Harley mystique was similar:

RW: So, why a Harley-Davidson?

Dave: Oh, I guess 'cause of the mystique; it's American made. Just mention Harley-Davidson and there's a whole line of thoughts that just the name brings out in people. You can ride the bike down the highway, you know, you can ride with a guy that has a Honda, and you can ride with a

guy that has a BMW, and you can ride with a guy that has a Suzuki or anything else, and they'll look his bike over, and they'll nod if he's on a motorcycle, then they'll look at my bike and they'll start pointing and stuff at the bike.

John's interpretation of the Harley mystique is consistent with both of the above, but emphasizes the owner-motorcycle relationship:

John: I've always been into building hot rods, way back since I was a kid, you know, '50's, '60's, '70's. I was always into building hot rods, and hot rods are American, they're red, white, and blue. And Harley-Davidsons are hot rods to me, and they're red, white, and blue. . . And it was probably just a, um, probably the Harley mystique played a big part in me riding Harleys.

RW: What's that Harley mystique?

John: Well, it's difficult to say. It used to be that, uh, if you rode a Harley that meant that you knew how to work on them and knew how to build them, 'cause you had to. Let's face it, they were all fuckin' old junkers when we got them, and we made 'em better, and made 'em to where they didn't break no more. You know, and I've always been a red, white, and blue American guy, and they were the only American motorcycle, except Indian.⁶

The "whole line of thoughts" that the Harley-Davidson name brings out to some extent concerns the prevailing image of the motorcycle owner. Gene noted that people relate to its traditional appearance and American heritage, but also recognize, and are intrigued by, its implicit danger:

Gene: I think people like to get kinda close to the bike and talk to somebody on a bike because I think there's that element of, "Here's a rebel, here's somebody that's a little different." And I think people like to just come by and maybe just kinda touch the tiger, okay? That type of thing. And, uh, I'm a pussy cat. Most of the guys I ride with, they're, you know, not hell raisers. No, I'm just an average Joe that happens to really love riding motorcycles. I'm not out to raise hell, or hurt anybody, or anything like that. There are bikers and there are *bikers*, okay? You've got, uh, Hell's Angels, and myself, which is the furthest thing from it.

People who rode Harleys in the 1920's or 1930's would be unlikely to mistake a 1993 FLSTN "Heritage Softail Nostalgia" for anything but a Harley-Davidson (although they might have trouble identifying the decade in which

it was produced). Their old-fashioned appearance inspires familiarity and a sense of permanence, but in addition, Harley-Davidson motorcycles continue to look mechanically accessible. Unlike Japanese and European imports, which conceal intimidating technological sophistication behind exotic, streamlined body panels, Harleys still look as though somebody with a screwdriver and a combination wrench could take one apart and put it back together. As John notes, there was a time when owners had to be able to do just that. This invitation to involvement with machinery is increasingly unusual in contemporary society, and seems as associated with ethnocentric notions of American individuality and self-sufficiency as technological intimidation seems associated with racist indictments of Japanese economic imperialism.

The Nativist Tradition

Because one dimension of the Harley mystique is the fact that Harley-Davidson is the sole surviving American motorcycle manufacturer, threats to its continuing survival in the form of foreign competition inspire wrathful responses long on nationalism and short on rationalism. The fact that his 1991 Sportster is technologically antiquated and thoroughly uncompetitive compared to similarly priced Japanese motorcycles was of no concern to Dan:

Dan: I think the primary reason is its appeal to the American heritage, that it is built in America. Whether it works or not was not relative. It was not relative, because it was a hand-made American, to me it is art. It is a beautiful symbol of America.

The "AMF years" (1969-1981) brought Harley-Davidson's reputation for quality to its all time low. The bikes, as always, were underpowered and expensive, and the economical, high-performance machines being imported from Japan dominated the market. New corporate expectations exceeded the capabilities of the existing manufacturing facilities, and seriously flawed

Harley-Davidsons often found their way into dealer showrooms. Harleys were unable to successfully compete at drag strips and road racing tracks around the country, and from 1978 to 1990 the land speed record belonged to Kawasaki. Yet even during this period, a hard-core following of devoted Harley enthusiasts persisted. Harley-Davidson's unique position as the only U.S. built motorcycle was arguably the primary reason that the company was able to survive. Its now classic design has been emulated of late by each of the major Japanese manufacturers, whose products, in many technical regards, are objectively superior. None, however, begin to challenge Harley-Davidson's currently dominant position in the large-displacement category.

Walt: You know the old saying: I'd rather push my Harley-Davidson than ride a rice-burnin', noodle-slurpin', harbor-bombin' shit bucket from Jay-A-Pan.

Dave: I don't think I could see myself on anything but a Harley. I don't think I'd ever buy or build anything other than a Harley. All the Jap bikes, they might go 200 mile an hour, but it's just not what I want. It's not what I'm after.

Disdain for all things Japanese is deeply ingrained in the rhetoric of the counterculture. The original outlaw clubs consisted predominantly of young World War Two veterans unable or unwilling to readjust to peacetime routine. Two decades would pass before Honda introduced its first inexpensive, small-displacement motorcycles to the American market, but the memory of Pearl Harbor, like the common perception of Japanese products as cheap and shoddy imitations, dominated the discursive critique of Harley-Davidson's foreign competition. Today, customers concerned with U.S. economic well-being have reinvigorated the rhetorical opposition to imported motorcycles:

Dan: I like to buy American . . . Umm, you look at the national deficit. You pick a Japanese bike, you're looking at hundreds of millions of dollars in deficit, for no particular reason . . . I buy the American product because it helps the American way.

Irrational loyalty thinly veiled by alleged patriotism may be better described as reactionary or regressive than as simply nostalgic. But the nativist argument is entrenched, not simply within the counterculture, but throughout the cultural practices of Harley-Davidson owners in general.

Harley Nostalgia

In addition to its American identity, the traditional appearance and unsophisticated engineering of Harley-Davidson motorcycles not only evoke consumers' nostalgic sensibilities, but resist the tendency toward obsolescence characteristic of virtually every other motor vehicle. Willing to capitalize on traditionalism, Harley-Davidson markets bikes called "Classic" (and "Ultra-Classic"), "Heritage," and "Road King" (last year's "Nostalgia" became this year's "Heritage Special"). At the price of state-of-the-art performance, Harley owners can be assured that the bike they buy today will hold its resale value and will be immediately identifiable by owners of models produced decades ago.

Dan: The look is not like anything else, and it does not change. It has had this look for a very, very, very long time. Which is nice.

Al elaborated upon the appeal of nostalgic aesthetics:

Al: Most people really kinda like Harleys. You know, 'cause it's an American bike, I guess. Especially older people, you know, guys I'd say 40 and on up, kinda identify with 'em, I guess. Pretty much every time I park it somebody'll come up and say how nice it looks.

RW: You think they identify with it, huh?

Al: 'Cause it's an American product, I guess. And 'cause it's been around so long. Because they still look the same, you know? Harleys look the same as they did 50 years ago, you know? As a matter of fact, the Heritage is a copy of, like, a 1960 motorcycle. So that's probably why people like it.

Prior to the widespread use of streamlined plastic fairings which conceal the motor, all motorcycles were first and foremost identified by the

mechanical configuration and aesthetic appeal of their motors. For the past 40 years, Harley-Davidson has been the only manufacturer of 45-degree, two-cylinder, overhead valve motorcycle engines.⁷ Although not a particularly efficient power generator, these motors have a distinctive appearance that is embedded within the Harley mystique. Today's motors unmistakably resemble the first Harley-Davidson OHV "Big Twins" produced in 1936. Whether they possess some objective aesthetic appeal or whether their appeal is a function of their timelessness, their prominently displayed motors identify antique military bikes and radical custom choppers as motorcycles carved from the same block.

Responding to consumer demand for more of the same, Harley-Davidson stylists continue to push the boundaries of nostalgic credibility. The "Softail" models, first introduced in 1984, feature a concealed rear suspension system which gives the illusion that the bike has a pre-1958 hardtail frame. Reproduction Hydra Glide-style shrouded front forks appear on three Softails, and one model carries a reproduction 1940's-style springer front end. The demand for antique replicas seems unlimited, but even Harley-Davidson's more modern designs (which strongly resemble those produced since the mid-1970's) satisfy the conservatism of customers who want traditional lines and trouble-free operation, trimmed with factory-applied lacquer and plating for a "certified custom" appearance.

Family Values

Curiously absent from the discourse of RUB informants was any significant discussion of their interpersonal relationships with other bikers. All said they ride alone most of the time. Gene, who is active in his local chapter of H.O.G., enthusiastically described group rides, but impersonally, as

though he rode to Laughlin, Nevada with a group of motorcycles, not motorcyclists. In contrast, social relations and value hierarchies were central in the discourse of the outlaws, who expressed regret about changing attitudes and the loss of traditional values:

Walt: Everybody says Harleys are good. Riding a Harley is not for everybody. Take a look. If you take a look at the Kawasakis and Suzukis and Hondas and the rest of them, they're smooth. The bikes are up-to-the-minute, state-of-the-art engineering and technology. And what do you get when you buy a Harley? A fuckin' ninety-year-old pile of junk that's got an antiquated motor. It's nothing more than a big vibrator.

RW: Put it that way, then why do people like you want to keep riding them?

Walt: Probably because we're traditionalists, and it's stuff that we grew up with, and at least we got values.

RW: What values are you referring to? What values does it express to ride a Harley-Davidson?

Walt: Oh, man. Probably for the average rider or people that just buy bikes, not very many. You know? But, the old days, when people got together there was a camaraderie, which there isn't anymore. Unless it's in a real small group. It's like the three of us. If you needed something and I had it, you were welcome to it. With Brian it's the same way. If he needed something I got, he had it. And there was no questions about when are you gonna give it back or what you gonna do: If I have it, you need it, you got it. It's not like that anymore. At least, I haven't found it other than the people I ride with. That is what we had, and now, there's no values.

Walt refers to his friends and riding cohorts as his brothers. Brothers are family, and among them generosity, loyalty, concern, and respect are unreserved. There is a forthrightness to biker brotherhoods, consciously constructed and continuously reaffirmed in response to the perceived duplicity, hypocrisy, and self-interest of the general public and the typical citizen:

Walt: You remember the swap meets we used to do? Man, we'd have junk, or you'd have something nice, and you could haggle with people. Now, the guys that were like us that went to swap meets are no more. You go to swap meets . . . whataya got? You got a lot of T-shirt venders, you got a lot of leather vendors, and you got big shops that come out there that try to live. Gouge to live and live to gouge. That's exactly what it is, there's no values anymore.

The traditional values of camaraderie, generosity, trust, and respect are under siege. Selfishness and commercialism surround localized bastions of idealized relations. There is even an ironic consistency between the alleged demise of traditional values and the increasingly nostalgic marketing of the Harley-Davidson mystique. "According to Mike Keefe, H-D ad manager, 'We're starting to sell the entire Harley-Davidson experience. With the establishment of local H.O.G. chapters, everything you need to enjoy the sport is at your H-D dealer. We offer the whole environment, something no other bikemaker can match' " (Wright, 1987, p. 223). Dealer sponsorship of contest-shows and organized runs places a premium on accessory consumption and competition. The emphasis on tradition as a value code has shifted to one of tradition as theater in which the audience participates. Both influence the process of identity formation, but to the extent that an emphasis on one excludes or invalidates the other, rival interpretations of tradition generate tension between Harley-Davidson owners that limit identification.

Masculinity

"According to a major marketing study . . . 98 of every 100 H-D owners is a man" (Wright, 1987, p. 224). Despite the increasing involvement of women over the past five years, masculine self-image is disproportionately significant in the discourse of Harley owners. Gender specificity often gives the impression of being built into the language, unifying the discourse of outlaws and RUBS. When asked about the attraction of Harley-Davidson motorcycles, all informants referred to its appealing sensory stimulations. These responses are grouped below under the heading "metaphors for masculinity."

Most also revealed feelings of satisfaction resulting from the attention and affirmation of bystanders. On this level, significant differences in the

symbolic value of the motorcycle were revealed. For RUBs, public admiration of their motorcycles was interpreted as status deference to themselves as owners. They enjoyed riding slowly in public areas, and conversing with strangers who were attracted by their motorcycles. For outlaws, the motorcycle was an expression of personal vision, made real through their competence with tools and materials. These distinct views of the motorcycle as a form of self-expression are subdivided under the headings "wealth and status," and "art and craft."

Metaphors for Manliness

Considered as a metaphor for masculinity, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle produces a baritone rumble at idle, and an intimidating roar when pushed hard. Its broad and low-biased powerband produces stump-pulling torque. The bikes are massive and ruggedly constructed. To equitably complete the stereotype, it should be noted that Harleys are rather simple. They aren't too swift, and although they reputedly have class, they also have a tendency to dribble fluids where others are least likely to appreciate it. Linked to a nostalgic, pre-feminist past, the physical presence of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle exudes masculine sex appeal.

RW: So what's the appeal? Why a Harley-Davidson, and not some other motorcycle?

Art: They're heavy. They ride nice. When you're on a Harley, there's just nothing else like it. You just feel like you got a machine under you, you know? You don't feel like you got a sewing machine under you. You feel like you got something out there that you're just toolin' around on, and you don't feel like you have to go fast. You don't have to impress anybody. You're just out there cutting the wind and feeling good.

The gender specificity of a sewing machine can be no more taken for granted than that of a motorcycle, but the domestic stereotype is certainly well established. The contrast implies that the Harley-Davidson is a masculine

machine which, of course, belongs beneath the rider, who manipulates it for his own satisfaction. The slang, *tool*, for male genitalia, following a possessive verb form completes the image of sexual domination.

Al: I got a brother in law, he's got a little Honda 50 step-through. That's as close as he ever came to a motorcycle. He's a three-piece suit guy, he's a manager for TWA at the airport, big executive type. He come down to my house and seen that I had a Harley, and he goes, "Oh man, take me for a ride. I just love the way these things sound. You gotta take me for a ride," you know? I thought he was putting me on, you know? But he wouldn't let up. He made me take him for a ride up and down the street. He wanted to just hear it, and cruise around on it a little bit. Me and Art were in Los Gatos one day, and some old guy come up when we were parked and says, "You don't mind if I stand here and just listen to 'em while you start 'em, do ya?" There's something about the sound of a Harley. I guess people remember 'em from their youth or something, maybe. It's a constant.

The repressed executive, who owns a step-through two-wheeler originally designed to permit an operator to wear a skirt or dress, and the elderly man hoping for gratuitous satisfaction, appeal to the Harley owner for momentary restoration of their manhood. It is the sound that provides their satisfaction, analogous perhaps to the voyeuristic pleasure of watching professional sports on television. Men who question their abilities--whether to catch a pass or to handle a big bike--may validate their masculinity through appreciation and acknowledgment of the same desires as those who actually perform these feats. Their admiration affirms the competencies of their role models, in this case the "competence" of motorcycle ownership.

RW: How did you like riding it?

Bob: Oh, I loved riding it. Oh, it was an exhilarating feeling to ride the Harley. You just felt like you had a big, powerful, throbbing engine that you're sitting on. The torque was just awesome. There's nothing like the thrill of the torque and the off-the-line speed and the noise that a Harley makes, that can satisfy or fuel the feeling that you really are on a real motorcycle. When you're sitting at the red light, just idling, and that chug-chug-chug-chug-type idle, and all that. You felt like you were really riding a motorcycle.

Ironically, there is a sense in which Bob's words contradict the surface expression of machismo revealed here and would, in certain company, have invited boisterous ridicule, if not outright contempt. A popular Harley-Davidson T-shirt depicts a voluptuous, naked woman straddling a motorcycle, with the caption "Put something exciting between your legs." The chugging idle of a Harley-Davidson is responsible for the well-known epithet, "Milwaukee vibrator." Admitting that he gets a thrill out of sitting at stop lights would have cast further aspersions upon Bob's manhood; "really riding a motorcycle" is not a sensation some would associate with obeying traffic signals or speed limit signs.

The power of the motor and the risk of personal injury serve for Gene as a remedy for feelings of emasculation:

Gene: You've got all that power right there at your fingertips. There's an element of danger. Every time you get on one of those things you're taking a chance, what with traffic, or animals, oil, water or whatever. We've all had those experiences. I think that, yeah, there's an element of danger there, too, that I think I'm drawn to a little bit. I'm a graphic artist. There's not a whole lot of danger in what I do, you know, day to day. Maybe nick yourself with an X-Acto. So I think maybe it's that little bit of the unknown, that element of danger.

RW: Now, why is that appealing? Many people stay away from motorcycles for that reason. Why would that attract somebody?

Gene: Well, I think, I being a man, I don't get to go out in the woods and hunt bears, and deer, whatever other kind of animals we used to hunt to eat. And I think this might take some of that place. Because we've become very domestic. And I think, me personally, I need that little element of the unknown, the danger aspect. It, uh, just kind of satisfies my soul. There's some craving in there that I'm drawn to.

The Harley-Davidson motorcycle operates simultaneously as French tickler and battle ax. Generally, RUB informants tended to be less sexually explicit in conversation and less aggressive on the road than outlaws, but the difference was more one of degree than of kind. For all informants, sexual

imagery was more evident at certain times, while risk and daring were emphasized at other times. The masculine significance of Harley-Davidson ownership as symbolic activity was common throughout their discourse.

Forms of Self-expression

Self-expression took two forms in the discourse of informants. On one hand, the motorcycle provided a medium through which creative vision was realized. Originality and performance were emphasized more by outlaws, who often fabricated their own parts and provided all or most of their own labor. Cosmetic ornamentation and comfort were emphasized more by RUBs, some of whom invested thousands of dollars for the installation of accessories.

Closely tied to this first interpretation, self-expression also took the form of public display. Harley-Davidson motorcycles magnetically attract attention, a fact that appealed powerfully to RUB informants. Outlaws differentiated between indiscriminate attention and the appreciation of knowledgeable audiences. For RUBs, public attention to their purchases conferred status upon themselves as owners. For outlaws, public attention to their creations confirmed their individuality as artists and craftsmen.

Wealth and Status. High status role models have been influential in broadening the appeal of Harley-Davidson ownership among those who least identify with the outlaw biker image. When asked about their decision to purchase a Harley-Davidson, new and first-time owners partly justified their involvement with appeals to authority:

Bob: I don't know what got me interested in the Harley. I, uh, started reading these articles, and I think the biggest one that got me thinking about it was this senior vice president of ours in Milwaukee rode in to the July '91 meeting on a Harley that they loaned him, to make a point.

RW: Who loaned it to him?

Bob: Harley-Davidson did. Harley-Davidson's headquartered in Milwaukee, and so is my company. And so I looked at that, and a combination of things, 'n' said, "Gee, I'd like to have a Harley." They make a lot of noise, and they're a man's motorcycle.

Bob's interest developed following exposure to media hype. During the interview he displayed photocopies of several newspaper and magazine articles that he had clipped over the past couple of years, including the one picturing his corporate supervisor astride a Harley with an amused audience of well-dressed insurance agents looking on in evident approval. Most of those articles concerned the appeal of the motorcycle as a remedy for professional stress. Celebrities and executives offered endorsements of the therapeutic benefits of Harley ownership, and provided Bob with acceptable role models for his own participation; successful, high-status, white, and predominantly male. The macho image associated with the bike was made uniquely inviting for Bob through the endorsement of his business superior.

Bob: You know, gee whiz, there's presidents of corporations, there's managing partners of law firms, there's people throughout Pennsylvania and New York that are making six-figure incomes, probably seven-figure incomes, that are riding Harleys for the, uh, mid-life crisis, for the stress reduction, that type stuff.

Bob was also certainly well aware of the stereotypical image of the Harley rider as a rebel or renegade. Although the infiltration of this image in popular culture reaches mythic proportions, it is a "low class" image Bob explicitly denies being attracted to:

Bob: We weren't being snobby, but we just found we didn't have a whole lot in common with the people. I mean, other than being Harley owners. I certainly didn't look like a Harley owner, you know. I didn't have the swagger, or the hair, or the beard, tattoos, and smoke cigarettes, and things like that. It seemed to be a pretty stereotyped crowd. And, uh, Harley riders tend to intimidate people, I think, also. 'Specially the ones with the beards and the ponytails and the beanie helmets and all that, 'cause they can look intimidating, with a scowly look on their face. I never wore a beanie helmet, I always wore the full face helmet, so nobody could see your face, anyway. But I would tend to think--I won't

speaking for the general public, you know, just straight across the board-- but I would tend to say that the perception the public has of a black leather jacket, noise-making Harley is hood, thug, you know, those type things that we don't denote as being, uh, the best.

Outlaw bikers constitute a large and vocal block opposed to mandatory helmet laws. One argument raised is that helmets depersonalize riders for whom individual style is a core value. The intended effects of long hair, black leather, body piercing and tattooing are undermined by the symbolic and physical presence of a crash helmet. Beanie helmets are a compromise that satisfies neither bikers nor bureaucrats. For Bob, a full-coverage helmet appears to provide a sense of security, both that his risk of injury is reduced and that he will not be associated as an individual with the biker counter-culture. He prefers to have the chance to explain that his involvement signifies wealth and status, not deviance.

Although Gene's personality and lifestyle distinguish him from the stereotypical outlaw, he prefers the beanie helmet because of its consistency or harmony as an accessory to the Harley mystique. He exploits the biker image to some extent, but like Bob he distinguishes himself from the counter-culture at every conversational opportunity.

Gene: Speed is not my thing. Like a friend of mine said a while back, he said, "If you just want to look cool on your motorcycle," which sometimes we just do, "you can just look cool on a Harley doing twenty miles an hour." They just have that aura about them. And it's fun to ride the bike down the road and have people look at it and wave and say, "Hey, nice bike." There's some ego in there, too.

Admiration, and awareness of being admired, are both facilitated by low-speed promenades. Ego gratification here explicitly accompanies possession; Gene feels personally complimented when observers admire his motorcycle, which is extensively decorated and always immaculate. Like a

mistress displayed at a holiday resort, Gene's bike could belong to anyone.

Only buying power is affirmed by such attention.

Art and Craft. The majority of the biker counterculture is not criminal, but working class. Many affirm their identities and express their individuality through the construction of one-of-a-kind motorcycles. No more inherently gender specific than the aforementioned sewing machine, the necessary facility with tools and raw materials is stereotypically masculine, as is the inclination to express individual identity in terms of motorcycle ownership:

Dave: Anybody can buy parts, put it in a box and shake 'em up and dump it out, or you know, you can even fit 'em up and make it look right. But there's more to it if you can build the parts yourself and, then it's like an extension of your personality. It's part of you. It isn't just a motorcycle.

The experience of buying a motorcycle takes hours; building one takes weeks, months, sometimes years. Within the finished product are the accumulated experiences that transform vision and materials into a personal statement. Dave envisions and designs his motorcycles, fabricates many of the parts himself, and assembles the finished product one piece at a time. As forms of self-expression, his bikes are unlike anything available through the purchase of a factory-built motorcycle. He suggests that these different approaches to ownership reflect different values. In constructing his own motorcycles, Dave believes that he expresses a part of himself that distinguishes him from others and that communicates to others his personal statements on wealth, work, art and the self:

RW: How do you see yourself in comparison to other motorcycle owners?

Dave: I'd like to think I was a little bit different, just 'cause I do build my own stuff and try to be a little bit different from everybody else.

RW: And you think that's unusual, even among Harley riders?

Dave: I think nowadays it is. I think a lot of people won't take the time, or spend the money it takes to build a class ride. They'd just as soon, you know, if they own a Harley, that's all they want to do, is just own one. They don't want to take the effort of the time it takes to build one.

RW: Why do you think that is?

Dave: I don't know. Maybe it's just they're content in owning a Harley . . . I like owning one, but I also like to build 'em. There's a lot of enjoyment in building a bike. Because when you're all done, this is what I've done, this is my accomplishment, this is a piece of me that's, I dunno, you could call it two-wheeled artistry or anything like that or whatever. But it's like a piece of you. This is it. This is what I had in the back of my mind, this is what I envisioned. This is a statement of my abilities. This is what I can do.

Dave's comments highlight a formerly essential cultural knowledge base, which concerns the intersection of Harley-Davidson history and engineering. Prior to the introduction of the Evolution motor, Harley-Davidson motorcycles shared both a maintenance-intensive reputation and a historical consistency in mechanical design. Knowledgeable enthusiasts grafted Panhead cylinders and heads onto Sportster engine cases, mounted Knucklehead motors in late-model swingarm frames or bolted Shovelhead motors into old-style hardtail frames, and exchanged camshafts, kick starters and electric starters, carburetors, wheels, forks, and exhaust systems between models virtually as their imaginations and service requirements dictated. This interchangeability pragmatized historical knowledge, enriched the biker culture, and dominated the discourse of its members.

Although the Evolution motor shares a number of engineering specifications with its predecessors, there is practically no possible direct exchange of parts between the Evo and its predecessors. The former historical knowledge base and the cultural practice of mechanical experimentation have thus been marginalized, isolating traditionalists like Dave from the evolving mainstream of the subculture and problematizing his identification with it.

A "class ride" embodies explicit standards of taste and originality and is neither exclusive to nor inherent within any socio-economic group. The fact that to be able to satisfy those standards requires considerable competence with tools and materials, a competence characteristically associated with working-class people, may reflect an underlying awareness that custom bike building is symbolic activity that validates the virtue of work rather than the power of wealth.

The categories Freedom, Nostalgia, and Masculinity represent symbolic substances that unify the discourse of Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners. In other words, these categories describe the underlying significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle and illuminate ownership as symbolic activity. What these categorical divisions specifically signify, however, is subject to various interpretations. Different conceptions of the meaning of each term, and its relevance or centrality in the symbolic world of individual Harley-Davidson owners, underlie the fact that distinct subcultural memberships can be identified. Although Harley-Davidson owners in general identify freedom, nostalgia, and masculinity within the symbolic activity of motorcycle ownership, outlaws as a counterculture and RUBs as a distinct subculture distinguish their contrasting interpretations of these identifying themes through more specific discursive and nondiscursive practices.

CHAPTER FOUR

COMMITMENT AS A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

There is perhaps no inherent reason that contrasting symbolic activities generate tension instead of accommodation between subcultural memberships. But in order to more clearly understand the tensions that do exist, Research Question Two originates from the belief that we must not simply look at the ways individuals and cultural groups identify themselves, but need to ask, how are alternative identities evaluated in the discourse of individual Harley-Davidson owners?

Alternative identities were evaluated through confirmations of and challenges to commitment. Harley-Davidson owners, confronted by the fact that ownership, instead of transcending difference merely re-presents it, test the legitimacy of conflicting interpretations through symbolic investment assessments. For example, riding a motorcycle, not simply owning one, appears crucial to interpretations of its symbolic significance in terms of freedom and masculinity. How much and in what way the motorcycle is used on the road permit finer distinctions and critical evaluations of the legitimacy of competing claims to symbolic ownership among conflicting groups.

In addition to riding, "wrenching" (the practice of maintaining and servicing a motorcycle) demonstrates familiarity with a cultural knowledge base which underlies interpretations of masculinity and nostalgia. How much and how well one is able to maintain and improve the motorcycle, like riding, frame critical evaluations of the symbolic activity of individual Harley-Davidson owners.

Results and Discussion

These evaluations are developed on five levels. First, informants discuss in general the recent changes in cultural values and commitments of Harley-Davidson owners. Change is evaluated positively by some, and negatively by others. The second section establishes limits and distinctions in individual Harley-Davidson owners' commitment to the symbolic act of riding a motorcycle. The third section establishes limits and distinctions in individual Harley-Davidson owners' commitment to the symbolic act of wrenching. Fourth, those who evaluate cultural changes negatively critique alternative identities in terms of commitment to riding and wrenching as symbolic activities. And fifth, those who evaluate cultural changes positively critique alternative identities in terms of commitment to riding and wrenching as symbolic activities.

Permanence and Change

Contrasting interpretations of the symbolic significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle and the cultural practices in which it may be used produce alternative forms of identification which are resisted by those with a significant investment in its current meaning. Riding and wrenching as symbolic activities constitute the practices by which Harley-Davidson ownership is re-presented as a source of identification. Before proceeding to comparative evaluations of RUB and outlaw commitments to the struggle for symbolic ownership, this section reports their discursive responses to the question of cultural change itself. Those with significant investments in counterculture identities oppose change, perceiving it as a loss of meaning. Those who represent this threat see change as an improvement in cultural

life, and the democratization or popularization of a significant symbolic resource. Both groups perceive improvements in the reliability of the product itself as a major contribution to its rhetorical influence.

Negative Evaluations of Cultural Change

The changes in cultural membership and the influence of these changes upon the symbolic significance and rhetorical function of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle were discussed by John, Dave, and Walt at some length. As evident representatives of the biker counterculture, their long-term involvement with the bikes and the various people who own and ride them distinguishes their perspective: they possess greater familiarity both with the way things have been and the way they are becoming, but their greater investment in established interpretations prejudices their perception of change:

RW: Have you noticed any changes in the kind of people who go riding these days?

Dave: Yeah, I guess you could say there's, like, two distinct groups, I guess you could say. There's the ones who've been riding for a really long time, and understand the Harleys, and the history of it, what it took for 'em to get to where they are. And you got the new guys . . . I guess the biggest change started like around '84, '85, when they come out with the Evo motors, 'cause they are a lot more reliable motor, a better bike. And you got all these people that have the money and they buy a Harley just to say "I have a Harley," and that's all they know. They don't know what it is.

RW: Why do they want one?

Dave: Couldn't tell ya. They just must think it's cool. They get the black leathers on and they get on the Harley and they ride up and down the street. I guess they try to look cool. They have no idea. They could look at a shovelhead or a panhead or a flathead and they wouldn't even know what it was. All they know is that they have a Harley and they can go ride and they look bad. And I guess that's kinda sad.

RW: Why is that sad?

Dave: You should know, um, you should know, whenever I get into something I always try to understand, not just what I'm working on. You try to figure everything out. Why it's the way it is. And it's just they don't, all they care about is what they have right there. And even that, they don't, oh, they don't understand it. They just know it's a motorcycle and it's a Harley. They don't know why it's an Evo motor, they don't know why it is the way it is, or why it got to where it is. They just know that they have it, and that's it. To me, you get more enjoyment out of building it, and to get into building it you have to understand what's happening. You know, there's just more to it.

Symbolic resources possess cultural significance, rhetorical power, and meaning within a historical context. Colonization attempts to rewrite history, relocating cultural practices and resources within a new context. For those who have lived within the original context, new interpretations appear trivial or nonsensical.

John: Biking to me is not a motorcycle, it's a lifestyle, it's a life. You got all these people that ride brand new Harleys and they got all these fuckin' leathers on and everything, and they go around emulating what they think a biker is all about. Well, that's what's really, uh, I don't know how to say "disgusting" in a more sophisticated way.

RW: What's disgusting about that?

John: Well, it's not about a lifestyle anymore. It's all about being cool, and, uh, being accepted. If you don't have a Harley-Davidson and all the fuckin' leathers to go with it, then you're not a biker, you're not a biker to the, uh, phony biker people nowadays. They put everything in a, how do I say it, put everything into a monetary type connotation. The bikers nowadays, if it ain't a new bike, and if you don't got a fuckin' thousand dollars worth of leather, then you're not a biker. If you got an old bike and it's fuckin' barely running, but you beat your head against the wall to keep it running, you're not even allowed to ride with the people with the new bikes. You gotta go find your own fuckin' gang of derelicts that got a bunch of bikes that they're proud as hell of just like, you know, that they're prouder of than the people that just went down and bought their new one. This whole biker thing has got me perplexed.

New interpretations of symbolic resources not only produce new forms of identification, they marginalize established forms. When new interpretations simultaneously trivialize formerly significant symbols, resistance

assumes the appearance of retreat. In John's case, retreat from the symbolic resource became complete rejection:

John: It got to the point where, just because it was a Harley-Davidson, it really didn't mean that much to me anymore. I got tired of that lifestyle. The people were changing. They weren't real people anymore, they were phony people, that alls they had to do was have a Harley and they were cool. You met more of those people than you did the real people. . . I don't know how they did it, but I'll tell you one fuckin' thing. I'll never ride a Harley again, because they're a bunch of fuckin' pussies.

Walt's assessment was entirely consistent with John's:

RW: Have you perceived changes in the kind of people who own and ride Harley-Davidsons?

Walt: Yeah, because the stereotype is pretty much dead.

RW: Why is that?

Walt: Well, you know, the stereotype that we used to have back in the '60's. You remember all the movies that come out, Hells Angels Forever, and all kinds of other things where they depicted 'em as just a bunch of derelicts? Well, pretty much we are. We were the people that their mothers warned them about.

Walt exaggerates. The stereotype is not yet dead, but it may be that when those who actually embody it die, what they represent will die as well.

Changes in the material substance of the motorcycle itself preceded changes in its symbolic substance.

John: I don't mean to take anything away from the Harley-Davidson mystique, or the Harley-Davidson company. I mean, I think it's really, really good that an American motorcycle manufacturer has come back from the depths of bankruptcy and become the number one motorcycle to own again. Well, when I owned a Harley-Davidson, it was the number one motorcycle to own, too. But it was the number one motorcycle because only real people, real people rode Harley-Davidson motorcycles, because you couldn't just go out and buy the fuckin' thing, you had to keep it running. It took heart and courage to have a motorcycle back then, a Harley back then. I mean, you could go buy a brand new one and the fuckin' thing wasn't any better than old one, back then.

John's appreciation for the economic revival of the Harley-Davidson Motor Company contrasts with his disapproval for the accompanying changes

in cultural participation and the significance of the motorcycle as a symbolic resource. As the bikes get better, ownership means less.

Positive Evaluations of Cultural Change

Among those who represent unfortunate change in the opinions of counterculture bikers, the change itself is viewed much more positively. In their view, as the motorcycle improved, the culture of ownership improved as well:

RW: So that stereotype of bikers being assholes and all that, do you think that's gone?

Al: It's going! One thing is, the new bikes cost so much that kind of guy can't afford to buy one, I don't think. I think most of the new ones are pretty much, you know, guys that got money. 'Cause you're talking 15,000 out the door, you know.

Art possesses a unique perspective among these informants in that he rode a Harley-Davidson as a very young man, and has clear recollections of the appeal, and the pitfalls, of the counterculture lifestyle:

Art: I got into the typical biker thing, goin' out in the canyon with 200 other people, you know, started to get into trouble and everything. And I guess I had, like, oh, maybe ten years where I didn't even ride a motorcycle. 'Cause I was raising my son, and I didn't want him getting involved in it, so I stopped riding for a while.

RW: Let's go back to something you said a couple of minutes ago. You said that it used to be that everybody that rode 'em was troublemakers and stuff like that. And now, all kind of different people ride 'em. When did you see that starting to change?

Art: Hmm. Probably, only within the last 6 or 7 years.

RW: Yeah? And what happened?

Art: I don't really know, to tell you the truth. It's hard to say. I can't really pinpoint one thing that happened. Maybe the bike just got more expensive, that only the better class of people could afford 'em. I don't really know. . . It used to be, people would look down on you a lot. You know, you pull up to an intersection on your chopper and you'd look pretty grubby and people'd always look down on you and be afraid to look at you. Stuff like that. You don't find that anymore. Nowadays it doesn't

matter who it is. When you pull up next to a light, they're checking your bike out. People don't look at you in the same way they used to.

The link between wealth and quality is made explicit. Better bikes cost more; as the poor are excluded, culture is improved.

RW: Why do you think this is changing, this image thing?

Bob: I think it's that people are cleaning their act up, it seems like, as far as Harley's cleaning their act up. Involved in types of Muscular Dystrophy rides, and things like that. And a lot of celebrities ride the Harleys, and talk about 'em, and stuff like that.

Cultural hegemony results from the complicit support of the established order by those who might otherwise benefit from change. Those with wealth and status attempt to preserve their privilege by improving the lives of those less fortunate. In this case, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle is delivered from the possession of troublemakers into the hands of the charitable and the celebrated, who already possess the resources necessary to publicize their reinterpretation of the symbol. Public approval legitimizes the colonization of the counterculture, whose critique then sounds shallow and ironically elitist.

Logo-motion: Riding as Symbolic Activity

RW: What's a biker, Walt?

Walt: That is somebody who lives, breathes, man everything that this guy does is around that bike. It's his main source of transportation.

Within the counterculture, the true symbolic significance of the motorcycle begins when the motor is started. A bike that is unable to be started or that is rarely ridden is assumed to reflect some flaw in the owner--generally, mechanical incompetence or lack of commitment to the biker lifestyle.

Although restoration, repair, or radical modification may justify "downtime," such projects become central in the lives of counterculture bikers.

In the lexicon of the counterculture, rides are called "runs." The run is the primary cultural practice through which identification is produced, and which distinguishes bikers from "wannabes." In general, counterculture bikers ride more frequently and accumulate more miles than other Harley-Davidson owners. Their motorcycles occupy a more central position in their cultural and personal lives, and contribute more substantially to the development of identification. When other commitments were more central in the lives of owners, riding was less frequent and over shorter distances. Gene represents a paradox, in that he explicitly distinguishes himself from the outlaw biker stereotype, but possesses an unusual commitment to riding:

Gene: I bought the bike used. A fellow had bought it in '89, and had it four years, and virtually didn't ride it. It had 7,000 miles on it, after four years. And he sold it back to the dealer. They had done all the service on it, they had all the service records. And the bike was clean. So, I picked it up used . . . Anyway, I bought it 16 months ago, and I've put about 28,000 on it.

RW: So you ride it a lot.

Gene: I ride it every day I can to work, if it's not raining. It's about an 80 mile round trip. And I rode it all last summer. About the only time I don't ride it is in the rain. I don't ride in the rain unless I get caught in it. Not by choice.

Gene's riding style is fairly conservative, as evidenced by his aversions to speed and lane splitting, and his conscientious avoidance of bad weather.

Although it previews upcoming information, it is worth noting here that Gene's commitment to riding contrasts with his mechanical interests and abilities, an ownership contradiction that was infrequently observed until fairly recently. The significant improvement in reliability and reduction in required maintenance which accompanied the introduction of the Evolution series of Harley-Davidson motorcycles permits owners without mechanical interests or abilities to ride without constant fear of breakdowns.

Immediately following the interview with Gene, I had the opportunity to speak with John about the progress of the study. When I described Gene's motorcycle--the whitewall tires, the raccoon tails dangling from the handlebars, the overabundance of chrome--John was openly scornful. Gene's white-collar occupation and middle-class lifestyle supported, in John's mind, the probability that Gene was simply another weekend rider who got more satisfaction out of parking his bike and talking about it than he did riding it. When he learned that Gene rode approximately 21,000 miles a year, John's scorn turned to ungrudging respect.

RW: When you had that bike running, how often did you ride it?

John: Every day. I put almost 20,000 miles on that motorcycle in one year. I know it's hard to believe, but that was when I was riding the outlaw trail, and I was going back and forth from Santa Cruz to San Jose two and three times a day, every day. Rain or shine, that was it. I used to wear out a back tire every month and a half on that motorcycle, just wear the tires out as fast as I could put 'em on. Good thing I was a semi-affluent drug dealer, or I could never have been able to afford all those back tires I put on that motorcycle. And that's when I first started wearing a helmet, too. Before the helmet law ever came around, I started wearing a helmet.

RW: Why's that?

John: Anybody'd ride a motorcycle like I rode that one should be wearing a helmet, you know. I mean, not only that, it was cold, and I did a lot of late night riding in all kinds of weather, and that was the one way that I knew of that I could keep my head dry.

John shares the general aversion outlaw bikers have to mandatory crash helmet laws, but not to helmets on principle. He is, in fact, an exceedingly confident, competent, and daring motorcyclist. He rides aggressively, purposely pushing himself and his motorcycle to new limits. To do otherwise, he claims, is not riding, but "puttin'."

RW: How long you been riding Harley-Davidsons?

Walt: The first time I ever rode one was 1958. The first one I owned I bought in, I'd probably say, 1975, 1976. But I had Indians before that. I had a 1953 Roadmaster and I had a 1946 Chief, but it was hard gettin' parts back in the '70's, and I just switched over to Harleys.

RW: And how often do you go riding?

Walt: Every goddamn day I get a chance.

Walt believes that he has logged over 500,000 two-wheeled miles in his lifetime. Like John, he has an aggressive riding style, and willingly rides in sunshine, rain, even snow. He uses his motorcycle regularly to commute to work, and spends his vacations on long trips with little more than a bag of tools, a change of clothes, and a sleeping bag strapped behind him.

Al owns several motorcycles, including two Harley-Davidsons, a Triumph, a Honda road racer, and a couple of dirt bikes. He said he rides his 1990 Harley-Davidson "Heritage Softail" the most:

RW: How many miles on it?

Al: About 8000 miles.

RW: And how often do you ride?

Al: Ohh, usually every weekend, at least, I ride a little bit. Usually not that much. Maybe 50 miles a weekend, something like that.

RW: Ever take any long trips?

Al: No, not really.

A four year old motorcycle with 8,000 miles on the odometer indicates something other than a substantial commitment to riding. Al, in fact, admitted that he is more interested in collecting motorcycles than in riding them. He rides conservatively, using the bike primarily for short trips around town:

Al: It's just nice for running around the city. And it's got the saddlebags on the back of it, leather saddlebags. So if I ride down to the store I got somewhere to carry stuff. That's one reason I ride it more, is if I'm running errands I can use that bike to do it. But I'm not into long

highway rides, you know. I don't get on it and ride all day or something. I don't go for that.

Bob rode mostly for pleasure on short trips as well. Providing a significant commentary on commitment and the symbolic significance of the motorcycle, Bob recently sold his Harley-Davidson because he used it so little:

RW: Go out every weekend?

Bob: No, just when it's nice. We're fair-weather riders. I only put 1500 miles on it in two years.

RW: 1500 miles in two years, huh?

Bob: Yeah, well, our longest ride on the Harley was probably a hundred miles. . . I found out that once I had it, it became a possession, rather than a mode of transportation . . . It became something I just wasn't getting a whole lot of practical use out of. It turned out to be something that was a fleeting fantasy, if you want to call it that.

For the purposes of this study, these informants establish the upper and lower limits of riding miles accumulated. As a symbolic resource, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle occupies considerably different positions in the lives of those who ride extensively and those who ride infrequently. Their various commitments to the symbolic act of riding will serve for each of them to clarify and evaluate their conflicting interpretations of the symbolic significance of the motorcycle.

Nuts and Bolts: Wrenching as Symbolic Activity

Next to riding, an ability to maintain, service, and improve the motorcycle provides a standard against which Harley-Davidson owners are often judged. Fewer people without some interest in mechanical work were drawn to Harley-Davidson ownership prior to 1984, when the factory introduced the fourth incarnation of its large-displacement, overhead-valve powerplant, dubbed the "Evolution" motor.⁸ Reputedly much more dependable, less messy, and easier to start than its predecessors, the Evolution motor was the first in an

ongoing line of improvements intended to broaden the appeal of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle. Bob was not entirely satisfied with the alleged improvements, however:

Bob: I found that if I didn't start it up every three or four days that, a characteristic of the Harley is that the oil would seep, or gravity would pull it out of the oil tank down into the sump of the engine, which is a characteristic. And then you'd start it up and it would blow it out of the carburetor and you'd have a mess on your hands. And that was a little frustrating, that I wasn't starting it up and riding it. I had to make an effort to do that.

Walt and Dave, whose highly customized machines are far more maintenance-intensive than unmodified, factory-built bikes, often wipe more oil on their trousers while making adjustments and fine tuning than blows through Bob's carburetor. Within the counterculture, extensive mechanical competence is not essential, although it frequently is a factor in personal reputation. More significant is an inclination to "wrench," to work on the vehicle with one's own hands, and to attempt to learn from others what one does not already know. Wrenching ritualizes motorcycle maintenance, and as a symbolic activity contributes to personal and subcultural identity formation. Bob, however, had no interest in that kind of activity:

Bob: I didn't do a thing to it. I bought it customized, and I sold it as was. I mean, costing \$10,000, I didn't want to put anything else into it.

Gene, despite the comparatively central position the motorcycle occupies in his life, believes he lacks the necessary skill to perform his own service and is not inclined to develop it. During the interview he mentioned that he replaced the stock camshaft in his motor, in the interest of increasing its horsepower:

RW: Did you put the cam in yourself?

Gene: Ah, no. No. I'm not much of a mechanic. I put the bag up in the front there on the windshield for the, ah, the tools . . . Also, I have saddle bags

on it, which I take off and put on.

Al has the necessary expertise, but no inclination to do more than ornament his motorcycle with mass-produced accessories:

RW: What have you done to the Heritage? Have you worked on it at all?

Al: Just little chrome doohickies here and there. Nothing real exciting.

RW: How 'bout the Sportster?

Al: Again, a couple of little chrome things here and there. Nothing major. They're basically both stock.

The most profound expression of wrenching as symbolic activity is building; one builds a bike, then wrenches on it to maintain and improve it. John provided the most extensive discussion of the work involved in actually building a motorcycle:

RW: When did you get your first Harley-Davidson?

John: 1973. It was an old, running, basket panhead. I bought it for \$1700. The cases were broken and welded back together, and they were welded back together so poorly that the timing plug didn't fit. 'Had to put a cork in the timing plug because the threads didn't align. I drove that motorcycle for eight months before it finally blew up. Then I had it rebuilt. 'Put on a new left side case, rebuilt the engine, and the transmission. While the bike was down I completely redid the frame. It was a stock Harley rigid frame. I believe it was a knuckle, because the panhead motor didn't fit in it. The rear cylinder hit the downtube that goes between the engine and the transmission. So, I completely redid the frame. I cut it off in the front, I cut off the front bottom motor mounts, and I cut it off behind the top rear motor mount, and built my own hard head to go on there. And I also fixed the part where the rear cylinder hit. I took and removed material and welded back in another flat plate so the rear cylinder wouldn't hit the frame back there anymore. And I customized it, redid all the welds and smoothed it all out, made it look all trick and everything. And that was the motorcycle that became "Slick." It got the name of Slick because it leaked oil so bad when I first got it and for the first six or eight months that I rode it, it was slick everywhere, from oil all over it. And then, after I rebuilt the engine and redid the chassis, I had all the hardware gold plated, and the spoke nipples were gold plated, had stainless steel polished spokes, painted the frame all black and had 24 karat gold leaf on it. It was really, it became "Trick Slick."

RW: When I met you in 1987, you were in the process of building a different motorcycle.

John: That was leftovers from Slick, and parts of the new bike that I'd been saving. I started saving parts to build my new, ultimate Harley-Davidson bike. That bike was a 96 cubic incher, weighed 460 pounds, and, uh, ultimate speed I ever got out of it was 146 miles an hour. That was across the plains in South Dakota, racing a shovelhead from Sturgis to Rapid City, raced almost all the way back. That was the fastest I ever went on that motorcycle. It was a bad-ass motorcycle.

Dan recognized differences between various types of Harley-Davidson owners, suggested to me that mechanical expertise is relevant to the development of the biker identity, and noted that factory improvements in manufacturing and quality control have influenced the symbolic significance of the motorcycle:

Dan: A biker is someone that really knows his bike, keeps it running. And to me, I don't consider myself so much of a biker because my bike doesn't allow me to work on it all that much. But it's very simplistic. So if anything breaks, I know I can put my hands to it and work on it.

RW: What have you had to do to it?

Dan: Chain tensioning, uh, oil changes. What else have I had to do? Spark plug change. That's about it.

For the purposes of this study, these informants have demonstrated the range of mechanical abilities and inclinations which partially locate the Harley-Davidson motorcycle within their cultural and personal lives. Their various commitments to the symbolic act of wrenching represent positions from which their differences in identity can be evaluated.

Smoke and Mirrors

Beneath the counterculture commitment to riding and wrenching lies an emphasis on credibility. Owners who don't ride or don't wrench create the illusion of being bikers, offending the self-perceived authentic and profaning their symbolic resources. This section examines alternative interpretations of

riding and wrenching as perceived by counterculture bikers. Commitment to the symbolic significance of these cultural practices is a focal point of their critique.

Riding

The essential symbolic act is riding. The rhetorical power of the motorcycle begins on the run; no other cultural practice is exclusive to the culture of motorcyclists. At this level, not even the brand of motorcycle is relevant:

RW: What's the word "biker" mean to you?

Dave: Biker? Biker's anybody that rides a bike.

RW: Doesn't have to be a Harley?

Dave: Doesn't have to be a Harley.

John: To me, the word "biker" means that, uh, somebody that rides a motorcycle. And I always used to say, that I rode with anybody, whether it was on a Honda, Kawasaki, Harley-Davidson. And I always used to say, quote me, it didn't make any difference to me what kind of motorcycle you were riding, you were out there catching the wind, and you were playing the same game I was, and that made us all brothers. You know, it wasn't the motorcycle that made you a biker, it was the lifestyle that made you a biker.

Walt: You know, every motorcycle that's on the highway today sees the same thing. They see people cutting them off, they see rain, they see fuckin' snow, they see sand kicked up from trucks, they see people that don't see 'em. Those motorcycles don't know what they are. You know? It's the person that's riding 'em. If the guy doesn't have the heart, if he doesn't have the inclination to do something and to be something by himself and not have to fall into a mold of a bunch of lemmings . . .

It is particularly interesting that these three individuals would make such statements, since, of the informants who contributed to the present study, they are the three with the longest histories of owning and riding Harley-Davidsons, and whose appearance, conversational habits, and social activities most reflect countercultural style. Their personal reasons for choosing

Harley-Davidson motorcycles have been well established. Ownership itself, however, is comparatively meaningless if the owner is not also an active rider:

Walt: We get a lot of wannabes around, though, too. People that you see standing around on corners or going in the shop, and the guy's wearing a fucking T-shirt and he's got a chain-drive wallet or something. I think this was last week, or maybe a couple of days ago, this guy come up to me and says, "Hey, man," he says, "I heard you been to Sturgis." I says, "Yeah, have you been there?" He says, "No, I'm going out this year, you know?" I says, "Well whatta you gonna do, which way you gonna go?" "Well," he says, "I'll get my trailer . . ." and I says, "Hey look," I says, "don't talk to me, then. Fuck you, I got nothing to say to you." I says, "If you're gonna go out to Sturgis then you're gonna have to go out to ride," I says. "If you wanna trailer your bike, then go talk to some other wannabe, don't talk to me." There's a lot of that out there.

An inoperative motorcycle or circumstances which are permitted to preclude riding are generally interpreted and criticized as flaws in commitment. However, special contempt is reserved for owners who trailer their motorcycles when they could be ridden:

RW: So what's the difference with people now that you see riding?

Walt: Um, the riders are definitely different. They don't go anyplace. What was it, Loon Mountain we went to, when Katie first came here? We went up there, and there were people there that trailered their motorcycles up. And when we went out to Sturgis, how many people did you see that were trailering motorcycles?

RW: Practically every single person that passed me was trailering his bike.

Walt: That's what I mean. That's what makes things different, that's a big thing and a change.

RW: Why do you think that happened?

Walt: Ahh, because they're pussies.

RW: Why would pussies want to ride Harleys?

Walt: It's an image that they think they're creating in riding a bike. It's the image that they want to project to other people, so they trailer everything that they have. We rode all the way out there from Connecticut to go to Sturgis, and then I see guys from Illinois and from Iowa trailering their fucking bikes. I don't understand that. They're not riders.

They just go up there and drink beer and they go out and look good, you know? Big fuckin' deal.

Dressing up, posing, taking short rides in nice weather, and gossiping are considered effeminate forms of behavior by counterculture bikers. The feminization of culture is frequently presented as the essential target of counterculture opposition. Outlaw bikers tend to glorify perseverance in the face of adversity and discomfort, and to condemn passivity which is perceived as unmasculine. In response to encroachment by RUBs, counterculture discourse has attempted--with some success--to attach an effeminate stereotype to its perceived opposition:

RW: Why do people like that even buy a Harley-Davidson?

John: You tell me. They only want to ride 'em to the bar and park 'em. Tell me why they only want to ride 'em when the weather's cool--so they can put on all their leathers. 'Cause it's cool, you know, it's hip, it's a trend, it's status quo. If you got a Harley nowadays, it means you're automatically socially accepted, and not only into the biker world, but into all different levels of society, in the American society. 'Cause you can't get any more American nowadays than riding a Harley. In the old days, the outlaws rode the Harleys and they were looked down upon because they rode 'em. People thought that most of the people that rode 'em didn't work and they stole and they were gangsters and they were hoodlums and they were outlaws and drug dealers, which a lot of us were. Big deal. That's what I did, so I could support my fuckin' hobby, my game playing. But also too, a lot of people, they had nine-to-five jobs, eight-to-five jobs every day of the week. They were honest, upstanding people, they went out and rode 'em every day to work. Most of the people that ride Harley-Davidsons today don't ride 'em every day. They just ride 'em on the weekend, on all the sanctioned, Harley-Davidson runs. Like I said, they go down to the bar, park in front of the bar, grab a beer and stand out on the curb and say, "Yeah, that's my motorcycle." And that makes 'em a biker, 'cause they can say "Yeah, that's my Harley." It's really frustrating, because people will buy into that trip, you know, will buy into it and say, "Yeah, you're cool, you got your fuckin' Harley." And they don't know anything about the person. The person only rides it as a status symbol. I call 'em "Harley socialites." And they go down to the bar on Sunday, and they're having their coming out ball, having their coming out party in front of the bar. And they might get on that fuckin' thing and ride a hundred miles at the most on one day, and go home and park it 'til next weekend. And the women, too, on their little Sportsters.

The fact that simple ownership of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle confers mainstream social status is disturbing, "frustrating," to John. Status, he believes, should accrue to the builder-rider, not the buyer. His indictment of the role of public perception, which validates pretension after marginalizing authenticity, substantiates his claim that the bikes themselves "don't mean that much anymore." Even though honest men rode their bikes to work every day, Harley riders were perceived as "gangsters and hoodlums." Now, owners are all-American socialites. The image of the debutante biker, decked out in full leathers for the "coming out ball," articulates the feminization theme, which John emphasizes by linking weekend riders with "women on their little Sportsters."

Bob corroborates the substance of John's critique in reflecting upon his recent decision to sell his motorcycle:

Bob: It was fun to have while we had it. It satisfied some portion of my ego for that period of time, like, telling people, "Yeah, I have a Harley." It was more like a possession than it was an actual motorcycle that we got some practical use out of.

Problematic for the Harley-Davidson counterculture is the fact that, for every customer like Bob who becomes disenchanted, many are willing to purchase a motorcycle and contribute to its redefinition as a symbol of wealth and status. In doing so, the point of owning a Harley-Davidson, and the commitment required to reproduce carefully constructed counterculture identities, become harder and harder to justify.

Wrenching

One of the most significant developments, in terms of the broadening of Harley-Davidson's popular appeal and its subsequent financial rejuvenation, was the development and marketing of the factory-custom motorcycle.

Accommodating as it is, and broad as its catalog of options may be, the factory irresponsibly redefines individualism by conscripting the "custom" label. Yet it has unquestionably convinced thousands that it can provide them with the experience of owning a custom show winner without the necessity of envisioning or fabricating it for themselves:

Art: For one thing, Harley-Davidson makes the bike now that is almost like everybody used to try to make. I mean, it's like a facsimile of what everybody used to try to build.

Art's use of the past tense is significant.

Walt: People are not building 'em, because when it comes from the factory everything is done. Whatever needs to be chromed or whatever looks like it wants to be chromed is chromed . . . You take a look at all the bikes that Harley makes today, and they're all cookie-cutter motorcycles. Every fuckin' one of 'em looks like the first one and it's gonna look like the last goddamn one that they build. They're all gonna look the same, 'cause everybody wants that.

More is at stake here than the false representation of individualism or artistic expression. By formularizing the custom idiom, work itself, as creation and self-satisfaction, is invalidated. By engineering customer expectations and circumscribing the domain of acceptable differences, the aesthetic experience itself is colonized. In both cases, lack of commitment is encouraged.

By formularizing the concept of the custom motorcycle, the value of work is explicitly associated with product; process is trivialized. Disincentive to experiment and to develop skills is built into every factory offering. Confidence in personal labor is undermined. The factory can do it better, cheaper, and faster, for the factory has technique and technology, and has defined the objective in terms it is uniquely qualified to satisfy:

Al: There's a tool guy that comes by here, you know, just a nice guy, comes cruising by, sells tools, like a Snap-on truck, and about six months ago he decided he wanted a Harley. And we tried to talk him into just go buying a new one, you know? And he found an old junker he decided he was gonna buy, three grand, and he says, "Well, I'm gonna fix it up,"

and all this crap. And, you know, we tried to say, "You know, you're gonna be into this thing as much as a new one costs." And it's, you know, it's a shovel, it's not an Evo, so he won't be able to sell it for as much, if he ever wants to, you know, sell it. But he says, "Oh, this way I can spread it out and it won't cost me as much." You know. But this guy, he couldn't do his own work, so he took the engine in, he took the tranny in, you know, and had a guy do this and do that. But he's still into it ten grand, and he's still got an old shovel. And I paid, I think, eleven for mine, and I could probably sell it for that or more.

To take an old junker, envision something different, and actually make it real requires wrenching commitment that is found in smaller and smaller proportions within the Harley-Davidson ownership community. Furthermore, the process is symbolic in a way that the consumption of corporate production cannot be. Creation or restoration as symbolic activity requires commitment, and produces commitment, to oneself, the vision, and the finished product:

Dave: The Sportster'll probably be around here forever. I think before I went through all the time and effort to build it the way it is I probably, at one point in time a long time ago, I probably could have got rid of it. I was offered some money for it, but I've had it so long and been through so much with it, it's just here.

The aesthetic experience of the audience is circumscribed as its familiarity with original custom work is submerged beneath factory reproductions of finite variety. Prepared for what it shall encounter, the custom audience fails to see the original when it appears, and never misses what it is not conditioned to expect. Originality becomes associated with a more or less individual selection of prefabricated accessories:

Walt: You don't find too many people with shovels, anymore. Because everybody's riding the E-motors. Sometimes I don't wonder if that's a conspiracy of some sort. If somebody just decided to start on that, and if you get rid of all the old stuff then the only thing that's out there is the new stuff, and you gotta ride the new stuff.

RW: And what's wrong with that?

Walt: Um, individualism. There is none. They're trying to do away with individualism. They're taking all the individualisms out of the American people. They're telling you what kind of motorcycles to ride, and

they don't want you to build 'em. Who thinks this is what the American people want? Or this is what Joe Average wants? Do you? Has anybody come and asked you, "Hey, do you think if we chrome plated this drip pan for a cross-country alligator that everybody's gonna want this?" Where do you guys get these ideas? Yeah, the individualism is slowly being pushed away. They want lemmings. They want everybody to follow right in step. So, they figure if you got something that's gonna look just like everybody else, you're not gonna do anything.

RW: Not gonna do what?

Walt: Well, you're just gonna fall in line. You're not going to be an individualist. That's exactly what it comes down to.

With so little modeling being done, Joe Average eventually forgets how to ask questions himself--and of himself. Uncertain of what he should want and of what the possibilities are, he selects from the range of predetermined options:

Dan: I like bikes that tend to retain the stock look and reliability, but have a little more performance. Such things as the sissy bar that I like. A lot of people like it to be a single saddle, but I like a sissy bar. The front highway pegs, which I almost always ride on. And a few other chrome parts. A chrome cover for the battery, which is also nice.

How the addition of a back rest, extra footpegs, and chrome plated accessories improves performance and preserves the original appearance of the motorcycle is far from obvious. Ornamentation of this sort is often scorned by long-term Harley enthusiasts. The expression, "Chrome don't getcha home" is generally directed at those whose bikes are gleaming monuments to aesthetic overkill powered by stock or, even worse, poorly maintained or performance-impaired motors:

Walt: These people that buy their first Harley, what's the first thing they put on? A set of two-inch drag pipes. And they can't understand why some kid on a fuckin' moped'll blow 'em off the road. You try to tell these stupid clowns anything, and they don't listen to you. "Oh, what the fuck do you know, old timer?" I says, "Yeah, you son of a bitch, I was riding these fuckin' things when you were still swingin' in your old man's balls. Come on!"

The colonization of custom motorcycle aesthetics impairs commitment to wrenching on two levels. First, it empowers corporate stylists, whose efforts inflate retail prices and authorize customers to explore only limited alternatives. Because little can or needs to be done to complete the stylistic statement, little is done in that regard. Second, its most explicit invitation is directed at those least prepared to envision and execute alternatives. Just as increased reliability has attracted those formerly intimidated by the requirement for mechanical expertise, factory custom styling appeals most to those with little experience or inclination in that direction:

Walt: Me and Mike, we been welding aluminum, we been fixing old parts, been puttin' helicoils in 'em. So those are individuals, we are individualists, we're not, you know, like the rest. These other idiots, you ask 'em, "So, did you do this?" "Uh, no." "Whatta ya mean, no?" "Well, I had the shop do it." Christ, they got mechanical abilities just one step shy of sabotage.

It is troublesome for counterculture bikers to lose control of their cultural resources to those with so little invested in their symbolic significance. Children who can enjoy a good story but have not yet learned to write can scarcely be said to understand the symbolic significance of language.

Law and Order

Counterculture commitment is subject to criticism by the RUB subculture primarily in the same terms as those used by the dominant culture:

Gene: There's a few of the guys that I ride with that I kinda shake my head and go, "Ay-yi-yi, I can see where you're headed and it's not a good place."

In general, the counterculture is seen as abusive--of controlled substances, personal property, individual rights, and social authority. With specific regard to riding and wrenching, counterculture commitments to radicalized behavior may be interpreted as a lack of commitment to social responsibility.

Riding

Riding occupies a fundamentally different position in the value hierarchy of RUBs than it does in that of the outlaws. In general, it is assigned a recreational, not a rhetorical, function. Not only is accumulated mileage less significant, but riding style reflects an essential concern for pleasure and relaxation instead of passion and purpose:

Bob: I think of myself as, not a full-time biker, but a pleasure-biker. I'm very safety oriented, and, uh, I see these people on bikes doing stupid things. Threading the needle, and cutting in and out of traffic just to get where they're going a little faster. And I refuse to do that.

Although Gene represents a noteworthy exception to the generalization about mileage, his riding style is similarly conservative and responsible:

Gene: I don't ride crazy. I'm not out there looking for trouble, speeding. Speed is not my thing. I do very little lane splitting. I'm just not into that. There's enough danger on a bike without looking for it.

This commitment to safe riding may reflect an awareness of the hardest of facts about motorcycling: accidents. Although fatalities declined from 50.4 per 100 million miles in 1980 to 30.6 in 1991 (Tausch, 1994), injuries and damage claims generally support the argument that motorcycling is a high-risk activity. More significantly, however, the commitment to safe riding reflects a willingness to temper radicalized notions of personal freedom with self-control. More than positively correlated with accident statistics, recklessness and irresponsibility continue to undermine favorable perceptions of Harley-Davidson owners:

Dan: I don't need to drive anything over 55, 60. It's very interesting. It kinda seems as though I'm almost, when I'm riding it, that I'm setting kind of a precedent. I feel almost a responsibility. I always want to be perceived as the good guy who rides a Harley-Davidson.

Bob recognizes the difficulty of changing the negative image:

Bob: Harley has had to fight off that negative image, I think, ever since that *Life* magazine cover of that guy in 1946, '47, who was in Hollister pictured on his bike drunk, and beer bottles everywhere and all that. . . I think that was the turning point in public, you know, looking at motorcycles the way they did. And it's been an uphill battle ever since then.

The Harley-Davidson motorcycle is not the focal point in the lives of these informants, but instead seems to be appreciated as a recreational vehicle in the same sense as a Winnebago might be, albeit with different power, handling, fuel economy, and weather protection characteristics. Compared to the Kawasaki touring bike he bought first and still owns, Bob's Harley-Davidson compared unfavorably in each of these categories. His interest in comfort, safety, and shared adventure is reflected in the purely recreational use the motorcycle is reserved for. The intensity with which Harley-Davidson owners sometimes approach motorcycle ownership is at odds with Bob's commitment to his family responsibilities:

Bob: I know a commercial realtor over in San Jose that rode to Sturgis last year on his Low Rider. And he rode by himself; his wife won't ride the bike with him. And I didn't buy the Harley to ride by myself. I bought it to ride two-up with [my wife] and to share that experience with her. And I just know that she wouldn't have enjoyed riding to Laughlin and then camping out or sleeping on the ground or something like that. That wasn't our style. And this commercial realtor's got caught up in it so much that it very well could cost him his marriage. Which is another factor that people have to make a decision on, "Do I like it so much I'm willing to give up my marriage, or do I like it just enough to where . . ." You know? Because a lot of wives won't ride Harleys with their husbands. And I thought to myself, I could do a lot more with that money. Put the boys in college, or keep 'em in college . . .

Bob also indicated that his commitment to family responsibility is, if not incommensurate with the Harley counterculture, at least challenged by its emphasis upon machismo and individualism. He sold his motorcycle, partly because he was unable to identify with those who, from his perspective, still constituted the Harley stereotype:

Bob: I would guess that the majority of Harley owners . . . use their bike for commuting. They use their bike to go to work, and they use their bike for everyday riding, which, uh, is probably a more true characteristic of the true Harley rider than we'd like to believe.

RW: Did you ever have any rough times with them?

Bob: Oh, no. No, no, no.

RW: But you felt out of place?

Bob: Yeah. I'll tell you what. These Harley owners are hard-core drinkers, too. Just from my experience, of going on these poker runs, a lot of these guys would be drinking Bloody Mary's in the morning, hop on their bikes, and each stop that we made they'd be chugging the beer, smoking pot, shooters, you know? Then climb back on their bike and go for rides. And one of the presidents of the local group even admitted his worst accident of his life, he was drunk. And this is one thing, I refuse to get on my bike if I've had a drink. I refuse to. So that set me apart, right there. I wouldn't say everybody drank on these rides, but I'd say a good percentage of them did. And that bothered me.

Dan's desire to be perceived as the good-guy Harley rider results from disturbing experiences he has had at work:

Dan: I generally don't ride it to my work. My job is a professional job, and I'm having a little bit of a problem with the perception. Riding it to work, often times, um, the perception of that sometimes is skewed.

RW: How so?

Dan: I notice that, like, when I ride my bike into work, I was even told, "Do not park your Harley in front of our company, because the president would not like that. So I had to park it on the side of the company. Umm, another time I was approached as, "Oh, that's what you're like after work." I've had comments come to me, uh, you just can't believe. I have gone from a completely conservative individual to somebody that's a Heckle and Jeckle kind of a person.

Dan's commitment to this organization--its purposes and, presumably, his ongoing position within it--readily supplanted his enthusiasm for riding his motorcycle to work. Although he was mildly disgruntled by the corporate reaction, he essentially found it comical, and certainly far more rational than job sacrifice as a symbolic activity.

Wrenching

RUB informants, as previously noted, had little to say about wrenching as a symbolic activity. Bob did not see mechanical work as play, but as a source of stress and an intrusion upon his freedom. Gene and Al, although different in terms of mechanical knowledge and experience, appeared equally uninterested in wrenching as a way to affirm traditional values or masculine competencies. Only Dan mentioned that he performed his own maintenance and installed his own accessories. Although he admitted that he was only beginning to look into the financial and mechanical requirements, he also expressed interest in someday building his own custom bike:

Dan: Now my aspirations have changed from buying a showroom-floor bike to building my own. And that's what I'd like to do in about two-and-a-half years, is to build up my own bike, so that when I'm finished I have the exact bike that I want.

It is important to realize that this is far from even an implied commitment. Until Dan acts upon this stated desire, he is simply a wannabe in the estimation of counterculture bikers like John or Dave. By the same token, the same lack of commitment to riding and wrenching that forms the substance of the counterculture critique of RUBs also forms the substance of the RUB defense of responsible behavior. Dan, Al, and Bob see no benefit to themselves or their families from prioritizing such behavior ahead of family relations, employment security, or public image. In other words, they preserve a detachment from their motorcycles which allows them to more effectively fulfill commitments of greater rhetorical significance.

In summary, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle is perceived by these informants as a symbolic resource. Motorcycle ownership is a symbolic activity by which freedom, nostalgia, and masculinity are located and affirmed

within their identities. Each of those terms is subject to different interpretations which are expressed through more specific symbolic activities predicated upon motorcycle ownership: riding and wrenching. Individual approaches to these two symbolic activities produce more specific forms of identification and, simultaneously, division: outlaw biker versus rich, urban biker. Because the rhetorical significance of Harley-Davidson ownership is often extreme, the division between the counterculture of outlaw bikers and the subculture of rich, urban bikers takes the form of a struggle over cultural ownership of a symbolic resource. Each group defends the legitimacy of its claim and invalidates the claim of its adversary through critiques of their commitments to riding and wrenching. Their opposing critiques reflect their class-based perceptions of work and their contrasting access to wealth, their conflicting approaches to masculine identity formation, and the differing importance they attach to lifestyle consistency and social credibility.

CHAPTER FIVE
IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Limitations of the Study

The small sample size and the nature of the research questions should permit no doubt that broad theoretical generalizations and concrete problem-solving strategies were not research objectives. Predisposed as many of us are to expecting conflict to be resolved, the fact that this one is not (at the present time, under the auspices of the present researcher) may suggest a theoretical limitation. Instead, I prefer to think that it admits the problem is an empirical one, against which theory can be tested, but not measured. It certainly appears as though the counterculture is on the run (Walt says the outlaw clubs aren't going away, they're "just kinda going underground"), but at the localized level riding and wrenching proceed as always.

To the extent that a culture exists as an object of study, it exists within a historical context characterized by inverse proportions of stability and change. When change appears to predominate, cultural studies are undertaken with a sense of urgency, under the assumption that irretrievable data will be lost if not captured in the moment. This assumption privileges specific moments in cultural development, narrowing the focus of research in a way that fragments and distorts our perception of otherwise dynamic social phenomena. Whether or not this assumption is an unavoidable problem in the study of human symbolic activity, just such a sense of urgency directed the course of the present study. Preliminary observations led me to believe that, throughout the subculture(s) of Harley-Davidson owners, significant and unpredictable changes were occurring. At the same time, I was changing a little bit, too. As a result, for all that it attempts to include, this report is

conspicuous for what it inevitably leaves out (a point I shall return to below, under *Suggestions*).

Finally, distinguishing between a subculture of rich, urban bikers and a counterculture of outlaw bikers oversimplifies the complexity of the struggle over the Harley-Davidson motorcycle as a symbolic resource. Not only are the labels themselves reductionistic, they encourage a tendency to overemphasize the contributions of those who represent the extremes.

Suggestions for Future Research

It seems to be a rare enough but significantly disturbing fact that when white male subcultural groups collide with each other, the socially constructed separations between dominant and subordinate, valid and invalid, become unusually blurred. At one time the subject of much discussion in terms of class struggle, such collisions are less frequently the subject of analysis than those which occur between white males and their more obvious gender or racial opposites.

Although some of the RUB informants were disturbed by specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors, none recalled experiencing overt hostility from outlaw bikers individually or in groups. Nor did the outlaws express any sense of having fought for power or position and lost. All, however, commented in different ways on the explicit resistance to the participation of women as Harley-Davidson owners. The hostilities I expected to discover between RUBs and outlaws, although still in evidence, have been restrained in the presence of a new, common adversary: the female Harley-Davidson owner. Research which reveals opposition to female riders by male riders could be presented independently or in conjunction with evidence of accommodation to female riders, and could be analyzed from a number of theoretical perspectives and

with a variety of methodological tools: communication rules perspectives, feminist criticism, and social construction of self would seem to be self-evident suggestions. A feminist might focus upon sexual dimorphism in biker discourse. For example, the passenger seat on a Harley-Davidson motorcycle is often referred to as the "bitch pad"; Sportsters are "girl bikes"--real men ride Big Twins.

The expansion of the female riding community and the spread of women's motorcycling clubs provide unexplored opportunities for survey, interview, and ethnographic research. How women interpret men's reactions to their appearance as motorcycle owners and riders would be of considerable interest, particularly when compared to men's self-reports. Gene, for example, mentioned that a former president of his local chapter of the Harley Owners Group was a woman. This fact invited ridicule from a local outlaw club:

Gene: There were a lot of comments from the Ghost Mountain Riders when we went on a ride. You know, "Did we stop for a beer, or to get our nails done?" And there were some of the guys that just couldn't handle that. So they left the club.

In light of the existing research, which substantiates masculine self-affirmation as a primary motivation for involvement, women's objectives for participating would almost certainly broaden our understanding of similarities and differences in men's and women's perceptions of speed, machinery, power, freedom, individualism, and independence. My own informal observations when in the company of a female rider suggest that women and men experience significant (and sometimes frightening) differences in the behavioral responses of surrounding automobile and truck drivers.

I am unaware of any methodical examination of the linguistic and conversational phenomena specific to the biker subculture. By virtue of

their historical duration, the vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, rituals, and narratives unique to the Harley-Davidson ownership community offer conversation analysts and speech act theorists a selection of historical and social contexts in which to experiment. Knuckle, pan, shovel, dresser, and mousetrap have culture specific meanings; one might "Chop the dresser, eliminate the mousetrap on the knuckle, and put a shovel top on a pan bottom just in time for the next run." Insults, challenges, threats, boasts and their responses may appear with disproportionate frequency and unusual variety compared to such adjacency pairs in the conversation of other cultural groups.

Theoretical Implications

As the notorious exploits of outlaw motorcycle clubs were reported in periodicals, films, and newscasts during the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's, a predictable tension emerged as public fear, contempt, and outrage mythologized the outlaw biker stereotype. For many years, the Harley-Davidson Motor Company has resisted the exclusive association between its products and the counterculture with little success. The counterculture press continues to publicize governmental and private-sector opposition to bikers as individuals and as a group. Bob, of course, was concerned that the negative connotations attached to Harley-Davidson motorcycles would be applied to him, and Dan experienced explicit discrimination from his employers and co-workers. Given its predominantly unfavorable cultural significance, the growth of a subculture of respectable, upper- and middle-class Harley-Davidson owners constitutes a cultural paradox.

It seems insufficient to suggest that the re-presentation of oppositional subcultural resources as symbols of wealth and status is a conspired attempt to

undermine social criticism, or even a tactic in the war against crime and indecency. Such an explanation minimizes the cultural contributions of the consuming public, who in this case clearly confront a number of conflicting imperatives prior to choosing to buy a Harley-Davidson motorcycle or not. It is at this participatory level that the dialectic of cultural life needs to be fully understood, not as operationalized ideological rhetoric, but as an improvisational dialogue between cultural agents, a conversation in which cultural participants modify their responses to conflicting positions according to a flexible logic of possibility. In other words, symbolic colonization and liberation proceed, not according to a predetermined script, but through the creative and often unpredictable responses of cultural agents to the symbolic activities of others. Although patterns and replications of cultural appropriation and resistance occur, excessive concern with predictability conceals the inconsistencies and irrationalities of cultural development.

The flexibility of dominant and subordinate cultural relations is made evident through the prevalence of irony and paradox, themselves the products of the dialectical nature of identification. Dialectic at any level is characterized by greater or lesser degrees of contradiction; in the presence of total agreement, dialogue loses inertia and desists. This section locates the conflict between the outlaw biker counterculture and the subculture of rich, urban bikers within a conversational context in which winning the argument over ownership may erase the cultural value of the symbolic resource. First, it considers the paradoxical appeal of the subversive among conservatives, reasoning that the cultural presence of the outlaw is essential to the cultural practices of RUBs. Second, it examines the converse value to the counterculture of accommodation to the economic and social participation of RUBs.

Third, it clarifies the position that identification is a dialectical phenomenon, and argues that the inherent irony in this position is that tension and conflict are necessary conditions for identity formation to occur. It concludes by reiterating the critical focus of Cultural Studies as a theoretical framework, and clarifies the contribution to theory this study was intended to provide.

Born To Be Mild: The Appeal of the Outlaw Image

Gene: There are bikers and there are *bikers*, okay?

A paradox is evident upon the realization that RUBs exploit the element of indecency associated with the counterculture, even as they redefine the public image of Harley-Davidson owners through their own participation and practices. For a number of the well-heeled supporters of the cultural status quo, owning a Harley represents a socially acceptable way to express repressed dissatisfactions with modern life, easing frustrations before they accumulate in personally or culturally destructive proportions. More than a vehicle for personal excitation (although very likely tied to it), the motorcycle alleviates tension by permitting these owners to perform a low-level protest against the real or perceived injustices of social existence. Ironically, Harley-Davidson ownership may ultimately lose its upscale appeal as it ceases to represent the counterculture critique of wealth and social status.

For those who exploit the renegade image, the cultural presence of the outlaw biker is essential to the believability of the performance. "The critical thing about identity is that it is partly the relationship between you and the Other. Only when there is an Other can you know who you are. There is no identity without the dialogic relationship to the Other" (Hall, 1991). In the case of the RUB subculture, this dialogic relationship with the Other is self-contradictory. On the one hand, it is oppositional, the means by which RUBs

distinguish themselves from outlaws. Dan felt that he was setting a precedent by riding a Harley, that he had a responsibility to refute by example the implication that Harley riders were bad guys. John and Walt interpreted the elaborate and expensive leather costuming worn by RUBs as a transparent and unsuccessful attempt to emulate what real bikers are supposed to look like. It more likely reflects a sardonic and successful attempt to display a difference in wealth, taste, and class.

On the other hand, the dialogic relationship is accommodating, the means by which RUBs are able to present themselves as renegades to an uninformed audience. Although RUBs are not black leather-jacketed hoods or thugs, part of the thrill of owning a Harley-Davidson results from the fact that a believable impression of toughness and decadence is created because their motorcycles are associated with allegedly real outlaws. Dan did little to dispel the speculative rumors about his off-the-job social life, and Gene allows himself to get a little "rough around the edges" when he takes his bike out in public. Satisfaction with this second relationship is dependent upon comfort in the role, the extent of the desire to be perceived by others in this way, and knowledge that this dramatic ethos is grounded in the reality of the Other.

As the Harley-Davidson customer base shifts more toward high-income, middle-aged professionals, that association will become harder to preserve. Not only will behavioral expectations reflect these demographic changes, but as outlaw bikers find themselves less able to identify with those who come to typify Harley-Davidson owners, some may be inclined to renounce the motorcycle as a symbolic resource. When John decided that Harley-Davidson motorcycles had become upper- and middle-class status symbols, their rhetorical influence for him was dissipated entirely. Dave is building a custom

Shovelhead hot rod because "yuppie bikers" all ride Evos. Gene believes that people approach him in parking lots because they want to "touch the tiger," although he himself is just a "pussy cat." Only because tigers exist do pussy cats benefit from such attention.

Ball and Chain: The Infusion of Culture and Capital

Walt: Sometimes you gotta do whatever it is to survive, but you can't sell your soul.

Disturbing for the counterculture is the fact that its loyalty and seniority may account for less than the wealth and status of its adversaries in legitimizing its claim to contested symbolic resources. Even worse, outlaw bikers are compelled to acknowledge the cultural benefits of participation by the economically and socially established.

Only the recent surge in demand for its products among those with the ability to actually purchase one rescued the last American motorcycle manufacturer from impending bankruptcy. Clearly, it was the demand for "heart and courage" among its clientele (articulated through mediocre product performance and reliability) that endangered the survival of the business in the first place. "Real people" were not flocking to dealer showrooms in sufficient numbers. As a result, its products, marketing strategies, and customer base had to change in order for Harley-Davidson to survive. The price of survival may be a reduction in the influence of the counterculture.

By the same token, a swollen market of mechanically unskilled Harley-Davidson enthusiasts provides economic opportunity for the counterculture. Direct dependence upon their skills provides working-class bikers with some relief from self-destructive reactions to former status deprivation by including competency-based interpretations of status. There is more demand

among the economic elite than Harley-Davidson is able to satisfy; small-scale service and accessory entrepreneurs suddenly have a wave to ride. Gene and Bob spoke with respect, even affection, about a knowledgeable local mechanic whose lifestyle encompasses elements they would most likely find troubling. Although Walt protests the transformation of the marketplace, in which costumes and props have displaced used parts and performance accessories, a number of those who used to truck their collections to swap meets now own and operate aftermarket parts-and-service businesses.

The endorsement of the socially and economically powerful has also improved the public image of Harley-Davidson owners in general. Although there may be some ambivalence concerning the desirability of this change among the counterculture, there is little concerning its inevitability. Those who resent the inclusion of women and professionals retreat to insular social groups little different from the outlaw clubs of the past. Although they represent a decreasing percentage of the Harley ownership community, they face reduced harassment from community leaders, business owners, and law enforcement officials. Art noted the general change in public response to the appearance of Harley riders, from fear and contempt to approval and envy.

The Dynamics of Cultural Dialectics

The reluctant interdependence between outlaws and rich, urban bikers underscores the dialectic of cultural life emphasized by Willis (1978), but with a greater recognition of the fact that the cultural conversation is inherently two-sided, albeit dominated by different voices at different times. Commodity production initiated this conversation in 1903, and various voices had contributed to it by the time the biker counterculture came to dominate it. This is the moment of bricolage, the moment scrutinized most closely beneath the

Cultural Studies lens, in which the grammar, vocabulary, and direction of the cultural conversation are transformed by marginalized social groups.

Yet never does the conversation stop here. Eventually, the symbolic activity of the counterculture, in both its discursive and nondiscursive idioms, is deconstructed by those it was meant to exclude.

The course that conversation now takes re-presents the central symbol of counterculture resistance as a status symbol, and its cultural practices as leisure-time alternatives. In this discourse, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle validates consumption as identification, and ownership signifies consent, not opposition, to established distributions of wealth, status, and power. At this level, the popularity of factory-custom motorcycles styled as antique replicas can be interpreted as an attempt to rewrite recent history. The memory of counterculture opposition is eliminated as ownership of its associated imagery is transferred. "This may partly explain why the current explosion in revivals has not often led to a rediscovery of the originals" (Grossberg, 1986, p. 62). Although he refers to a different subject, Grossberg's point is applicable here; the originals belong to the opposition. In this light, the mechanical discontinuity between the Evolution motor and its predecessors, together with Walt's conspiracy hypothesis (see p. 79), deserve new consideration. If the "old stuff" no longer exists, the "new stuff" is open to reinterpretation, uncontested by historical inconsistencies.

Irony and paradox not only characterize the conflict between outlaw bikers and rich, urban bikers, but problematize the issues of identification, bricolage, and symbolic colonization when addressed from a broader theoretical perspective. The language of Cultural Studies, like the critical discourses of feminism and postmodernism, challenges the legitimacy of existing

allocations of economic, political, and social power. In general, it validates difference, exposes repression, and relocates the marginal at or near the cultural center. It permits bricolage, the critical re-presentation of dominant cultural resources, to be described as symbolic liberation, but defines the commodification of subordinate cultural resources as symbolic colonization. At the boundaries of cultural identification, however, certain ambiguities need to be resolved. By presenting rival groups of white American males in the context of a struggle for the ownership of symbolic resources, the familiar distinctions between oppressor and oppressed become obscured.

At the extremes, rich, urban bikers are not white collar suburban dwellers with mortgages. They are high-cultural elites with powerful political positions, popular cultural celebrities, and corporate empire builders. Outlaw bikers are paid assassins, narcotics distributors, thieves and rapists. Does the fact that they offend (and perhaps also fascinate) each other as dissimilar Harley-Davidson owners permit their "struggle" to be analyzed as class-based resistance to cultural hegemony; the democratization of symbolic resource ownership; the liberation of historically repressed alternative identifications? If so, who represents the "colonizer," and who the "liberator?" It is not my intention to obscure issues or conceal "the enclaves of colonial/hegemonic discourse and practice" (Giroux, 1994, p. 149). Rather it is to highlight the complexity, complicity, diverse agents, and multiple situations through which they are constituted.

It would appear nostalgic to the point of being regressive to validate the counterculture claim to symbolic ownership of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle simply because outlaw bikers are brand-name loyal, mechanically talented, psychologically dependent, historically knowledgeable, and other-

wise culturally dispossessed. In other words, the extent and duration of symbolic commitments are imperfect criteria for the validation of exclusive claims to symbolic resources. Knowing, for example, that the participation of women, racial minorities, and homosexuals would likely be opposed on principle, Harley-Davidson ownership would, as it has in the past, be implicated with misogyny, bigotry, and homophobia as cultural practices. But, even supposing the opposite to be true of the rich, urban biker subculture, it continually threatens to subordinate imagination to commodification, individualism to social status, physical labor to surplus value, and authenticity to the ethic of consumerism. Wealth, status, and power are surely no less problematic than symbolic investments as criteria for cultural legitimation; in both cases, exclusion and constraint restrict the possibilities of liberatory symbolic activity.

Getting Real

The critical framework of Cultural Studies provides a language of possibility through which popular cultural practices are legitimated in their own right, not as measured against the elitist criteria of the dominant culture. Rather than critique the politics or ethics of subcultures, the perspective defended here is that cultural life is dialectic in a more radical sense than is generally recognized. Any attempt to dominate the negotiation of meaning, which is the subject of all cultural conversation, must be suspect. Neither the symbolic significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle nor the outcome of the struggle for cultural ownership surrounding it are ultimately predetermined. Grossberg (1986, p. 70), in fact, argues that resistance to symbolic colonization is "hyper-localized"; meaning is created at the individual level.

The explicit objective of this study was to push a theoretical assertion to a level at which it has rarely been substantiated. Most of the familiar Cultural Studies projects (Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979, 1987, 1988; Willis, 1977, 1978, 1990) document the "subversive" interpretation of dominant cultural "texts," and then conclude, as if the cultural dialectic was a pendulum displaced via bricolage but to which no restoring force was applicable. A more complete description of the situation must include those forces which draw the symbolic "bob weight" back toward its point of origin in the dominant cultural domain. It must also recognize that the period, frequency, and amplitude of the cultural "oscillation" change, but cannot be construed to have stopped. The ongoing and broadly based interest in Harley-Davidson motorcycles provides an unusual opportunity to observe the action of, and reaction to, the return of conversational initiative to the dominant culture (in the form of a representative subculture of rich, urban bikers). The importance of this opportunity is that it locates the sites at which privilege is accumulated and meaning is created within the symbolic activities of individual cultural participants. In other words, the development of and resistance to hegemonic cultural discourses occurs at the borders between contrasting personal interpretations of specific symbolic resources. Perhaps more than previous examples, this study encourages a serious second look at the theoretical utility of hyper-localizing the production of culture and resistance to marginalization.

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Endnotes

¹See Appendix A for a more detailed discussion of the history and development of the Harley-Davidson Motor Company, its products, and its customer base.

²Peter Fonda, however, is to this day a cult hero who appears regularly at national and regional biker events.

³Senate Bill 339, The Outlaw Street and Motorcycle Gang Control Act of 1991, "makes no effort to define the term 'outlaw motorcycle gang' . . . [It] would label as criminals all riders who belong to legitimate motorcycle organizations and clubs" (Lawson, 1991, p. 10).

⁴Hell's Angels Motorcycle Club, whose distinctive emblem or "patch" is red and white. Sewn onto the back of a denim vest, the resulting garment is referred to as a club member's "colors."

⁵The Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.) "recently topped the 200,000 member mark, making it the largest organized motorcycle club in the world. Sponsored by Harley-Davidson, the club has 220,000 members in 750 chapters worldwide. The affiliated Ladies of Harley for women enthusiasts has 27,000 members" ("No Hog Tale," 1993). Although the factory has struggled to overcome the outlaw image attached to its product line, and in no way endorses the illegal activities of the "one percenter" outlaw clubs, H.O.G. clearly attempts to impart to its members some sense of the renegade image associated with the outlaw clubs. Club officers possess titles, and a degree of authority on group rides, and members wear the club "patch" and other insignia on their jackets.

⁶The Indian Motorcycle Company folded its tents in 1953. Recently, American Dirt Bike and ATK America began producing limited numbers of high quality off-road and dual-sport motorcycles, but nothing aimed at the hot rod, touring, or custom street bike enthusiast. In 1988, Erik Buell, a former Harley-Davidson engineer, began designing and producing limited numbers of exotic street bikes powered by Harley-Davidson "Sportster" motors. Essentially a chassis builder and assembly plant, the Buell Motorcycle Company technically broke Harley-Davidson's 35 year reign as the sole surviving American motorcycle manufacturer. However, in 1993, Harley-Davidson purchased a 49% interest in the Buell company, clarifying beyond doubt the close relationship that exists between the "two" companies.

⁷Since the demise of the British 61 cu. in. Vincent-HRD "Black Lightning" in 1954 (Currie, 1987).

⁸The overhead-valve "Big Twin" first appeared in 1936, as the 61 cubic inch "E" model, followed in 1941 by the legendary 74 cubic inch "F" model. Popularly dubbed "Knuckleheads," due to the knuckle-shaped protrusions on their valve covers, these motors were updated in 1948 and became known as "Panheads." The "E" model Panhead disappeared after 1952, and in 1966 the "F"

was again redesigned and came to be known as the "Shovelhead," again due to the imagined shape of its valve covers. In 1979, the first 80 cubic inch Shovelheads appeared, and in 1980 the 74 cubic inch Big Twin was replaced entirely by the new, larger displacement motors. In 1984, Harley-Davidson introduced the Evolution motor, which entirely replaced the Shovelhead in 1985. Some enthusiasts refer to the new motor as the "Blockhead," but the nickname has failed to take hold as broadly as the former ones did; most simply refer to it as the "Evo."

⁹True to their American heritage, Harley-Davidson motors continue to be identified almost exclusively by their displacement in cubic inches, rather than the more universally used cubic centimeters. The figures below include most of the standard, factory-produced motor sizes as advertised in cubic inches, accompanied by their metric equivalents.

30.5 cu. in. = 500 cc
45.0 cu. in. = 750 cc
54.0 cu. in. = 883 cc
61.0 cu. in. = 1000 cc
74.0 cu. in. = 1200 cc
80.0 cu. in. = 1340 cc

¹⁰Although single-cylinder and horizontally-opposed two-cylinder motors were at one time produced by Harley-Davidson, the classic--and today, only available--configuration is a two-cylinder design in which the cylinders are arranged in a 45-degree "V," one facing toward the front of the motorcycle, the other facing toward the rear. Offered in 54 cu. in. and 74 cu. in. "Sportster" and 80 cu. in. "Big Twin" sizes, all models use two overhead valves (one intake, one exhaust) per cylinder operated via pushrods, fed by a single, constant-velocity carburetor.

¹²Two weeks after the incident, *Life* magazine presented the following beneath a photograph of an obese, beer-swilling motorcyclist lounging upon a filthy Harley-Davidson flathead:

On the Fourth of July weekend 4,000 members of a motorcycle club roared into Hollister, Calif. for a three-day convention. They quickly tired of ordinary motorcycle thrills and turned to more exciting stunts. Racing their vehicles down the main street and through traffic lights, they rammed into restaurants and bars, breaking furniture and mirrors . . . Police arrested many for drunkenness and indecent exposure but could not restore order. Finally, after two days, the cyclists left with a brazen explanation. "We like to show off. It's just a lot of fun." But Hollister's police chief took a different view. Wailed he, "It's just one hell of a mess" ("Cyclist's Holiday," 1947).

¹³The *Easy Rider* bikes were not Sportsters, but were constructed using early '50's-style rigid frames and 74 cu. in. Panhead motors. It is improbable that there is any combination of motor and chassis components that has not been tried by Harley-Davidson customizers at one time or another.

Appendix A

Racers, Officials, and Outlaws: The Symbolic Evolution of the Harley-Davidson Motorcycle

William S. Harley, and Arthur, Walter, and William Davidson completed their first motorcycle in 1903. During the next 90 years, Harley-Davidson motorcycles would come to be recognized and coveted around the world, representing for many the epitome of two-wheeled transportation. Also during that time, the sound, the appearance, the image of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle would come to be associated with several cultural groups and milieus. In fact, as much as the reputation of the motorcycle has been influenced by the characteristics of its users, they have come to be identified through their association with the motorcycles.

This appendix provides a historical overview of the development of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle in light of its changing customer bases which, regardless of organizational affiliation, are able to be classified as cultural groups, or subcultures. The perspective provided by this examination reveals how the symbolic significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle evolves in response to the subculture most closely and predominantly associated with it.

Although naturally most fully understood and influential within the subcultures of its users, the symbolic significance of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle crosses cultural boundaries, influencing relations between subcultures and members of the dominant culture. As dominant cultural interpretations of the symbolic activity of subcultures are communicated and agreed upon, they become relatively explicit and reductionistic, without some of the implicit and essential meanings understood within the subculture.

As a result, dominant cultural interpretations can and sometimes do reify subcultural differences, by amplifying oppositional tendencies and inadvertently encouraging those who identify with the mediated image of the subculture to join. On the other hand, dominant cultural interpretations of subcultural symbols and symbolic activity can and sometimes do subvert subcultural differences, by demystifying them and re-presenting them as acceptable additions to its own lifestyle alternatives.

During its 90 year history, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle has been most closely affiliated with three subcultural groups, whose uses of the motorcycle contributed to prevailing interpretations of its symbolic significance. Those subcultures will be referred to as racers, officials, and outlaws.

Racers

Almost since the invention of the motorcycle, attributed to Gottlieb Daimler in 1885, racing has been a popular sport. Few motorized vehicles approach a motorcycle's power-to-weight ratio, which determines rate of acceleration. The effectiveness of modern suspension and braking systems provides extraordinary handling and control, and permits racers to more effectively exploit the power and speed of their motorcycles. In fact, a number of motorcycling's most significant developments have resulted from racetrack experiments, and most manufacturers field racing teams or provide incentives to riders who win aboard their machines. The marketing value of successful racing is clearly understood by all of the major motorcycle manufacturers.

During the first ten years of its operation, however, the Harley-Davidson Motor Company steadfastly refused to support motorcycle racing and racers. "The factory attitude to competition in general eventually evolved into

a high state of mean-spiritedness, and became the cause of much disgruntlement among those private racers who were expert enough to bring favorable publicity to the marque without so much as a cent's worth of works assistance" (Middlehurst, 1990, p. 15). Finally in 1913, tired of watching riders on Ace, Cleveland, Excelsior, Flying Merkel, Indian, Reading-Standard, and Thor motorcycles intrude upon Harley-Davidson's plans for market dominance with reputations built upon America's dirt and board racetracks, Chief Engineer Bill Harley hired William Ottaway, formerly with Thor, to head a newly established factory racing department (Wright, 1987).

The Wrecking Crew, as the factory team was billed, first competed in 1914, racing 61 cu. in.⁹ Model 11K's (Middlehurst, 1990; Wright, 1987). Among the first successful 45-degree V-twin motors,¹⁰ the 61-inch flathead racing motor replaced the common but unreliable atmospheric valve assembly with mechanically actuated valves. In 1915, it sported 4-valve heads, an engineering coup that began the sequence of racing successes which transformed the Harley-Davidson from a mere motorcycle into a symbol of power.

In 1920, a Harley-Davidson became the first motorcycle to exceed 100 miles per hour (Wright, 1987). But despite tremendous success in racing, economic conditions forced Harley-Davidson to abandon factory sponsorship in 1921. Engineering developments continued, however, and were made available to loyal privateers. In 1925, a dual-camshaft 61-inch motor "began showing up in hillclimb and flat-track winner's circles" (Wright, 1987, p. 48), and legendary racer Joe Petrali became the first to win a race at an *average* speed of over 100 miles per hour, completing a 100-mile board-track race in 59 minutes, 47.2 seconds (Wright, 1987, p. 189). Petrali continued to develop a reputation for Harley-Davidson as well as himself when, "in 1935, he won all

thirteen events on the national calendar, including five nationals in a single day on the Syracuse, New York, track" (Wright, 1987, p. 189).

By 1936, Harley-Davidson and Indian were the only U. S. motorcycle manufacturers left to battle it out in racing--and business--competition. In that year, Harley-Davidson introduced the direct ancestor of today's "Big Twin" motorcycles, the 61-inch Model E, employing overhead valves and a hemispherical combustion chamber. The distinctive shape of the valve covers perched atop the cylinder heads gave rise to the popular "Knucklehead" nickname. In 1937, a partially streamlined Knucklehead piloted by Joe Petralli set a motorcycle top-speed record of 136.18 miles per hour (Bolfert, 1991; Middlehurst, 1990; Wright, 1987). The new design was so much superior to the flathead, side-valve motors previously produced that one can only marvel at Indian's failure to adopt the overhead valve design, a decision many believe was ultimately responsible for Indian's demise in 1953.

Harley-Davidson's racing dominance was interrupted by World War Two, but resumed with vigor in 1947, when "seven out of the top ten finishers at Daytona rode Harleys. In 1948, Harley-Davidson riders won 19 of 23 National Championship races. The following year, they took 17 of 24" (Bolfert, 1991, p. 158). It was also in 1948 that the venerable Knucklehead was replaced by an improved motor incorporating internal oil passages, aluminum cylinder heads and chrome-plated valve covers which immediately inspired the "Panhead" nickname.

Racing success in 1950 previewed what was to be an exciting decade. "In all, Harley-Davidson riders took 18 of 24 National Championships in 1950, establishing six new racing records in the process" (Bolfert, 1991, p. 169). In 1952, Harley introduced the 45 cu. in. Model K, featuring single-unit construc-

tion of the engine and transmission, front and rear suspension, and what first appears as a step backward, a flathead, side-valve combustion chamber.

Nevertheless, it dominated on flat tracks and road racing courses at the hands of masters such as Carroll Resweber, Bart Markel, and Mert Lawwill until 1970. Under American Motorcyclist Association racing rules, overhead valve-equipped motorcycles were handicapped when competing against side-valve motors. "Prior to 1970, the KR 750¹¹ side-valve competed against the 500cc overhead valve Triumph, BSA, Matchless, and Norton" (Wright, 1989, p. 166).

In 1970, however, the AMA withdrew the handicap rule. Harley-Davidson was ready with the overhead valve XR750, a bike that has dominated dirt track racing ever since, and competed successfully on the road racing circuit until high-tech, water-cooled, two-stroke Japanese race bikes made that world their own. A descendant of the Model XL "Sportster" introduced in 1957, the XR is the only Harley-Davidson currently competing head-to-head with Japanese machinery and winning. For the most part, Harley-Davidson racers compete among themselves, whether on drag strips or in production-class events like the new Twin Sports Series, exclusively reserved for 54-inch Evolution Sportsters.

Through incredible perseverance, a streamlined, dual-engined Harley-Davidson owned by *Easyriders* magazine publisher Joe Teresi captured the motorcycle land speed record on July 14, 1990, "turning in a 322.150-mph two-way average speed over the flying mile" ("Gotcha," 1990). Harley-Davidson recently developed a road racing superbike, the VR1000, which debuted at Daytona in March, 1994, but which has failed to finish a race due to mechanical failures (Lawson, 1994). But although the racing story is not over, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle is no longer widely understood as a symbol of

power. In terms of power-to-weight ratios, factory-built Harley-Davidsons rank last in horsepower produced and first in weight compared to other bikes in their displacement class and marketing niche ("New motorcycles," 1994). All four of the major Japanese motorcycle manufacturers build bikes with less than 45 percent of the displacement, but 45 percent more horsepower, than Harley-Davidson's top-of-the-line models ("Walking the high wire," 1993).

The subculture of Harley racers persists, however, although the domains of their success are significantly more limited than they appeared prior to 1970. Characteristically driven to compete, these racers share an intense commitment to the sport and to Harley-Davidson motorcycles:

Few have ever gone racing for the money; it simply isn't there. Fewer still have any conscious desire for fame or glory, though fame and glory are the assets and can be the liabilities of winning. Not one racer in anyone's memory ever thought he would wind up in the ambulance, so death wishes can be ruled out. What's left is the rush riders receive from competition, from playing a game made fast far beyond human power by means of an internal combustion motor . . . Far from being motorcycle bums, these riders frequently possessed an advanced degree of mechanical knowledge and held full time jobs off the track (Wright, 1989, p. 173).

Beyond the necessary commitment in energy, time, and money, motorcycle racing is physically demanding. "Death was common in the early years, as riders donned cloth caps at worst and gauze-and-airplane dope helmets at best for 100-plus-mile-an-hour competition" (Wright, 1989, p. 174). These days, kevlar-reinforced leather racing suits and fiberglass crash helmets save lives every time a race is run, but deaths and crippling injuries continue to occur. The demands of motorcycle racing, for riders and for builders and tuners, are all-consuming. In a somewhat different way, so are the demands of various law enforcement agencies.

Officials

So who, if not the racers, did Harley-Davidson court? At several points in company history, the answer appears to be police departments and government agencies. Harley-Davidson made its first motorcycle sales to a police department in 1907, but it refused to support a factory racing team until 1913, and discontinued the racing program in 1921. "By 1914, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle had earned such a solid reputation that nine departments of the federal government employed its service. The U.S. Postal Service alone used over 4800 Harleys for rural deliveries" (Bolfert, 1991, p. 54). The Department of Interior used Harley-Davidsons to patrol Yellowstone National Park (Wright, 1987). The U.S. Army National Guard, pursuing Mexican insurrectionist Pancho Villa in 1916, rode Harley-Davidsons equipped with sidecar-mounted machine guns (Wright, 1987). Even before U.S. entry into World War I, English and French military personnel rode Harley-Davidsons, primarily for medical and messenger services. "War Department records show that 26,486 H-D's were ordered through November 1, 1918" (Wright, 1987, p. 99). Particularly through cultivated associations with law enforcement agencies and the Department of Defense, the Harley-Davidson motorcycle became a symbol of the culture of uniformed authority.

Police department accounts were especially lucrative. Following an initial large sale, dealerships continued to profit through service and maintenance contracts. The repeat business was jealously defended. In what appears to be direct violation of the Sherman and Clayton Antitrust Acts, Harley-Davidson and primary-rival Indian agreed in 1922 to standardize prices on competing models and in 1923 to insist on single-brand dealerships

(Middlehurst, 1990). As much as it helped stabilize established relations with law enforcement contractors, their collaboration effectively served to drive the competition out of business. By 1936, Excelsior, whose four-cylinder Henderson models had competed successfully for police department contracts, had finally succumbed, leaving only Indian and Harley-Davidson to struggle over the domestic market (Middlehurst, 1990).

By 1924, 1,400 police and sheriff's departments were using Harley-Davidson motorcycles, growing to more than 2,500 in 1925, and to 2900 by 1929 (Bolfert, 1991; Wright, 1987). The 74 cu. in. Model JD, introduced in 1921, was immensely popular among law enforcement agencies, and in 1930 the California Highway Patrol placed its initial order (Wright, 1987). Responding to the high profile of the newly mounted California Highway Patrol, Columbia released *State Trooper* (Lederman, 1933), starring Bob Artman and the Harley-Davidson JD police bike. The free publicity was of no great consequence to Harley-Davidson; depression-era sales bottomed in 1933 at 3703, the lowest since 1910 (Bolfert, 1991; Wright, 1987).

Harley-Davidson production had peaked in 1928 at 22,350 motorcycles, a figure that would not be reached again until 1942 (Wright, 1987). As the U.S. economy slid into depression, the factory made the ill-fated decision to introduce the new, 30.5 cu. in., single-cylinder Model C, and the 74 cu. in. Model VL. The unpopular VL was discontinued in 1936, and the C followed suit in 1937. However, a third new model introduced in 1929, the 45 cu. in. Model D, became a legend, continuing to be produced for motorcycles until 1953 and used in Harley-Davidson's 3-wheeled "Servicars" until 1974. In 1936, the "D" designation was changed to a "W," and 45-inch, World War Two-vintage WL's continue to sought after by enthusiasts (Wright, 1987).

Relief for the U.S. economy arrived in the form of increasing hostilities between Japan and China in the East, and Hitler's annexation of Austria and Czechoslovakia in Europe. American armaments makers were perhaps only the first to benefit from foreign aggression; industrial production and sales increased in all sectors. By 1940, 3500 city police forces were patrolling aboard Harley-Davidson motorcycles. "Reflecting the growing militarism of the times, the 1940 models were offered in five colors, with names like Flight Red, Clipper Blue, and Squadron Gray" (Bolfert, 1991, p. 137). Between 1942 and 1945, Harley-Davidson provided 88,000 motorcycles to military (Wright, 1987), almost exclusively 45-inch WL side-valve models.

Harley-Davidson resumed civilian motorcycle production in 1946. Demand was high due to the familiarity many returning GI's had with the bikes. Many also seem to have had trouble readjusting to civilian life, and were drawn to the excitement of motorcycling. Their quests for higher performance radicalized the expanding custom craze, with cultural implications that will be discussed in the next section.

In the decades following the war, American automobile design and highway development received considerable attention. Speed, and accident fatalities, increased, and the image of the motorcycle cop concealed behind a highway billboard permeated the consciousness of American motorists. The classic police motorcycle is the Harley-Davidson "Panhead." Introduced in 1948, it appeared in 1949 on the "Hydra Glide," on which telescoping, hydraulically-damped forks replaced the traditional, "springer" front suspension. Handling improved once again in 1958, when the Hydra Glide's rigid frame was replaced with one using a swingarm and rear shock absorbers. The new "Duo Glide," with windshield, saddle bags, siren, flashing

lights, and fender-mounted CB radio, formed the honor guard and escort of many a Presidential cavalcade--including the one in which John F. Kennedy was assassinated--and made motorcycle duty a privilege among many police departments.

In 1950, "foreign cycle sales amounted to nearly forty percent of new registration" (Wright, 1987, p. 33). British-built Triumphs, Nortons, and BSAs were lighter, quicker, better handling, and less expensive than anything offered by Harley-Davidson. The company petitioned the U. S. Tariff Commission for protection, but the request was denied, in part because Harley-Davidson's own distributors "provided damaging testimony concerning Harley-Davidson's inability to accurately gauge the domestic market or to placate its dealers" (Wright, 1987, p. 34).

Harley-Davidson's market share continued to worsen as Japanese motorcycles, originally unimpressive, small-displacement utility and pleasure bikes, became high-horse powerhouses which, like the British bikes before them, outperformed Harley-Davidsons and sold for far less. Kawasaki in particular added insult to injury when it won coveted California Highway Patrol contracts in the 1970's and 1980's. Watching the stars of the popular television series, *CHiPs*, perform stunts beyond the ability of any Harley "Police Special" rubbed salt in the wounds of Harley-Davidson dealers across the country.

Largely responsible for this turn of fate was the decision by Harley-Davidson executives to sell the company to a corporate investor prepared to finance the retooling necessary for product improvement and increased efficiency. In January, 1969, American Machine and Foundry assumed this responsibility, but simultaneously demanded increases in production beyond

the capacity of the existing staff and facilities. Product quality plunged, with dealers bearing the burden of servicing often-inoperative new motorcycles before they could be wheeled onto showroom floors. To this day, Harley-Davidson motorcycles built between 1969 and 1981 (when AMF ownership finally ended) carry a stigma even non-enthusiasts are aware of.

In an attempt to regain lost market shares, the U.S. Tariff Commission was petitioned once again in 1978, with AMF charging that the Japanese were dumping excess production on the U.S. market at unfair prices. Unfortunately, as in the first attempt, "H-D's case was effectively killed off by testimony from their own dealers, who gave vent to many years' worth of pent-up bile by denigrating Harley's regressive attitude in regard to model development and other matters . . . The Commission listened closely to the damning evidence before throwing out H-D's claim of unfair Japanese competition" (Middlehurst, 1991, p. 88).

So it was that on June 16, 1981, AMF sold Harley-Davidson to a coalition of businessmen committed to repairing the company's damaged reputation and restoring its position in the marketplace. In 1983, the new owners petitioned the Tariff Commission once again. This time, "the White House weighed the evidence, then surprised financial analysts and shocked Oriental bikemakers on April 1, 1983, by imposing sizable tariffs on all Japanese cycles 700cc or larger" (Wright, 1987, p. 265). Prepared to take advantage of this respite, in 1984 Harley-Davidson revealed the newest revision of its timeless Big Twin, the 80 cu. in. "Evolution" motor. So significant has the improvement in quality been since 1981 that the California Highway Patrol was persuaded, largely on the basis of improved reliability records, to switch back to Harley-Davidson motorcycles in 1984, following a decade aboard Kawasakis.

Outlaws

Despite the more serious uses to which racers and officials put them, motorcycles are essentially recreational vehicles, the equipment needed to participate in the "sport" of motorcycling. Although government contracts permitted the company to survive several parlous economic downturns, Harley-Davidson has always devoted the bulk of its advertising energy to encouraging the recreational use of its motorcycles. Since early models were intended for solo use (a sidecar was required if one wanted to carry a passenger), marketing strategies emphasized the individualism of motorcyclists, and encouraged a self-contradictory form of personalization that continues to this day: the "factory custom" motorcycle.

Responding to a threatening decrease in sales at the time of the Depression, and always unwilling to endorse aftermarket parts sales, Harley-Davidson made a radical departure from tradition in 1933 with vibrant new color options and Art Deco gas tank designs. "Also available, for a \$15 charge, was a chrome-plated package that included handlebars, chain guard, exhaust pipe and muffler, and several other major cosmetic pieces" (Bolfert, 1991, p. 120). Factory installed options, of course, constitute a somewhat egalitarian form of individualization, but illustrated for many the fact that motorcycles need not be drab, economical, utilitarian vehicles. As the imagination of enthusiasts was stimulated, creative self-expression and the emotional appeals of sound, wind, and speed encouraged the formation of social groups united by a common interest. "By the late 1930's American motorcycling at the top end had taken on all the trappings of a lifestyle pastime, exemplified by the

increasing profusion of clubs which went in for regular meetings, runs, social events, and bike shows" (Middlehurst, 1990, p. 50).

Not to be confused with bowling leagues or philatelic societies, motorcycle clubs represented more the lifestyle than the pastime. The purchase of a Harley-Davidson required a significant financial commitment even in the 1930's, and the motorcycle frequently assumed a central position in the life of the genuine enthusiast:

"Fewer than 300 motorcycle clubs existed in the country in the early thirties. Declining popularity of motorcycles, caused primarily by a lack of money, made it difficult in some parts of the U. S. to find any kind of organized group of riders whatsoever. Those who were in clubs became more and more a subculture, wearing clothing available only from a motorcycle dealer" (Wright, 1987, p. 27).

As have so many American popular cultural trends, especially those involving motorsports, "consistent custom evidence surfaced initially in California in the thirties" (Wright, 1987, p. 150). The subculture of the bike club probably first became associated with the "outlaw" epithet through members' participation in non-sanctioned competition in the early thirties:

Bob Holder, now retired and living in Lincoln, California, reports that "you could ride whatever you wanted at outlaw tracks, so long as the size of the engine was legal--45 cu. in. for side valves and 30.5 cu. in. for overhead valves . . . We used to take a 1929 Harley 61 cu. in. bike and remove one cylinder and rebalance the rest. We had a 30.5 cu. in. bike with one overhead valve. I was riding one of these at Santa Ana one Sunday and just before I crossed the finish line the crankpin broke, causing parts of the engine to fly up between my legs. When I got the checkered flag, I didn't have an engine in the frame" (Wright, 1987, pp. 178-179).

Outlaw racing developed in response to American Motorcyclist Association sanctioning restrictions, some of which appear to have concerned the lifestyles of AMA members more than event standardization and equipment safety. Wino Willie Forkner recalls being reprimanded by AMA officials for

drunk and disorderly behavior, and being denied a sanction because of the name of his club, the Boozefighters:

You had to be an AMA member. If you weren't a member, it was hard to do any racing because they sanctioned just about every race . . . You know, there were plenty of young dudes there who wanted to get with the drinkin' and raisin' hell, and do more racing than the AMA was promoting in our part of the country ("Wino Willie," 1986, p. 102).

The Boozefighters achieved notoriety during the July 4th, 1947, weekend, when they and other club members and a number of unaffiliated enthusiasts congregated in Hollister, California. Although fights and vandalism occurred, media reports¹² exaggerated the terrorism (Bolfert, 1991) and set the stage for the most persuasive negative interpretation of the outlaw subculture, Kramer and Benedek's (1954) *The Wild One*. The San Benito County sheriff's report may have "exonerated the bikers" ("Wino Willie," 1986, p. 112), but *The Wild One* portrayed them as violent and outrageous, an image that persists to a considerable extent even today.

In 1957, Harley-Davidson introduced the 54 cu. in. "Sportster." Lighter, more nimble and quicker than any prior factory offering, the Sportster became a widely used platform for radical custom experiments. "Choppers," as such highly modified bikes came to be known, got their name from the technique of cutting or chopping the motorcycle frame and rewelding the metal to increase rake (the angle of the steering head relative to the front frame downtubes) and stretch (the height of the steering head, accomplished by lengthening the front frame downtubes). Following surgical alterations to fenders and gas tanks, and the removal of all non-essential baggage and hardware, builders like Ed "Big Daddy" Roth and Arlen Ness attached outrageously lengthened front forks, impairing low-speed handling but completing

a stylistic tour de force. Among the most well-known examples of custom choppers were the bikes ridden by Wyatt and Billy in Fonda and Hopper's (1969) Cannes Film Festival winner, *Easy Rider*.¹³

In 1965, the Duo Glide received a bigger battery, an electric starter, and an appropriate new name: "Electra Glide." Its Panhead motor was superseded in 1966 by the 74 cu. in. Shovelhead, with better designed valve actuators and an improved combustion chamber capable of increasing horsepower by ten percent. Then in 1969, the Harley-Davidson Sportster came to the attention of American television audiences in the popular series, *Then Came Bronson*, starring Michael Parks as a slightly mysterious but essentially clean-cut vagabond fleeing trouble and pursuing adventure from coast to coast, week after week.

William "Willie G" Davidson, vice president in charge of product styling and grandson of founder William H. Davidson, gave new meaning to the concept of the factory custom motorcycle in 1971, when he replaced the heavily shrouded front fork on the Electra Glide with the sleek, lighter-weight Sportster unit. The result was an immensely popular addition to the Harley-Davidson line, the Super Glide FX. "The FX was a perfect base for customizing. This practice, previously regarded with a kind of sniffy hauteur by H-D, had been so facilitated by the explosion of aftermarket parts outlets, and so glamorized by motion pictures such as *Easy Rider*, that it had become virtually impossible to ignore" (Middlehurst, 1990, p. 87). This styling trend continued, and in fact accelerated, through the late 1980's and early 1990's. Harley-Davidson appears to have enthusiastically accepted, and successfully attempted to capitalize upon, the realization that, in many potential customers' eyes, Harley-Davidson motorcycles symbolize the renegade spirit epitomized by outlaw bikers.

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Informant demographics: Name, age, occupation.

Why did you decide to buy a Harley-Davidson motorcycle?

How long have you owned Harley-Davidson motorcycle?

How often do you ride?

Where do you ride?

When do you ride?

With whom do you ride?

What motorcycle-focused social activities do you attend?

Do you perform your own service and maintenance?

What modifications have you performed to the motorcycle?

What does the word "biker" mean to you?

Do you consider yourself a biker?

What does the Harley-Davidson motorcycle symbolize?

What changes have you perceived in the image or meaning of the Harley-Davidson motorcycle?

What kind of people do you meet who ride Harley-Davidson motorcycles?

What changes have you perceived in the kinds of people who ride Harley-Davidson motorcycles?

How do you perceive yourself in relation to other Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners?

How do people react to you when they see you and your motorcycle?

What message do you think is sent by your choice of motorcycle?