

INTIMATE COLLISIONS: IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND PLACE IN THE
KANSAS DIRT-TRACK AUTO RACING SPHERE

By

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Abstract

Dirt-track auto racing, spread across the U.S. and concentrated in the nation's Heartland, is largely unexplored territory within the cultural studies field. In turn, this project addresses contemporary Kansas-centered auto racing as a cultural sphere composed of spaces, objects, and practices derived from the "action" on the dirt oval. Participant-observation ethnography comprised the bulk of research, conducted over three years in garages, museums, and other spaces in which racing-related practice took place. Research and analysis were driven by an identity-based inquiry: How do participants construct senses of self in relation to the Kansas dirt-track racing community? On one hand, I trace processes of reproduction within the racing sphere. Identity ideologies and organizations have long reflected male dominance of competitive spaces, as well as the ubiquity of Whiteness among participants in general. Gendered organization appeared to result, in part, from the patrilineal routes through which men socialized boys into mechanical and operational familiarity with race cars. As a result, locally hegemonic masculinity was constructed around automotive-mechanical competency, competitiveness, and "rugged" engagement with speed and objects that threaten bodily harm. On the other hand, I address the ways in which racing practice entails reformulations of dominant cultural structures. When articulating the appeal of dirt-track racing, participants emphasized variety and disruption, especially in regards to "exciting" on-track "action," which was contrasted against the mass culture of corporatized NASCAR. Furthermore, drivers embraced the opportunity to enact industrial productivity through their small-group racing operations; in doing so, they exercised power and sovereignty not typically present in their predominantly working-class

occupations. As a whole, contextualized within a culturally shifting Kansas, participants converged within the racing sphere to find a sense of localistic community, thus engaging in “intimate collisions” both on and around the track.

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Introduction

Unearthing Culture at the Local Dirt Track

On July 4, 1916, a *Wichita Eagle* headline roared: “Ten Dare-Devil Drivers Will Flirt With Death Today.” The following account predicted that the racers, who had converged on Wichita from around the United States for an Independence Day event, would be “smashing world’s dirt track records” at the local speedway. The “bad blood” between drivers had produced this supposed exchange between Oklahoman George Clark and Indianan “Wild Bill” Endicott:

“I’ll run you out of gasoline and into the ditch,” Clark told Endicott heatedly last night while they were entering their numbers on the official blanks sent by the International Motor Contest Association.

“If you do, you boob, you’ll go faster than that old boat can take you,” retorted Endicott.¹

The next day, the *Eagle*’s front-page headline reported the spectacle’s outcome: “7000 People Watch Clark Keep Promise.” In the main twenty-five-mile event, the driver had “plowed his way through a sea of dust to victory,” pulling ahead after Endicott’s engine overheated.²

On September 22, 2012, I sat in the wooden bleachers of the Heartland Park Topeka dirt track on a cool Saturday evening. Drivers sped their Stock cars around the oval, banging against each other on the turns and sending dirt and exhaust into the seats where I had joined a few hundred other spectators for this weekly race event. As they approached the front straightaway, drivers Logan Murphy and Robert Campbell collided

¹ “Ten Dare-Devil Drivers Will Flirt With Death Today,” *Wichita Eagle*, July 4, 1916.

² “7000 People Watch Clark Keep Promise,” *Wichita Eagle*, July 5, 1916.

harder than usual; with one of his tires shredded, Logan slowly exited the track. Meanwhile, Robert climbed out of his stalled car and angrily waved his arms at the retreating Logan. My focus on this display was interrupted when Logan's wife, Jackie, in the bleachers to my right, stood up and yelled, "Get back in your car, you pussy!" Robert's fiancée, Sarah, sitting some twenty feet away, responded, "Hey! That's *enough!*" and made a beeline in Jackie's direction. The spectators' attention collectively shifted from the track to the women converging in the stands, though their collision course was disrupted by a young man who jumped between them. I would later learn that the two parties were far from strangers: Logan and Robert were in fact cousins, both living within a few miles of the track.

These snapshots offer distinct iterations of Kansas dirt-track auto racing. The first is an account of the racing spectacle: just a decade into the mass adoption of the automobile, professional drivers' high-speed clash is excitedly documented by the local press. The event heralded Wichita's location in national modernism, as a great crowd had gathered to witness potentially record-breaking velocities from nationally known racing performers. These performers, entirely male, enacted an emergent version of masculinity through their display of aggression, bravado and risk-taking behavior. Nearly a century later, at a community track on the capital city's southeastern corner, drivers continued to embody such masculinity in forms of conflict that occasionally spread beyond the dirt oval. However, this was not a spectacle of new technology or famous performers: dirt-track auto racing was now well entrenched as a cultural practice through which participants, from drivers to spectators, formed a community. Connectivity and localism were evident here at Heartland Park, where conflict might

involve two drivers, and their respective groups, tied to each other by blood. While auto races, staged in the context of holidays and fairs, had once represented Kansas's connection to emerging national and even global imperatives, contemporary weekly race nights accentuated localism through regular and, at times, hostile interaction between participants, with limited indication of the globalism deeply embedded in the twenty-first century.

Over a period of three years, I entered the Kansas dirt-track racing sphere in order to better understand the role of racing as a widespread and significant practice in the cultural fabric of the state. I use the term "sphere" to denote racing as a *cultural field* composed of physical spaces and materials, practices, and ideologies that may be located outside of, but remain connected to, the "action" on race tracks. Research was tailored to analysis of how participants constructed (1) their personal identities in relation to the racing sphere and (2) the collective identity of the sphere itself. It became clear that racing participation, particularly competitive driving, was deeply immersive: it extended beyond Friday or Saturday night events to other times and places, shaping the involved parties' sense of themselves. In the course of this process, "intimate collisions" were ever-present, whether between machines on the track or people off of it; while the term "collision" connotes a violent meeting, I also use it in reference to the constant, face-to-face interactions through which participants constructed racing culture. In turn, this cultural geography is presented on the premise that our understanding of Kansan life, and of ideas about "Kansas," is incomplete without consideration of dirt-track auto racing. I will also argue that a comprehensive understanding of auto racing's cultural role in

American life must reach deeper than NASCAR and other “major” leagues, all the way down to the “grassroots” where participants converge in the dirt of local tracks.

Kansas and the Heartland as Place

This is, in many ways, a study of place(s). Its parameters do not overlay Kansas borders, exactly, but rather encircle Kansas-related racing. I address both racing in Kansas and racing by Kansans; the former includes participation by those arriving from elsewhere, while the latter entails Kansan residents’ racing activities inside and outside of their state.

Given that the Kansas racing cultural field extends beyond state borders, I contextualize it within the larger “Heartland” region. The designation of particular areas as the Heartland, sometimes used interchangeably with the terms “Midwest” or “Middle West,” is a product of historical processes. James Shortridge has noted that geographic conceptions of the “Middle West” did not stabilize around Kansas and Nebraska until the mid-twentieth century.³ Still, Michigan native William David Barillas remarked in *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland* that as a child he had located “the heart of the heartland” around Minnesota, Iowa and Illinois.⁴ At one point I personally argued with a fellow graduate student who, as an Indiana native, believed that the Heartland was in fact centered in her own home state; I realized that for some the “Heartland” rests wherever one’s heart resides, in regards to home. However, for the purposes of this study I join Linda Allegro and Andrew Grant

³ James Shortridge, *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 7-10.

⁴ William David Barillas, *The Midwestern Pastoral: Place and Landscape in Literature of the American Heartland* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), xiv.

Wood in locating the Heartland in Kansas and the surrounding states of the central U.S.: Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. The authors largely base this designation on land, climate and agriculture: despite cultural and environmental diversity, these areas tend to share such industries as corn, soybeans, cattle and hogs/pork.⁵

As a signifier, the “Heart” connotes a sense of regional centrality and significance, given the human heart’s role as an essential organ on which the rest of the body relies for survival. However, broad conceptions of the Heartland have varied widely between the more positive, in regards to democratic engagement, safety, and honesty, and the more negative, particularly blandness, simple-mindedness, and unwelcoming weather.⁶ Despite this disparity, the Heartland has consistently been associated with the “pastoral,” a term defined by Shortridge as “the concept of an ideal middle kingdom suspended between uncivilized wilderness and urban-industrial evils.”⁷ In turn, according to Barillas, the Heartland has been frequently represented through the “image of farms, bucolic woods and streams, and small towns populated by plain-speaking, upright citizens. The Midwest, according to pastoral myth, is what America thinks itself to be.” In turn, he argues, the notion of a specific Midwestern regional culture is lost when it is imagined to simply be a microcosm of “national” culture.⁸

⁵ Linda Allegro and Andrew Grant Wood, *Latin American Migrations to the U.S. Heartland: Changing Social Landscapes in Middle America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 2.

⁶ Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 2; Victoria Johnson, *Heartland TV: Prime Time Television and the Struggle for U.S. Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 5; Robert Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America Since the 1950s* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 9-10.

⁷ Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 6-7.

⁸ Barillas, *The Midwestern Pastoral*, 4, 18-19.

Drawing on such geographic work, I will contextualize dirt-track racing (as both cultural practice and representation) within the pastoral imaginary. The Kansas racing sphere reflects pastoralism through the staging of races on *dirt*, the same soil that has long been at the center of the state's history. Kansas dirt may have been thrust into the national imaginary (certainly in contemporary historiography) most prominently during the 1930s "Dust Bowl" era, as clouds of dry soil were swept across the plains during periods of severe drought. Even as fewer Kansans are employed in agriculture in the twenty-first century, sociologist Robert Wuthnow argues, "the land... is valued in a way that people from other regions often find difficult to understand." He distinguishes between such "land" (as a source of home and history) and "ground" or "dirt," which is "easier to place beneath one's feet" and view as a usable commodity.⁹ In addition to its use on farms, dirt-as-commodity continues to comprise the majority of roads in contemporary Kansas. However, one must venture away from the interstate and highway system to access such dirt roads; they represent pieces of Kansas that non-local residents are unlikely to feel. While most of my own driven miles were on paved major roads, I occasionally steered my car onto gravel and earth, and I was struck (as an East Coast native) to see such a large fraction of roads unpaved. Thus while I set out to document and analyze a practice, dirt-track racing, generally unknown to outside observers, the dirt itself came to symbolize the "out of the way" spaces that are largely invisible to people whose lives exist outside of them.

In addition to rurality, pastoral imagery tends to include cultural insulation and preservation of White identity. However, particularly since the 1970s, Kansas and the

⁹ Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland*, 88-89.

Heartland region have been marked by significant demographic and cultural changes. Residents have shifted toward cities and corollary “edge cities”; furthermore, as of 2006 nearly half of people in Kansas were born outside of the state, indicating what might be a surprising level of in-migration.¹⁰ This number includes tens of thousands of international migrants; in recent decades, the Heartland has become a destination region within the larger labor-driven migratory circuit between the U.S. and the rest of the Americas.¹¹ Surveying these changes in total, Wuthnow argues that “an unsettling of the cultural and political values of the heartland has taken place, resulting less in any straightforward recentering of power and more in new modalities of accommodation, resistance, diversity, tolerance, and self-definition.”

Perhaps partially resulting from such destabilization, localist politics and culture remain important within Kansas. In his dissertation project on state- and local-level politics during the mid-2000s, Henry Way challenges the concept of a “monolithic” Kansas, instead approaching the state as a “chimera”: “a mythical, illusory, composition, constructed from contrasting parts.” He argues that “place” remains important at the local level, despite assumptions of Kansas cultural homogeneity.¹² Wuthnow has also pointed out that, since the rise of anti-“big government” sentiment in the 1970s and 1980s, politicians have emphasized their local roots and opposition to outside political intrusion.¹³ The turn to the local may also be explained by Shortridge’s observation that

¹⁰ Ibid, 5-6, 14-16.

¹¹ Allegro and Wood, *Latin American Migrations to the U.S. Heartland*, 2-4.

¹² Henry Way, “The Chimera of Kansas” (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2008), 9.

¹³ Wuthnow, *Red State Religion*, 280-281.

ambivalent public judgments of the Heartland have limited regional pride, to the point that its residents are “afflicted with insecurity” in regards to cultural identity.¹⁴

In turn, I propose that dirt-track auto racing emerges as a nexus of local pride and social connection. Participants build sub-networks around particular race tracks and garages, collectively comprising a dirt-track racing network that transcends state borders. In that sense, the social functions of racing may be compared to those of religion, a cultural field with significant presence in Kansas for over a century and a half. I did not enter this study with attention to religion, yet could not ignore the presence of Christian prayers and crosses in spaces from race tracks to museums. In *Red State Religion*, Wuthnow conducted a broad study of the relationship between religion and politics in Kansas; he found that while fundamentalist conservatism is assumed to define religious institutions, the state has reflected a wide variety of denominations, institutions, and religiously informed political positions. He concludes that, across this spectrum, religion has been most influential in its iterations as “local communities and relationships among neighbors, friends, and fellow churchgoers.”¹⁵ Wuthnow situates churches and other religious spaces within “associational grassroots democracy,” made up of social institutions that “were the core ingredients of civic life.”¹⁶ My own research pointed to dirt-track racing, which produced social publics at race tracks and beyond, as another such associational grassroots democratic institution. Racing not only facilitated spaces in which organized (Christian) religion was expressed, but may also be viewed as a variant

¹⁴ Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 2.

¹⁵ Wuthnow, *Red State Religion*, 8.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 365.

of religion, in that it featured similar aspects (morality guidance, social interaction, ritualized meeting events, etc.) for its “disciples.”

Though I did not conduct a deep study of present-day perceptions of Kansas during my research period, the tumbling approval ratings of Governor Brownback by 2015, hand-in-hand with a budget crisis that offers no end in sight, has surely reinvigorated (particularly for those on the political Left) the perception of a dysfunctional Kansas. It builds on a position already revived by Thomas Frank’s scathing 2004 book about his home state, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* In turn, localized networks facilitated by such cultural activities as racing may be more important than ever, in regards to generating both local pride and wellbeing in a time of great uncertainty.

Identity: Theory and Approach

Reflective of the American Studies field within which it was carried out, this study offers significant attention to identity dynamics in the racing sphere. I adopt Way’s argument that “place” must be acknowledged within examinations of identity; while systems of race, gender, and other categories exist at the national or global level, locally driven studies are necessary to fully understand their ground-level iterations. Therefore, I will apply social identity theory to particular experiences and interactions in the Kansas racing cultural field.

In regards to conceptions of regional identity, Whiteness and maleness have long defined the Heartland resident archetype. In her study of representations of the Heartland

on television, Victoria Johnson applies a regional lens to George Lipsitz's scholarship on the links between Whiteness and citizenship:

...the persistent association of “midwesternness” as “white” is critical to the region's revaluation— particularly in moments of social upheaval and trauma—as “home” of “authentic” cultural populism and traditional U.S. values. In such moments, the Midwest is recuperated as a “white,” heteronormative, familial space, in “a strategic deployment of power” that invests the region with identifications that have functioned historically to “universalize [the region] into Americanness.”¹⁷

On the locus of gender in the Heartland, Renee Laegreid opens *Women on the North American Plains* by noting that popular mythologies of the “Plains” region have constructed the White male, particularly in the role of cowboy and farmer, as the archetypal figure. In turn, historians have heavily focused on White men in examining the region's past, despite Plains women's longtime involvement in public politics.¹⁸ With an eye to the embeddedness of Whiteness and maleness in Heartland mythology, my own study turns to a space in which these identities are, in fact, ideologically and materially centered. Thus I examine the ramifications of a White-raced sphere largely controlled by men, as well as the factors behind the reproduction of this structure.

¹⁷ Johnson, *Heartland TV*, 18; citing George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 72. By the mid-2010s, the assumed hegemony of regional Whiteness was under challenge, as race was thrust to the forefront with the Black Lives Matter movement-rooted protests in Ferguson and Columbia, Missouri, Chicago, and other locations. However, this media narrative largely emerged after the completion of my fieldwork.

¹⁸ Renee M. Laegreid, “Introduction to the Collection,” in *Women on the North American Plains*, ed. Renee M. Laegreid and Sandra K. Mathews (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2011), xxiii; Ibid, “Riding the Winds of Change: Education and Activism on the Central Plains, 1930 to the Present,” in *Women on the North American Plains*, 152-153.

In addition to its contextualization within region, identity (particularly gender) will also be examined in relation to *technology*. The growth of the social constructionist view of gender has been intertwined with cultural scholars' arguments that "technology," a seemingly material concept, may also be examined as a socially and historically contingent construct.¹⁹ This process has been highly gendered: as "technology" came to be equated with self-generative machines, it was collapsed with masculinity as compatible constructions.²⁰ In response, contemporary feminist scholars have sought to re-define "technology" in a broader sense. Judy Wajcman has noted the importance of not only tracking how men came to be seen as essentially better skilled at interacting with machines, resulting in the exclusion of women, but also the ways in which technology is "deeply implicated in the masculine project of the domination and control of women and nature." This presents a potential dilemma for feminist intervention: is it enough for women to be included in systems of technological knowledge, or must they also fundamentally transform technology's social functions?²¹ In approaching such questions, Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert have proposed the concept of "interface" in examining the relationship between technology and culture: "In this definition, machines do not necessarily *determine* social relations, but are situated in networked social relations, subject to uses and creative misuses by the humans (and other machines) that surround them." The authors acknowledge the difficulty of determining causality: while

¹⁹ Nina E. Lerman, Ruth Oldenziel and Arwen P. Mohun, "Introduction: Interrogating Boundaries," in *Gender & Technology: a Reader*, ed. Nina E. Lerman, Ruth Oldenziel and Arwen P. Mohun (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 2-3.

²⁰ Ruth Oldenziel, *Making Technology Masculine: Men, Women, and Modern Machines in America, 1870-1945* (Amsterdam University Press, 1999), 42.

²¹ Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 17, 20-21.

machines do not “determine social relations,” they both influence and are influenced by them.²² In any case, in her study of the historical processes by which White men laid claim to expertise on technology, Ruth Oldenziel left no doubt as to the false essentialism applied to such expertise:

There is nothing inherently or naturally masculine about technology. The representation of men’s native and women’s exotic relationship with technology elaborates on a historical, if relatively recent and twentieth-century Western tendency to view technology as an exclusively masculine affair. The public association between technology and manliness grew when male middle-class attention increasingly focused its gaze on the muscular bodies of working-class men and valorized middle-class athletes, but disempowered the bodies of Native Americans, African Americans, and women.²³

Oldenziel does not limit her gaze to gender dynamics, but includes race/ethnicity as well; this approach has gained prominence as scholars consider how gender structures intersect with other social phenomena.

These writers point to both ongoing assumptions of male technological competency and the potential for women to gain access to machines for themselves, thus reconfiguring the gender-technology relationship. I approached my study of Kansas auto racing as a testing site for such dynamics: to what extent had men, in fact, claimed ownership to machines (automobiles and otherwise) in the racing sphere? And in what ways had women challenged this collapsing of technology and masculinity by accessing central points of power in the community? As will be illustrated, I ultimately found this

²² Melodie Calvert and Jennifer Terry, “Introduction,” in *Processed Lives*, ed. Melodie Calvert and Jennifer Terry (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

²³ Oldenziel, *Making Technology Masculine*, 10.

to be a male-centered site, and men's claim to central spaces in racing was rooted in ownership over the machines around which all activity revolved. This is not to ignore the occasional female driver, mechanic or official, but the rarity of such exceptions points to a largely reproductive system in which technological engagement was a key component in the performance of masculinity.

But what is "masculinity," exactly? This is a foundational question of masculinity studies, a field that grew directly out of the Feminist scholarly turn from the study of *women* to the study of *gender*.²⁴ Since then, historians and sociologists have traced the processes by which masculinity, or "masculinities," have been constructed. R.W. Connell and Pierre Bourdieu, in early masculinity studies texts, touched on systemic processes of "dehistoricization" and "naturalization" by which the social construction of masculinity (as ideology) has been rendered largely invisible. That is, differentiated gender norms tend to be regarded as just that, "normal," and are reproduced unless specifically de-naturalized and challenged at a systemic level; challenges have occasionally reconfigured gender lines, such as the growth of "contemporary models of emotionality" practiced by men.²⁵ While Judith Butler and others have led the important call to acknowledge how discourse structures subjective bodily experience, this has been accompanied by arguments (including from Butler herself) that such bodily experience is,

²⁴ Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (2nd ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 28; Christopher E. Forth, "Men and Masculinities in Anglophone Scholarship" in *Histoire de la virilité de l'Antiquité au XXIème siècle Vol. III*, ed. Jean-Jacques Courtine, (Paris: Seuil, 2011), 131-155; Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075.

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 23, 82, 88, 103; Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (2nd ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3-6, 186-189; Sofia Aboim, *Plural Masculinities: The Remaking of the Self in Private Life* (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 159-164.

in itself, worth studying.²⁶ In *Plural Masculinities*, Sofia Aboim acknowledges the power of discourse, yet also emphasizes attention to the material inequalities that tend to persist despite discursive interruption.²⁷ In her landmark text *Masculinities*, Connell argues that this discursive, social constructionist approach sometimes “runs into difficulty” by overemphasizing the “signifier,” through which “the signified tends to vanish.” Connell contends that “bodies, in their own right as bodies, do matter...There is an irreducible bodily dimension in experience and practice; the sweat cannot be excluded.”²⁸

The very title of *Masculinities* is important: Connell posits a pluralistic but hierarchal system of maleness. In her words, “We must also recognize the *relations* between the different kinds of masculinity; relations of alliance, dominance and subordination.” Connell argues for a “hegemonic masculinity,” a single, dominant masculinity that is practiced by few (if any) men, but serves as an aspirational model that sustains the patriarchal system. This “hegemonic” iteration is elevated above “marginalized masculinities,” such as Black or gay masculinities, which belong to “subordinated classes or ethnic groups.”²⁹ In 2005, Connell and James Messerschmidt addressed the use of “hegemonic masculinity” within scholarship of the previous two decades, noting both criticisms and reformulations. The authors concede the need for contextual specificity, positing three levels at which hegemonic masculinity might be ascertained: “Local” (largely analyzed through face-to-face, ethnographic methods), “Regional” (examined at the cultural and discursive level), and “Global” (at a broader,

²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Ibid, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

²⁷ Aboim, *Plural Masculinities*, 31-34.

²⁸ Connell, *Masculinities*, 50-51.

²⁹ Ibid, 37, 76-79.

transnational cultural level, particularly within “world politics and transnational business and media”).³⁰ In this ethnographically driven project, I will address the construction of Kansas racing-sphere hegemonic masculinity at the “local” level (through my participant-observation fieldwork) and “regional” level (through examinations of public narratives from newspapers to museums). I feel that such contextual specificity will strengthen the sometimes-ambiguous nature of “hegemonic masculinity” by focusing on the shared characteristics of men who exert power and visibility in Kansas racing.

This approach is in part inspired by *Masculinity, Power and Technology: A Malaysian Ethnography*, Ulf Mellström’s study of small automotive repair shops in Penang. His examination of men’s construction of masculinity through mechanical engagement with automobiles, a small-group collaborative process, revealed processes that were strikingly similar to my own subjects’ interactions on the other side of the world.³¹ I was also broadly guided by a theoretical text published in the same year, Chris Haywood and Máirtín Mac an Ghaill’s *Men and Masculinities*, in which the authors address the tensions between broad conceptions of masculinity (at the social/cultural level) and individual experiences (at the subjective level). While lauding analyses of larger gender ideologies, they caution that “in emphasizing wider social structures of oppression that determine the position of men, these accounts tend to marginalize men’s subjectivities.”³² The authors contend that such subjectivities are best interpreted through sociological/ethnographic methods, which may reveal “the social organization of

³⁰ R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 849.

³¹ Ulf Mellström, *Masculinity, Power and Technology: a Malaysian Ethnography* (Aldershot, Hampshire; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003).

³² Chris Haywood and Máirtín Mac an Ghaill, *Men and Masculinities: Theory, research and social practice* (Buckingham; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2003), 11.

masculinity and active cultural production of masculinities within institutional sites, including the state, family, workplace, education and media” – that is, locations that range across “public” and “private” categories.³³

Returning to the concept of plural “masculinities,” my general focus on gender will incorporate intersectional analysis with particular attention to race and class. Early on in my fieldwork, it became clear that Kansas racing participants were overwhelming White-appearing, while every interviewee self-identified as “White” or “Caucasian.” Like masculinity studies, the critical study of Whiteness has grown in recent decades, though writers have pointed out that scholars of color had addressed the absence of Whiteness as a racial category for years before it entered mainstream academic conversation.³⁴ In the introduction to *Working Through Whiteness* (2002), editor Cynthia Levine-Rasky emphasizes the importance of intersectionality when analyzing constructions of Whiteness: “White is thoroughly mitigated by other loci of social identity and group membership such as social class, gender, sexuality, politics, ethnicity, religion, and more...Not all whites are white in the same way.” However, she points to the power of Whiteness in its very invisibility, reflecting its hegemonic nature: White privilege, particularly invisible to its beneficiaries, is reproduced as normative.³⁵ In the conclusion to this volume, the author also addresses the necessarily relational nature of Whiteness in its construction against other race categories. Levine-Rasky finishes by

³³ Ibid, 6.

³⁴ Joseph Pugliese, “Race as Category Crisis: Whiteness and the Topical Assignment of Race,” *Social Semiotics* 12, no. 2 (2002): 149; Kirby Moss, *The Color of Class: Poor Whites and the Paradox of Privilege* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 102-103.

³⁵ Cynthia Levine-Rasky, “Introduction,” in *Working Through Whiteness: International Perspectives*, ed. Cynthia Levine-Rasky (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 4, 7.

noting that, despite variations within Whiteness, the category retains power:

“Contextualizing whiteness spatially expands a simplistic framing of the category but may leave open or at least complicate the problem of racism. In what ways does a whiteness spliced by gender and class maintain active participation in systems of domination?”³⁶

Other works on Whiteness address specific sites at which it is produced. Some, such as Richard Dyer’s landmark text *White* (1997), focus on the representations of Whiteness, in this case a broad look at Western iconography from the Renaissance to the twentieth century.³⁷ Turning to contemporary cultural texts, David Savran’s *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (1998) posits a post-Civil Rights backlash in which White male figures from Beats to masochistic action heroes enact victimization at the hands of historically marginalized groups. The author closes by arguing that, rather than targeting such groups, working-class White men would most effectively direct their ire at the socially powerful people who facilitate growing class-based inequality in the U.S.³⁸ Other texts, such as Kirby Moss’s *The Color of Class* (2003), focus on these dynamics within the everyday: Moss’s subjects were poor White residents in a Midwestern town, reflecting the “paradox” of Whiteness and poverty, two concepts rarely linked in public discourse. In this reflexive work, Moss recounts his uncomfortable experiences as a Black scholar who studied the White poor, which resulted in moments of surprise and sometimes backlash from his

³⁶ Ibid, “Critical/Relational/Contextual,” in *Working Through Whiteness*, 325, 334-335, 338.

³⁷ Richard Dyer, *White* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997).

³⁸ David Savran, *Taking It Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 320.

subjects. He also argues for the constructed nature of class, as subjects defined this category in a variety of ways, “based on money, education, race, gender, material possessions, geography, nationality, politics, even eating habits.”³⁹ In general, Moss argues for the importance of direct contact with voices outside of academia, which may reveal disruptions of dominant scholarly narratives:

Moving away from the central argument in Whiteness literature (that Whiteness and its position is unnamed, neutral, even invisible, and that part of the mission of a postmodern critique is to reveal it), the narratives here, and the way I positioned myself in relation to the dislocated images of Whiteness, reveal that ideas about social class and race are largely assumptive and situational, and one should only attempt to define them through a complex reading of contexts as well as content...seldom are the voices of the less privileged allowed to enter the academic debate or given the leverage to define the definers or the center. The relegated voices of low-income Whites I encountered offered a different definition of Whiteness than the ones that crowd current academic debates.⁴⁰

Through this contention, Moss seems to be pointing to the importance of ethnography: to borrow from Spivak, while the “subaltern” may not be able to speak for itself in the public sphere, it is crucial for scholars to listen to underrepresented voices in order to more comprehensively understand cultural ideas, including those on identity.

Such intersectional analysis informed my own study of identity in the Kansas dirt-track racing sphere. In particular, my research was premised on the idea that identity categories (gender, race, class, and others) are necessarily relational, in that groups are constructed in relation to one another. For example, on gendered spatial organization:

³⁹ Moss, 3-5, 15.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 113.

Are certain spaces and roles largely occupied by men, and others occupied by women? Are there cross-sexual spaces occupied by both? Discursive construction is considered as well: are certain practices described as male-gendered, such as a “manly” or “masculine” manner of driving? How is race discussed, in explicit or coded language, and does Whiteness remain the invisible category that, according to cultural scholars, gives it added power as non-raced and “normal”? In regards to class, are there common class identities among certain groups, including drivers from different “classes” (divisions) of automobiles? And how do participants interpret the classed nature of their activity? By focusing on particular categories and then considering them intersectionally, I produce a study that unveils how individuals and groups position themselves relative to gender, race, class, geography, and the focal cultural field of this study, dirt-track auto racing. This is, then, a study of identity and the process of its construction.

As a nod to reflexive turn in ethnography (see discussion below), I must acknowledge the role of my own subject position in shaping the research process. In terms of visible markers of identity, I was able to easily blend into this space. The Whiteness projected by my straight brown hair and pale skin, though not sharing the sun-reddened quality of many participants, was an initial marker of belonging in a very White-raced sphere. Furthermore, my maleness was not only normative in the central spaces of the track, but most individual spectators in the bleachers (that is, those not clearly affiliated with a group) were men; thus I was not an outlier as a male on my own. In a particularly class-based sense, I was also able to match my own fashion style to the track by adopting jeans, t-shirts and either sneakers or well-worn brown shoes. This was not a significant departure from my usual attire, but I consciously tailored these choices

toward matching the normative style of the track. My own privilege of blending in, which allowed for more “under-the-radar” research as I gained comfort at the track, may be contrasted with other ethnographers’ experiences of conspicuousness resulting from identity-based difference with their subjects. This includes Sharon Mazer, who ventured into the professional wrestling sphere as an undersized woman; Kris Paap, who faced resistance to her efforts to work among men in the construction industry; and Kirby Moss, whose Blackness rendered him conspicuous, and sometimes unwelcome, among his White subject population.⁴¹

In some senses, my own identity was located outside of race-track normativity. For example, like the researchers mentioned above, my status as a student in graduate school (earning a doctorate degree) clearly contrasted with the formal education of most Kansans in the dirt-track racing sphere, in which four-year college degrees were rare. As another nexus of difference, my agnosticism did not match the Christianity embedded at race tracks. However, this identity element was concealed fairly easily; I was never expected to explicitly express my religious identity, and as someone who grew up in the southeastern U.S., I was not particularly uncomfortable with the overtly Christian religious rituals at race tracks. In regards to otherization, I was most conscious of my initial knowledge gaps, particularly in regards to auto racing and auto-mechanical logistics. While some of my informants were baffled by my own ignorance in these areas, I came to prefer revealing this lack of such expertise early in our interactions; it

⁴¹ Sharon Mazer, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 11-12; Kris Paap, *Working Construction: Why White Working-class Men Put Themselves – and the Labor Movement – in Harm’s Way* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006) (this occurs throughout the text); Moss, *The Color of Class*, 5, 13, 44-46.

allowed me to more openly ask about racing and mechanical issues, even if I risked perceived legitimacy by doing it. It was a lesson in the plurality of knowledge, as my longtime focus on intellectual work did not include mechanical experience; thus my interactions with informants were also exchanges of distinct and classed knowledges. As a result of such exchange, my position within the racing sphere shifted significantly over three years. During early visits to race tracks, as a visitor to an unfamiliar space, I worked alone, scribbling in my notepad while sitting in the back rows of the bleachers, both to observe and to *avoid being observed*. I felt that I did not yet have the knowledge or experience to actively engage with others around me, fearing their perception of my illegitimacy as a researcher. However, as I gained knowledge and comfort in these spaces, I was eventually able to reach out and connect to racing participants despite the inevitably reciprocal gaze that would follow. Such connection facilitated the intimate ethnographic methods that produced the bulk of this text.

Auto Racing Through the Lens of Cultural Studies

I characterize this text as a cultural study of sport: that is, it a study of the ways in which people produce, exchange and negotiate ideologies and practices through shared participation (as competitor, spectator, etc.) in sport. However, I anticipate a potential response: Is auto racing a “sport?” This a question that continues to generate debate, primarily along the lines of physicality and “athleticism.” Those who characterize auto racing as a sport point toward the bodily control, hand-eye coordination and learned skills required to drive at high levels. Arguments against such a designation emphasize that auto racing does not require adequate exertion, particularly as the driver is seated while

the machine generates the power needed for high speed.⁴² In any case, this debate reveals the status tied to “sport” today: it is rare to find an auto racing participant actively separating him/herself from “sport” due to a perceived negative association.⁴³

I ultimately categorize this as a “cultural study of sport” because auto racing does fit most of the criteria. Scholars and other public commentators have defined “sport” through aspects that include (1) the presence of competition between two or more parties, (2) the primacy of skill over chance in determining outcomes, (3) the unscripted nature of such outcomes, (4) a governing body and rules, and (5) the centrality of corporeal motor skills and physical exertion.⁴⁴ Auto racing, including in its dirt-track form in Kansas, clearly incorporates the first four elements. The final criterion, particularly regarding exertion, is less clear: power (the force needed to propel an automobile forward at high speeds) is produced moreso by combustible engines and a system of interlinked parts than by the human body. On the other hand, in the course of this study I learned that “motor skills” (aptly named) are certainly required of successful drivers, who must

⁴² For an example of this debate on an online forum, see: “Is race car driving a sport?”, Debate.org: <http://www.debate.org/opinions/is-race-car-driving-a-sport> (Accessed January 4, 2016). Dozens of respondents posted arguments for/against the designation of racing as a sport, leading to a fairly divided assessment as of January 2016: 61% “Yes,” 39% “No.”

⁴³ The modern Olympics, a useful measure of “sport” given its wide inclusion of athletic contests, does not currently include auto racing, though the Paris games of 1900 did feature “rally racing” exhibitions on public roads. Source: Jeroen Heijmans, “Motorsport at the 1900 Paris Olympics Games,” *Journal of Olympic History* 10, no. 3 (September 2002): 30-35.

⁴⁴ “Definition of sport,” SportAccord website: <http://www.sportaccord.com/about/membership/definition-of-sport.php>; “Sport,” *Oxford Dictionaries*: http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/sport; Michigan State University Department of History public slideshow, “Sport Definitions”: <http://history.msu.edu/hst329/files/2010/02/College-Sport-Definitions.pdf>. An authoritative academic text defining “sport” has not yet been published, though a 2014 H-Net CFP indicates that such a book may be pending.

effectively integrate their bodies into their automobiles, creating a new “body” temporarily hybridized between human and machine.

In any case, auto racing does clearly qualify as a *game*. As laid out by Bernard Suits in his philosophical text *The Grasshopper*:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [preludory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit the use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. I also offer the following simple and, so to speak, more portable version of the above: playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.⁴⁵

This passage’s final phrase, “unnecessary obstacles,” will be particularly salient to the current study. Auto racing, especially in its oval-track form, entails the subversion of functional automobility: competitors forego transportation in favor of repeatedly circling back to the starting point, driving with speed and aggression banned from public roads, while frequently damaging their automobiles with such extreme operation. When additionally considering the high expense of repairing such damage, a reasonable person might ask, “Why would anyone compete in auto racing?” Answering this question is a central imperative behind my project.

However, I am certainly not the first person to address auto racing as a cultural nexus. Auto racing scholarship has grown since the 1990s, as the larger turn to popular culture included attention to this field. The bulk of auto racing studies are historical in

⁴⁵ Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper* (3rd ed.) (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2014), 43.

nature, with examples including Robert Post's *High Performance: the Culture and Technology of Drag Racing, 1950-2000* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), David Charters's *The Chequered Past: Sports Car Racing and Rallying in Canada, 1951-1991* (University of Toronto Press, 2007), and David Lucsko's *The Business of Speed: The Hot Rod Industry in America, 1915-1990* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). Aside from these full-length texts, articles cover snapshots from the post-World War II Vancouver drag racing scene to the history of auto racing in Fargo, North Dakota.⁴⁶ Auto racing scholars have also lent significant attention to NASCAR, the major American racing league, in recent years: both historical- and contemporary-focus texts examine the location of NASCAR within cultural context. Some work, such as Mark Howell's *From Moonshine to Madison Avenue: a cultural history of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997) and Daniel Pierce's *Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), is reflexive fan-scholarship, offering the perspectives of writers with longtime devotion to auto racing. On the other hand, Joshua Newman's and Michael Giardina's work on NASCAR and neoliberal politics, as well as Ehren Pflugfelder's examination of NASCAR fan rhetoric, represent more critical analysis of this cultural site. Newman's and Giardina's *Sport, Spectacle, and NASCAR Nation: Consumption and the Cultural Politics of Neoliberalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and their accompanying article "Neoliberalism's Last Lap? NASCAR Nation and the Cultural

⁴⁶ Catherine Genovese, "T-Bucket Terrors to Respectable Rebels: Hot Rodders and Drag Racers in Vancouver BC, 1948-1965," in *Car Troubles: Critical Studies of Automobility and Auto-mobility*, ed. Jim Conley and Arlene Tigar McLaren (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 21-35; Daniel John Simone, "Drivers, dust and dirt: the history of auto racing in Fargo, North Dakota (1903-1969)" (master's thesis, North Dakota State University, 2002).

Politics of Sport” (2010) posit NASCAR as a key cultural site in which elite promoters of neoliberal politics garner support among a largely working-class fan base.⁴⁷ The authors openly criticize this process as facilitating an economic system that largely works against those very fans’ interest, as well as perpetuates American neo-colonial operations overseas. Pflugfelder turns to online NASCAR message boards in the context of neoliberal globalization, finding resistance (though gradual acceptance) of non-American drivers’ and manufacturers’ arrival into NASCAR around a decade ago.⁴⁸ This final article is published in *Motorsports and American Culture* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), a collection of articles that represents the broadest study of historical and contemporary U.S. racing, from NASCAR to community tracks, to date.

Despite this recent text and others, auto racing scholarship remains marked by a particular gap in ethnographic, contemporary study of non-NASCAR auto racing. While historians have turned their attention to smaller-scale community tracks, studies of contemporary racing are nearly entirely devoted to NASCAR. The ongoing invisibility of local, dirt-track racing is illustrated by Ben Shackelford’s claim, in his study of masculinity in NASCAR, that “Though races today do not wholly resemble the weekly events of earlier years that were described as ‘Saturday night at the local dirt track where there was a fight and sometimes a race,’ they still carry the stamp of a tradition of

⁴⁷ Joshua I. Newman and Michael D. Giardina, “Neoliberalism’s Last Lap? NASCAR Nation and the Cultural Politics of Sport,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, no. 10 (2010): 1511-1529.

⁴⁸ Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder, “‘Running with the Big Dogs’: The Rhetoric of Fan Identity in a Postmodern NASCAR”, in *Motorsports and American Culture*, ed. Mark D. Howell and John D. Miller (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 87-102.

regional, masculine violence.”⁴⁹ While Shackleford dates them to “earlier years,” these weekend dirt races continue to take place at hundreds of U.S. tracks (including over a dozen in Kansas) during the warm half of the year. As I seek to fill that void in studying community racing, I will address a couple other areas as well. On one hand, fan-scholars such as Mark Howell and Daniel Pierce seem hesitant to address issues of power, and their praise of NASCAR and racing leads to, on occasions, moments of ostensible distortion (such as the essentialist guiding argument that NASCAR represents “American” values).⁵⁰ On the other hand, while Newman and Giardina focus on issues of power, and ground their text in ethnographic research, there is a striking lack of fans’ presence within the text; the authors portray spectators as nearly blindly accepting the ideology offered by event organizers.

In turn, I have conducted a project minimally marked by fanship while grounded in direct engagement with racing participants. As should any cultural studies scholar, I attempt to connect day-to-day material realities, in this case those of Kansas racing participants, to the larger ideologies and structures within which they exist. In the process, I will employ the metaphor of “welding,” the process of metal-based manipulation and combination so commonly used in racing mechanical work. The racing sphere featured various cultural fusions, from the blending of Christian crosses and checkered flags at the Kansas Auto Racing Museum to the frequent pairing of male identity with driving and maintenance practices. While “welding” connotes a certain

⁴⁹ Ben A. Shackleford, “Masculinity, Hierarchy, and the Auto Racing Fraternity: The Pit Stop as a Celebration of Social Roles,” *Men and Masculinities* 2, no. 2 (1999): 189.

⁵⁰ Mark D. Howell, *From Moonshine to Madison Avenue: A Cultural History of the NASCAR Winston Cup Series* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997), 8-10, 131.

permanence in regards to fusion, I acknowledge the visible “weld lines” that mark the meeting point, indicating possibilities of fracturing and reorganization.

Contextualized within larger cultural structures, the Kansas racing community was striking in its emphasis on locality and community, which may be perceived as a kind of resistance to those very structures. As I learned in the course of fieldwork, the phrase “*grassroots* auto racing” circulated in this sphere, connoting the involvement and influence of a wide group of people in the community; that is, power and voice is largely derived from the ground up. This stands in contrast with the hierarchy and professionalization found among high-capital, high-visibility leagues from NASCAR to Formula One. I came to see my own study as “grassroots” as well: I connected with people at various levels of power and influence in the Kansas dirt-track racing sphere, including drivers, relatives, administrators, archivists, and others, in the interest of uncovering how racing structures identity, and vice versa, for its myriad participants.

While the present text is contemporary in focus, this project’s initial research phase addressed early twentieth-century Kansas racing. Through close analysis of local newspaper coverage, I traced the cultural significance of auto racing during the 1909-1918 period, when cars challenged horses as the premiere spectacle at county and state fairs. In broad context, this was also a period marked by interlocking Modernist developments. Amid urbanization, Americans were entranced by the expansion of new technologies (telephone communication, flight, vertical architecture, automobiles, and others) that produced spectacular sensations; David Nye has termed this collective array the “technological sublime.” The turn of the twentieth century also featured a significant shift in the social construction of masculinity, as American men were increasingly

compelled to exude qualities of power and toughness in the form of performance. At the intersection of such technology and gender shifts, auto racing emerged as a practice by which male drivers exhibited their ruggedness and mastery of automotive technology for the gaze of an audience. When contextualized in Kansas and examined in media narrative, I found that auto racing was framed through two particular themes. As summarized in the published version of this study in *Kansas History* (Fall 2015):

First, event promoters and newspaper writers and editors worked in tandem to present auto races, and the festivals within which they were staged, as spectacles of progress and exceptionalism. Second, this narrative framed automobile racers as masculine exemplars of such progress and exceptionalism, mirroring the national-level gendering of technological mastery as male.⁵¹

While I did not comprehensively trace the shifts in auto racing's cultural role over the next century, this early-history examination provides themes around which contemporary Kansas racing is studied. However, as discussed in the following section, my turn to ethnographic method did alter thematic focus: while still attentive to representations of racing, I also address the day-to-day lived experiences of participants, in order to more deeply understand why and how auto racing remains a culturally significant sphere in twenty-first-century Kansas.

Methodology

Over the course of three years, from early 2012 to late 2014, I engaged in participation-observation research of the Kansas racing sphere. I attended around forty-

⁵¹ Steve Marston, "Spectacles of Speed: Modernity, Masculinity, and Auto Racing in Kansas, 1909-1918," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 38, no. 3: 195.

five dirt-track race events in the Heartland region, primarily in Kansas, with Topeka (and its Heartland Park race track) as my focal point of study. While spending the first two seasons in the bleachers, in 2014 I entered sub-networks through personal contacts with racing participants, which comprise this study's subject group. "Participants" include anyone with a direct connection to the Kansas racing sphere. I primarily interacted with competitive drivers, who typically experienced the deepest and most time-intensive engagement with racing. However, I also connected to participants in other roles, sometimes multiple for a single person: spectator, mechanical worker, family member, and so on. I joined them in the places in which they normally worked and played, including garages, living rooms, and restaurants. Some of these interactions were more formalized: I conducted twenty-six face-to-face interviews, typically between one and two hours, in order to both learn about participants' backgrounds and how they understood their own relationship to racing. While my time "in the field" comprised the bulk of research and present documentation, I also examined forms of public representation, including historical local newspapers, museums, a television show, and fan-archival websites. This multi-methodological approach was carried out in order to offer a broad portrayal of Kansas dirt-track racing, touching on the various ways that practices and ideologies were exchanged in this sphere.

At its heart, this project is ethnographic. In their "Manifesto for Ethnography" (published in the inaugural edition of the *Ethnography* journal), Paul Willis and Mats Trondman define the approach as "a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing at least partly *in its own terms*, the irreducibility of human experience.

Ethnography is the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events.”⁵²

The authors thus emphasize the intimacy between the scholar, research site and subjects, while granting these subjects influence in the research process. David Kamper’s “American Studies, Ethnography, and Knowledge Production” (2000), in *American Studies*, also emphasizes such intimacy, reflected by the definition of ethnography as “scholarly face-to-face engagement with cultural actors in the domains where they enact and produce culture.”⁵³ Regarding one’s focus within ethnographic study, Willis and Judith Oakley have both emphasized that, in addition to examining linguistics, researchers must also analyze material practices and objects as significant not only for meaning, but for their very materiality. In *The Ethnographic Imagination* (2000), Willis points out that unlike language, these objects have purposes *beyond* “signifying, i.e., sending messages, meaning or information to others.” Such material items also contain “use values,” including a sensory affect that does necessarily signify. Thus Willis proposes his “socio-symbolic approach,” in which humans (with their interpretation) and objects may be separately analyzed; the ethnographer should consider the process by which human use creates particular meanings around an object, creating “symbolic form.”⁵⁴ Taking these definitions and perspectives together, ethnography entails close encounter with both humans and human-made objects; I followed the authors’ guidance through attention to meaning-making as well as materiality, sometimes but not necessarily examined in tandem.

⁵² Paul Willis and Mats Trondman, “Manifesto for Ethnography,” *Ethnography* 1, no. 1 (2000): 5.

⁵³ David Kamper, “American Studies, Ethnography, and Knowledge Production: The Case of American Indian Performers at Knott’s Berry Farm,” *American Studies* 46, no. 3/4 (2005): 339.

⁵⁴ Paul Willis, *The Ethnographic Imagination* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2000), 24, 26.

I also emphasize my own identity in this work, a nod to the “reflexive turn” commonly dated to *Writing Culture*, the 1986 anthology edited by George Marcus and James Clifford. In this intellectual strain, scholars increasingly turned attention to their own subject position within a research site, as well as the general circumstances in and through which a monograph was produced.⁵⁵ Despite this shift, Okely has argued that the “detached observer” model remains prevalent, particularly in British ethnography, and frames this as a male-gendered practice in which “the self-possessed social scientist does not want to appear as buffoon but as the all-confident hero.” In turn, Okely supports an even stronger turn to collaboration and reflexivity in order to combat this researcher/subject fragmentation.⁵⁶ While my own manuscript production process did not involve collaboration with the subject group, the fieldwork-stage intimacy with my informants will nonetheless carry over to the final product, in part due to the possibility of subject review. David Kamper and Faye Ginsberg have separately touched ethnography in an American Studies context, both emphasizing the ever-heightened intimacy of fieldwork in one’s home region. In Ginsberg’s words, for this local work, “the relationships and commitments established by fieldwork are accompanied by the reality of ‘natives’ looking over our shoulders as we fashion our representations of their worlds.”⁵⁷ I am offering my own subjects full access to this study’s final manuscript; though academic writing is not exactly inviting to a broad public, my anticipation of their

⁵⁵ Andrew Beatty, “How Did It Feel for You? Emotion, Narrative, and the Limits of Ethnography,” *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 3 (2010): 431.

⁵⁶ Judith Okely, *Anthropological Practice: Fieldwork and the Ethnographic Method* (London: Berg, 2012), 6-7.

⁵⁷ Kamper, “American Studies, Ethnography, and Knowledge Production,” 339-340; Faye Ginsberg, “Ethnography and American Studies,” *Cultural Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2006): 489-490.

potential reading surely alters my shaping of the text. I have attempted to channel such anticipation into a quest for more precision, moreso than as an incentive to provide an account of racing that will match participants' desired representation. Such interpretation is shaped by my *own* identity, which inevitably affected my experiences in the field; as a White male studying a sphere in which White maleness was normative, I enjoyed a sense of comfort that accompanied identity-marker-based belonging. All the same, as explored at the close of this chapter, I entered a space that was, in some ways, quite outside my "normal" surroundings.

"Space," in fact, was a guiding concept for research. Most was carried out in the eastern half of Kansas, as I drove thousands of miles through rolling hills of corn, soybeans, and wheat fields, as well as the prairies marking the Flint Hills between Manhattan and Wichita.⁵⁸ However, as explained previously, this project was not neatly contained within the state's political boundaries: I found that "Kansas"-centered racing spilled into other states, particularly those that comprise the Heartland region. Kansas-resident drivers and spectators traveled to other areas to compete and watch, while those from elsewhere in the Heartland arrived for races inside Kansas borders. Thus, with Kansas acting as the central marking point, I am analyzing the racing "sphere" as manifested in locations, practices, ideologies, and identities.

⁵⁸ As I intimately experienced during many bicycle rides in the area, eastern Kansas defies the state's assumed flat landscape, which is instead found in the western half of the state as the "tabletop" gradually rises toward the Rockies. On conceptions of the Heartland region as "flat," see: Barillas, *The Midwestern Pastoral*, 19.

Chapter Summary

I introduce the reader to the racing sphere through Chapter 1, “Racing Ritual: An Overview of the Kansas Dirt Race Track.” This broad survey of tracks across the state addresses “ritual” elements from spaces and objects to shared actions. While I sometimes “read” these elements for particular meanings, at other points I simply describe them in the interest of placing the reader next to me in the bleachers. Thus this chapter carries the twinned goals of critical analysis and thick description, both intended to help the reader better understand the myriad ideologies and sensory affects present on a night of dirt-track racing. As a whole, I portray the race track as a vibrant site of ideological expression in such areas as consumerism, community, religion, nationalism, and identity, as well as spectacular in its offer of loudness, visual speed, and flying dirt.

Chapter 2, “Racing Rhetoric: The Construction of Identity by Racing Participants,” marks the methodological turn toward direct interaction with informants. I conducted long-form interviews with drivers, family members, mechanics, and those in other roles, in each case probing how they understood their own identity in relation to the racing sphere. The themes of “community” and “family,” sometimes equated with one another, commonly emerged across these personal narratives. I also touch on “work” as a key concept for participants, particularly drivers, who valued racing as a form of productive labor. Given the working-class, male identity of most respondents, I argue that racing operations offered drivers the opportunity for labor sovereignty and control that they likely did not experience in their paid occupations, and that this might be deemed a recuperation of empowered (White) masculine performance.

I shift from interpersonal discursive construction to more “ordinary” racing activity in Chapter 3, “Racing Routine: Community and Exchange in the (Extra)Ordinary.” With “community” having thematically emerged in interview accounts, I examine how racing participants enacted community through material and discursive exchange at tracks, garages, and other racing-related spaces. These findings are based on my participant-observation work with four parties (three racing groups and a videographer), each of whom I shadowed during the 2014 season. I found that actual on-track driving comprised a very small portion of racing-related activity, necessitating attention to the many less visible exchanges away from competition. However, the knowledges and practices exchanged by participants generally pointed back to the “action” on the track, including extraordinary moments of conflict, symbolized by “fireworks,” which generated extensive attention and discussion.

Chapter 4, “Racing Representation: Museum, Television and Fan-Archival Narrative,” entails a return to the public narrative approach that guided this project’s initial research on early newspaper accounts. I contend that contemporary sites, whether more material (museums) or digital (television show and websites), constructed dominant memory and facilitated a sense of “community” beyond the usual racing spaces. Visitors were invited to enact membership in the community through interaction with material items, such as automobiles, trophies, and uniforms, as well as representations that included race videos and online photograph collections. These sites were all curated by former drivers, while most materials were donated by other racing participants. Thus they reflected a “grassroots” aesthetic, collectively constructed by community members with little potential (like racing itself) for financial gain.

I close with “Reflections on a Lap Through Grassroots Auto Racing Culture,” in which I complete the analytical “lap” represented by this project. This chapter is largely a revisiting of my main arguments, including on the racing sphere’s offer of localism and stability in the face of broad cultural change; the re-centering of masculinity and Whiteness despite participants’ lack of acknowledgment of those structures; and competitors’ embrace of racing as small-group industrial work. I also address the dirt track in the context of authenticity, as it reflects “real” racing in ways that some perceive to be lost at the NASCAR level. The text concludes with a 2016 visit to Heartland Park Topeka, thus returning to the starting point at which research had begun four years earlier.

A New Perspective on Old Territory

In his popular 2007 book *Deer Hunting With Jesus*, a reflection on White working-class life in small-town Virginia, Joe Bageant declares, “Few educated liberals will ever find themselves sucking down canned beer at the local dirt track.” As a native of this environment, Bageant frames himself as the rare cultural observer and writer who would enter such spaces. If this gap exists, I embarked on my own project to fill it through a cultural study of working-class space in Kansas, particularly at the tracks, in the “Pits,” in garages, and other sites touched by racing. And I did find myself “sucking down canned beer at the local dirt track” once in a while.

It began as a journey into an entirely unfamiliar place. I grew up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, a largely affluent town that houses the state’s flagship public university. It is within an easy drive of, yet culturally far removed from, the Charlotte-centered

NASCAR sphere. At one point I attended a race at Orange County Speedway, the local race track in whose county namesake I grew up; for those of us in Chapel Hill, it was “out in the county,” some twenty-five miles from town, and my friends and I merely visited the track as a novelty, perhaps (it seems in retrospect) as an act of rural slumming. Thus, for me, racing existed in representation more than material reality. Along with NASCAR’s high visibility within newspaper and television sports coverage, I knew racing through other popular cultural texts, from NASCAR-oriented films *Days of Thunder* (1990) and *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2006) to such musical odes as “Racing in the Street” (Bruce Springsteen) and “The Distance” (Cake). I was also once invited, while living in Austin, Texas, to watch a friend race his Camaro on a local community track. I later regretted passing on this opportunity, but the lingering interest in a racing scene out of the spotlight was intact when I relocated to eastern Kansas, a major hub of dirt-track auto racing.

This project, then, emerged from a desire to explore unfamiliar territory, both in a literal sense (Kansas) and in regards to the more rural and working-class spaces in which I have rarely found myself. As an East Coast native traveling west to study Kansas culture, I was subconsciously tapping into the “settler” narrative so prominent in Kansan and American mythology. However, I now write these words with greater attunement to how my own identity, including the preconceptions I brought to this project, shaped research and documentation. I thus present a self-aware attempt to broadly examine and convey the ways in which Kansans form sense of self, and sense of community, through participation in dirt-track racing.

Chapter One

Racing Ritual: An Overview of the Kansas Dirt Race Track

On a Saturday evening in April 2012, I first entered the space in which I would unearth a piece of Kansas over the next three years. I turned my compact car rightward onto cracked pavement as my stomach betrayed a touch of anxiety. This was the nervous thrill that accompanies one's solo entrance into new territory; yet instead of a faraway land, I had arrived at the dirt race track just twenty-five miles from my current home. I followed a narrow road to the main lot, parked my car, and stepped out with sharp attention to the affects that would ultimately fade from awareness with the onset of familiarity. The southern breeze carried traces of dirt and exhaust, as well as the soft buzz of an old Hank Williams song, as it drifted from the direction of the oval track. Soon enough, I would understand these to be muted previews of the sensory intensity to come. When I emerged from the bleachers some four hours later, the dirt on my face and foam plugs jammed into my ears reflected the spectacle that drew hundreds of onlookers each weekend.

This chapter will provide an introduction to ritual dynamics at dirt race tracks in Kansas, including those "spectacular" aspects. While focusing on shared generalities between tracks, I will also take care to note distinctions between sites across the state. Following a basic overview of dirt-track racing itself, analysis will turn to the tracks' layouts and features, including the significant presence of consumerist activity in the form of marketing and commodity sales. The next section entails an overview of the stages and actions present at a typical race night, as performed by track employees, drivers and their crews, and spectators. Discussions of religious-nationalist ritual and the

track as a “theater of ethics” are included this section. I then examine the affects experienced from a spectator’s perspective, with particular attention to aural roars, material dirt, and other forms of sensory intensity. Finally, I will turn to public performances of identity at the track, as well as my evolving sense of identity and belonging as the study progressed.

For a procedural framework I turn to Ronald Grimes’s *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, in which he offers categories by which an ethnographer might map and analyze ritual. This includes ritual space (size and shape, general layout, symbolism of such layout, levels of access); ritual objects (basic characteristics, the stories behind objects, processes by which they are created, symbolism and meaning of objects); ritual time (location in time, duration, and frequency of the event, reasons behind such elements); ritual sounds and language (linguistic and non-linguistic, and meanings behind such sounds); ritual identity (roles/hierarchies, extension of such roles beyond the ritual space, and markings of particular roles); and ritual action (repetition, meanings behind actions, and how the body is used to perform such actions).⁵⁹ Using such categories in tandem, I hope to create a rich description of my experiences as an observer of auto racing over a period of three years. In general, this chapter aims to introduce the reader to the structural elements present at Kansas dirt tracks, which will set up and contextualize the more site-specific, in-depth findings that comprise the remaining chapters of this text.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Ronald Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 20-31.

⁶⁰ This chapter will include my observations only at dirt tracks; the following two chapters will turn to other sites, particularly drivers’ homes and garages, as I delve into interviews and case studies (products of more direct interaction with participants).

Dirt-track racing: overview

The Kansas racing sphere is composed of a variety of leagues and rule sets, but tracks are most often guided by two leagues: the United States Racing Association (USRA) and the International Motor Contest Association (IMCA), the latter of which claims to be the oldest active racing association in the country.⁶¹ At times I encountered other organizations, including the World of Outlaws (the major national-level “sprint car” league), the United States Modified Touring Series (USMTS), and the United States Auto Club (USAC). While some leagues, such as the World of Outlaws, represent a traveling tour in which a group of drivers moves from track to track together, the USRA and IMCA act as sanctioning rule bodies for multiple tracks. At the Heartland Park Topeka track, USRA officials in matching blue polo shirts oversaw the staging of the races, enforcing rules on procedures and automobile setup (such as tire brand and engine size limits). Thirty miles to the north, IMCA officials managed the races at Thunder Hill Speedway, implementing a different set of rules for those drivers.

Across these leagues, I encountered around a half-dozen types, or “classes,” of cars that were most common at Kansas tracks. These were marked by differences in expense and, subsequently, “performance” level. In his book *High Performance: The Culture and Technology of Drag Racing 1950-2000*, Robert Post offers two conceptions of auto racing “performance”: (1) technological performance, referring to mechanical generation of speed and efficiency, and (2) theatrical performance, in regards to drivers’

⁶¹ Source: IMCA website, “About”: <https://www.imca.com/imca/about/>. My historical archival research did confirm that IMCA was operating as a league in the mid-1910s at the Kansas State Fair.

and officials' roles as "actors" in the spectacle of racing.⁶² I am using the former conception in this section, though the latter clearly applies to dirt-track racing past and present (as illustrated elsewhere in this text). Technological performance is affected by myriad material elements, including the car's overall shape, weight (total and distribution), engine power, tire shape and material, and smaller parts that influence mobility (springs, shocks, etc.). Across car classes, the act of modification is crucial: racing participants continually seek those changes to the car that will allow the driver to navigate the track in less time. Outright engine power is but one factor. On a dirt track, drivers (most directly through their wheels) cling to a surface that provides less traction than asphalt or concrete; thus the ability of a car to effectively connect to the track, and maintain that connection without excessive sliding, significantly mediates the importance of the engine's delivery of power to the wheels.⁶³ Within each "class" of car, drivers are restricted to certain parameters within which they modify vehicle setup. Each common class in Kansas racing is described more fully in Appendix A; when arranged roughly from low to high in terms of (1) expense of maintenance and (2) technological performance, they are as follows: "Stock," "Modifed (and "B-Modified"), "Late Model," and "Sprint."

⁶² Robert Post, *High Performance: the Culture and Technology of Drag Racing, 1950-2000* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), xviii.

⁶³ These comments about the relationship between mechanical details and racing performance are based on my general fieldwork observations over the period of the study.

Ritual space: Dirt track locations and layouts⁶⁴

As of 2016, only one paved, asphalt race track remains in Kansas: the 70,000-seat Kansas Speedway, built for NASCAR races in the early 2000s. Otherwise, the state boasts over a dozen dirt tracks, distributed fairly evenly throughout Kansas, with the larger facilities following population centers around Wichita, Topeka and the Kansas City metro area. I conducted research at fourteen tracks total: ten in Kansas, three in Missouri, and one in Iowa. Most tracks are located on the edges of towns and cities, marking the point at which developed residential areas give way to farmland or prairie; the rest are found two to three miles outside of a particular population center. Such locations were surely influenced by concerns over noise levels, which continue to generate citizen debate over the desirability of tracks in particular communities. From my perspective in the bleachers, rural context created a visual dynamic by which the dirt and grass of the race track blended neatly into the greens and browns of the surrounding landscape, that backdrop changing substantially during the course of a season between the spring and autumn. During particularly vibrant sunsets, the surrounding fields presented a live version of the American pastoral; they were bathed in a yellow-orange glow, sometimes visible for miles, offering moments that matched the idyllic iterations of the Heartland so common in public representations.⁶⁵ Reflective of Leo Marx's study of American mythology in *Machine in the Garden*, this landscape was once again altered by the machines within it: in a region long ago shaped by agricultural technology, thus

⁶⁴ For satellite imagery of each track involved in this project's research, see Appendix B.

⁶⁵ See: Barillas, *The Midwestern Pastoral*, 12, 18-19; Johnson, *Heartland TV*, 5; Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 6-7.

converting it *into* a human-made garden, high-powered automobiles loudly declared their presence.⁶⁶

The shapes and sizes of race tracks vary, most between ¼- and ½-mile in length, in terms of one lap as measured along the outside edge of the oval. Tracks range from a more circular shape, with shorter straightaways and gentler curves, to those with longer straightaways and sharper curves.⁶⁷



Figure 1.1: Race track diagram and basic terminology, including turn numbers

Variation also exists in the “banking,” the slope from the elevated outside edge (named “the top”) of a race track down to the inside (“the bottom”), where the track meets the infield. Steeper banking results in an especially elevated outside edge, which allows for (and even demands) that drivers push their cars faster, since it effectively counteracts

⁶⁶ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964).

⁶⁷ See Appendix B for a visual representation of this variation; see Fig. 1.1 for a diagram of a race track with basic terminology, including turn numbers, included.

inertia by drawing the car toward the infield instead. Thus the Belleville High Banks, located in north-central Kansas, acquired the nickname “The World’s Fastest Half Mile” due to its circular shape and steep banking. Drivers at Belleville may travel at high speeds without losing control and sliding off the outside of the track, though of course this is still a possibility.⁶⁸ Many tracks also feature an area known as the “cushion,” which runs along the outside edge; this softer, more loosely packed dirt offers added traction, and some drivers will seek it out to make their left-hand turns more effectively (see Fig. 1.2).



Figure 1.2: The “cushion” at Wakeeney Speedway

⁶⁸ As of 2014, the track’s official website includes its subtitle on the home page: “The World’s Fastest Half Mile Dirt Track.” (<http://www.bellevillehighbanks.org/>). One of my driver interviewees recalled his own horrifying experience at Belleville High Banks: he lost control of his car at great speed, flying off the outside edge of the track and landing at least one hundred feet away. His wife, pregnant at that time, later told me that she vomited when witnessing this, afraid she’d lost the father of their child. It was a reminder that, while such banked tracks are more “secure” in keeping drivers pinned to the inside, they also facilitate the higher speeds that make collisions even more dangerous.

Reflective of the grid-style, cardinal-direction-oriented layout of Kansas roadways in general, most tracks' straightaways are arranged in a north-south direction, with a few oriented east-west. John Opie has characterized the Heartland region's cardinal-oriented grid road (and state border) system, largely designed in the nineteenth century, as "a physical manifestation of a universal order that appealed to both Puritan theology and Enlightenment rationalism," thus a direct product of ideology. David Barillas has further argued that the grid's "precise coordinate description of any piece of real estate" reflects an "agricultural and utilitarian" version of democracy.⁶⁹ Paralleling the foundational material of this agriculture, materials of Kansas tracks tend to be clay-based, with variations existing between facilities; combined with differing maintenance procedures and local weather conditions, great variety exists in race conditions. Accounting for the dirt's changes over the course of the night, drivers must adjust their cars and driving styles to maximize performance in the context of such conditions. Thus dirt-track racing may be described as an enactment of the Heartland's deeply rooted "agricultural and utilitarian democracy," in which individualistic self-determination is emphasized. Like the farmer, the driver adopts a utilitarian approach in directing a machine around an enclosed plot of land, continually adjusting to changes in soil conditions, produced by changes (oftentimes extreme) in weather, in order to most efficiently convert technology into productive labor.

In addition to the dirt oval itself, the dirt-track site features a system of facilities. Spectator parking lots are typically surfaced with gravel, dirt and/or grass, while the

⁶⁹ John Opie, *The Law of the Land: Two Hundred Years of American Farmland Policy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 8; cited in (and elaborated by) Barillas, *The Midwestern Pastoral*, 26-27.

presence of pavement indicates significant investment (and probable status as a “nice track”). The ticket booth is typically located adjacent to the parking lot, near the spectator entrance to the central track area; I would buy my ticket, costing ten to twenty dollars, before passing through the “gate,” at which another employee would check or scan the ticket before welcoming me through. At most tracks, spectators have the option of purchasing a “Pit pass,” for around double the usual admission cost, with which they (after signing a waiver of liability) may enter the space in which racers park and work on their cars.

Inside the admission area, race tracks tend to present the same set of structures: bathrooms, concessions stands (for the sale of food, clothing, and other racing-related items), a spectator seating area, and a media booth for announcers and officials, usually located behind and above the spectators. Adjacent to the oval track (and sometimes in the infield), the “Pits” mark the extension of competitive space; in conjunction with on-track competition, drivers and other mechanical workers keep their race cars in this area before and between races.⁷⁰ Like the parking lot, Pits material and layout varies by track facility, ranging from pavement with clearly marked spaces to an unmarked expanse of grass, gravel and mud. The Pits host a flurry of activity throughout the night, as each group makes adjustments to their machines, before and during races, in order to maximize technological performance.

Two examples will illustrate the structural diversity between Kansas tracks. At Lakeside Speedway (on the northwestern edge of Kansas City), I encountered a fairly new-looking, two-story-tall building behind the main bleachers. For those able to pay for

⁷⁰ I have capitalized the term “Pits” in order to indicate this space’s importance apart from the track, in regards to its connected but distinct set of social practices.

access, this structure contained enclosed, group-level viewing rooms (“luxury suites”), a broadcast booth, food concession area, bathrooms, and an emerging museum space devoted to the history of the track. Outside of this structure, Lakeside offered metal bleachers with individually shaped seats and back rests, a rare amenity at community tracks. There was also a display screen directly behind the back straightaway; during the races, officials updated this screen with the top five drivers, in order, at any given time. A concrete barrier was installed all the way around the outside of the track in order to contain drivers who veered their automobiles too far to the right.

By contrast, just before my visit to Wakeeney Speedway in northwest-central Kansas, I was told by a racing informant that I would be getting “back to grassroots!” at this site. I came to understand that, for this longtime participant in racing, the term “grassroots” denoted simplicity, lower investment, and fewer amenities for visitors. The Wakeeney parking lot was a large, flat, unmarked grassy area where spectators lined up their vehicles. They sat on wooden bleachers with no back rests; there were only fifteen rows in each section, which meant that I could not sit up high enough, even in the top row, to clearly witness the race all the way around the track. The broadcast and officials’ booth was a small aluminum structure, around twelve by eight feet in surface, installed above the bleachers. There was no scoreboard to indicate the order of the drivers during a race; there was also no barrier around most of the race track’s outside edge, meaning that when a driver lost control and drove the car off the outside, it simply disappeared from the spectators’ sight, usually to reappear seconds later as the driver steered the vehicle back onto the dirt surface.

These “grassroots” tracks are also notable in that employees are less specialized; with fewer present, each individual is responsible for a wider range of tasks. At Wakeeney Speedway, during a caution mode (in which the race is “paused” so that immobilized cars may be cleared from the track), I witnessed the lead official climb down from his tower above the finish line, grab metal debris from the track, and then scramble back up into his stand before restarting the race with a wave of the green flag. At Atchison Speedway, the track’s owner also drove the water truck and acted as the lead official. In another instance, I witnessed the Heartland Park Topeka’s lead announcer holding a video camera during a race; I realized that he was simultaneously narrating over the loudspeakers (though a microphone attached to his headphones) and shooting the race videos that would later be posted online. Such multitasking is less necessary among a large support staff, like that found at a NASCAR race, but an expected element when one ventures into the “grassroots.”

The Image at the Track

In his landmark text *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard addressed the expansion of human-constructed symbols that pervade postmodern life. Inhabitants of the “Simulacrum” understand their world through such symbols, which range from media creations to language itself, to the point that they can understand material reality only *through* symbols; the line between representation and “reality” becomes blurred. He termed this ubiquitous stream of messages “The Image.”⁷¹ While I will later attend to how racing participants interpersonally constructed racing “reality” through linguistic

⁷¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994 [originally published 1981]).

exchange, this chapter addresses the stream of constructed images (or “signs”) that combine to form “The Image” at any particular race track. I analyze such signs on the premise that they carry meanings at varying levels of explicitness, on topics ranging from capitalistic consumption to identity-based ideology.

Marketing-driven symbols stood out in their widespread presence. Racing spectators were typically greeted by a sea of print billboards, the visual advertising supplemented by messages delivered over the loudspeakers. Thus the race track acted as a significant site of capitalistic reproduction, both in terms of processes (promotion and exchange of commodities) and projected ideology (the constant spectacle of consumption as composed of marketing language and imagery). For example, the Heartland Park Topeka dirt track, located on the southeastern edge of Topeka-area development, was sponsored by Briggs Auto (a regional car dealership) and named the BriggsAuto.com Speedway. During a 2012 visit, I was greeted near the entrance by a race car with a “wrap” (plastic covering the main body) displaying the BriggsAuto.com logo (Fig. 1.3).



Figure 1.3: The Briggs Modified car on display at Heartland Park Topeka

Continuing to walk toward the track, I entered a one-hundred-foot sheltered walkway whose entrance was topped by a CoreFirst Bank & Trust sign: “Welcome Race Fans! ATM by Flagpole.” I then strolled through a tunnel of marketing, surrounded by a dozen print advertisements for such businesses as Diamond International (trucking company), Labor Pros (temporary employment agency) and Med Assist, a “minor emergency center” in the Topeka area. After passing another car with a Super 8 Hotels wrap, I took my seat in the bleachers and gazed at the sea of banners positioned around the oval track (Fig 1.4).



Figure 1.4: Companies ranging from global to local advertise at Heartland Park Topeka; meanwhile, drivers make rare clockwise revolutions to “pack the track” before races begin

Behind the back straightaway, twelve large ads, around fifteen feet wide and eight feet tall, promoted regional and (inter)national brands, including Budweiser, Coca-Cola, O’Reilly Auto Parts, and the single non-corporate presence, the Kansas National Guard. In the infield, smaller billboards publicized more localized businesses, such as the “Tobacco Hut” (located literally a couple hundreds yards away, near Turn 4) and Ferrell

Gas (a propane gas distributor between Topeka and Kansas City). However, not all marketing images were stationary: most race car bodies featured logos for local businesses, such as Ray's Lock Shop (in White City) and Peerless Tire (in Emporia). Furthermore, during that night's intermission period, the Briggs dealership staged a parade of their used cars and trucks. The announcer declared, "I'm sure that if you head on over to Briggs come Monday morning, *any* of these beauties could be yours!" A spectator behind me retorted with a chuckle, "I ain't buyin' none of these vehicles. They've already drove 'em on the race track." As reflected by the announcer's narration, visual advertising was supplemented by aural varieties. Between individual races, the loudspeakers projected fifteen-to-thirty-second promotions for sponsors, through which I learned that the night's race winners would each get a free cigar from the Tobacco Hut. Meanwhile, track employees regularly walked along the bleachers area, yelling "Bud Light! Bud Light!"

Beyond Heartland Park Topeka, this type of branding was common throughout race tracks in and around Kansas. I divide these images into two imperative-based categories. Firstly, viewers were incited to consume products, whether through an offer to link oneself with a nationally famous brand (e.g., Coca-Cola) or local business (e.g., Ferrell Gas). Secondly, viewers were compelled to support the law enforcement system, whether through membership in this system (such as the National Guard) or by following existing legislation (including the "You Drink / You Drive / You Lose" and "Click It Or Ticket" campaigns). Bail bonds advertisements, such as the "Bad Boyz Bail Bonds" logo prominently featured on the Thunder Hill Speedway flag stand, represented the social control produced by these two systems' convergence: law enforcement fed capital to loan

companies through the imprisonment/bond system, and, judging by the ubiquity of such advertisements at race tracks, payees were plentiful in the spectator stands. As a whole, marketers seemed to be targeting working-class consumers, with bail bond agents joined by temporary employment agencies, automobile parts and repair shops, and economy beer companies (particularly Coors and Budweiser, whose respective corporate centers were located to the west in Denver and to the east in St. Louis).

Viewing these symbols through the theoretical lens of “The Image,” I argue that spectators, present for the primary purpose of viewing races, were continually exposed to ideologies of consumption and obedience to the legal system. As posited by other theorists from Stuart Hall to Janice Radway, the viewer does exercise some agency in interpreting such symbols for him/herself.⁷² As I did not specifically discuss this dynamic with other spectators, it was difficult to ascertain to what extent they resisted such buried messages as “buy beer” or “join the National Guard.” However, unless these various marketing parties are completely mistaken in the power of such messaging, some level of ideological influence may be presumed.

Ritual Action: A Race Night In Stages

This section represents an attempt to convey the most common procedures within a dirt-track race night.⁷³ Nearly all tracks in this study hosted a weekly race program,

⁷² Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-1979*, ed. Stuart Hall et al (London: Hutchinson, 1980): 128-138; Janice A. Radway, “Reading Is Not Eating: Mass-Produced Literature and the Theoretical Methodological and Political Consequences of a Metaphor,” *Book Research Quarterly* 2, no.3 (1986): 7-29.

⁷³ As is the case throughout this chapter, generalizations are balanced against distinctions from track to track and night to night.

held on Friday or Saturday nights. In addition, special events might span multiple evenings, such as Lakeside Speedway's "Sunflower Showdown," a four-night series from Thursday to Sunday in October. Weekly programs typically started between 6:00 and 8:00, ending by 10:00 or 11:00 (though I did attend race nights that extended beyond midnight). A program was generally divided into stages: (1) What might be termed "warmup" or "prerace" mode, in which fans, drivers and employees prepared for the night's events; (2) Hot Laps, during which drivers tested their cars on the track in a non-competitive, non-measured mode; (3) The national anthem and prayer, which marked the transition to competitive mode; (4) Heat races, each involving a small number of cars; (5) Intermission, generally a fifteen- to thirty-minute break which might include entertainment events; (6) Feature races, each involving a larger field of cars, and offering the most rewards to winners in terms of prize money and prestige; and (7) What might be termed "cooldown" or "postrace" mode, a mirror to the opening stage, in which participants digested the night's events and transitioned back to life away from on-track competition.

Most of my own race nights began in the employee and spectator parking lot (prerace activities in "the Pits" will be addressed in Chapter 3). Depending on the track, (predominantly male) groups gathered around cars and trucks to eat, drink and talk; many exhibited an upbeat demeanor, marked by extensive laughter and "talkin' shit," the playful exchange of insults. Such prerace actions reflected the leisurely nature of this space, as well as, perhaps, anticipation of the spectacle to come. Furthermore, by collectively eating and drinking in the spectator parking lot, participants enacted a form

of social leveling that differed from the classed hierarchies of the racers' Pits areas (discussed in Chapter 3).

From this point, attendees purchased admission tickets to gain access to the primary competitive space (the oval track) and its surrounding facilities. During my early experiences inside the admission area, I was struck by the constant presence of the announcer's voice, projected over a series of loudspeakers, that greeted me upon each entrance into the bleachers. I came to understand this as a kind of "voice of god" dynamic: the announcer(s) narrated the events during and around races, oftentimes framing them within certain notions of morality. This narration may thus be considered an aural version of "the Image," in that the announcers' omnipresent commentary structured attendees' understanding of the action they witnessed. In addition to endorsements of sponsors, announcers offered light-hearted banter, mixing humor and self-deprecation, to fill the quiet space preceding the machines' rumble. Their commentary was supplemented by music, typically a mix of country and Top-40, rock, and other popular genres of the past sixty years. There was little in the way of hip-hop; the closest style might have been choreographed dance songs, such as DJ Casper's early 2000s "Cha Cha Slide," which prompted some spectators at Thunder Hill Speedway (mostly children) to dance along as the singer instructed, "Right foot, let's stomp / Left foot, let's stomp / Cha Cha now y'all!" When not dancing, spectators acted as a dynamic, flowing group, with individuals frequently moving between the bleachers and concession/restroom areas, while others engaged in conversation before the races (and their accompanying high volume) began.

Meanwhile, the track's surface was prepared for competition. At least one water truck circled the track in the hours before the races, spraying liquid behind as the driver slowly moved forward (Fig. 1.5).



Figure 1.5: The water truck is used to prepare Sweet Springs Motorsports Complex for competition

This process moistened the dirt, creating more traction for cars. After the water truck pulled off, drivers in other vehicles (various types of trucks, and sometimes drivers in their own race cars) would “pack the track,” slowly moving along its surface in order to press down and secure the wetted dirt in place. It became clear, over the course of my research, that there was a disparity between tracks in terms of their ability hold water from the first race to the last during a given night; a frequent topic of conversation among drivers, crew members and spectators concerned how “tacky” (higher traction) or “slick” (lower traction) a track seemed to be.

Meanwhile, the rumble of engines from the Pits gradually grew until drivers entered the track in groups; once given the go-ahead by officials, they accelerated their vehicles around the oval. However, this stage was not measured as competition. “Hot

Laps” were an opportunity for drivers to test the track’s dirt conditions and their cars’ performance before the beginning of “official,” measured races. Given that dirt varies significantly between locations, as well as from week to week depending upon weather and maintenance conditions, it was important that drivers “read” the track conditions throughout the night.

Religious-Nationalist Ritual at the Dirt Race Track

“What a night for racin’! Whooo! [Voice lowers] Let us pray.”

Sitting in the metal bleachers at Humboldt Speedway, I snapped to attention at the announcer’s signal. I had joined hundreds of other spectators at this southeastern Kansas race track to watch drivers engage in circular speed, motors roaring and dust flying, as they performed Hot Laps for the past half hour. However, with his performative declaration of “Let us pray,” the crowd en masse rose from our metal seats, collective chatter replaced by silence (see Fig. 1.6). The middle-aged male announcer offered a brief prayer in which he focused on driver safety before concluding, “In Jesus’ name, Amen.” A brief pause gave way to “The Star-Spangled Banner,” in the form of a brass-band recording that buzzed from the speakers above us, as a driver slowly circled the track while extending a stick-mounted American flag outside of his car’s right-hand window.



Figure 1.6: Humboldt Speedway spectators pause during “The Star Spangled Banner,” many gazing up to a United States-signifying flag visually paired with a racing-signifying checkered flag

I came to recognize the prayer-anthem ceremony as a widely shared, highly symbolic ritual for racing participants. In addition to the combination of the prayer and anthem into a two-part series, there existed cultural “cross-referencing” in which one text drew conceptual and ideological elements from the other, thus “welding” together notions of “God” and “country,” religion and nationalism, through such public performance. While positing a spectrum of religious expression at various levels of secularization, I turn to Laura Privera and John Howard to define nationalism as the process by which a nation’s identity, and criteria for membership in said nation, are constructed.⁷⁴ In this section I argue that, through the twinned performance of prayer and anthem at Kansas dirt tracks, Christian and American identities (in conjunction with Whiteness and

⁷⁴ Laura Privera and John W. Howard II, “Masculinity, Whiteness, and the Warrior Hero: Perpetuating the Strategic Rhetoric of U.S. Nationalism and the Marginalization of Women,” *Women and Language* 29, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 30.

masculinity, as well as a militaristic ethos) were constructed and welded together into a relationship of mutual normativity.

This ritual was, to borrow from Victor Turner's typology, *liminal*: it marked the temporal transition between non-competitive and competitive modes.⁷⁵ The prayer and anthem were preceded by Hot Laps and followed by Heats, the short races in which measured competition was initiated. The shift from Hot Laps to prayer was sensorily striking: upon its initiation, attendees almost entirely ceased their activities to stand in silence with hands clasped in back or over heart, hats off, and in many cases heads bowed. In the wake of Hot Laps, during which spectators moved and yelled to each other over the roar of passing cars, the sudden stillness was remarkable for its demand that all present participate, in action if not in spirit. On one occasion, I began walking towards the track at this ritual's initiation in order to secure a better video-recording perspective; however, overcome by my own conspicuousness in motion, I stopped to join the others in quiet deference.

The prayer, commonly termed the "invocation," was led by a religious official and tended to focus on the themes of driver and spectator safety, commendation of past and current military personnel, and the construction of the United States ("this country," "our country") as a nation built and blessed by God. For example, during "Military Appreciation Night" at 81 Speedway in Wichita, the announcer invited all veterans to walk onto the track and join current Navy members around the finish line. Following audience applause for the military representatives, a clergyman offered his prayer over the speaker system as spectators, officials and drivers bowed their heads in silence:

⁷⁵ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1969), 95.

Please pray with me at this time. Our Grace and Heavenly Father, again we thank you for a wonderful day that you gave us; Lord I just – today as we honor the military and the veterans, Lord I just pray a special blessing over each and every one of ‘em, Lord from the past to the present to the future. Lord we know your hand’s in all of this, because God you built this country, and we just love you for that. So Lord today, I ask that you keep us safe every week, Lord even if it’s just from gettin’ a lady off the trailer, to these fans gettin’ home tonight. So Lord we just thank you for that. So Lord just keep us safe tonight, and we’ll just honor you with that. We love you for what you do. In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen. [Track announcer: “Amen.”]⁷⁶

The speaker moved seamlessly from tribute to the military, in the context of ongoing American military presence in the Middle East and elsewhere, to the assertion that a (Christian) God is directly involved in, and endorses, the actions of “this country.” By closing with “In Jesus’ name I pray, Amen,” he removed all doubt that it was a specifically Christian invocation. In doing so, the prayer leader “welded” together Christian and American-nationalist ideologies, naturalizing each in the context of the other, and traced cascading relationships of protection from God to military to citizens. The crowd remained silent while three Navy soldiers followed the other’s call of “Forward, HUT!”, lining up with the American flag held high, in preparation for the national anthem. It was not an abrupt transition; the clergyman had foreshadowed the singing of a battle hymn with his own military references.

Public prayers were common at tracks in Kansas, the only exceptions being Heartland Park Topeka and Thunder Hill Speedway. At Dodge City Raceway in southwestern Kansas, the announcer introduced the prayer leader as a “track chaplain”

⁷⁶ Personal recording, July 19, 2014.

who was a member of Racers for Christ, a national organization that connects religious officials to tracks across the country. Operating under the motto “Bringing Inspiration to the World of Motorsports,” the RFC website establishes their “Purpose/Message” as follows:

We serve in a pastoral role to Christians who are actively participating in motorsports and racing. Many racing participants are away from their home church much of the year, and through the implementation of track-side chapel services and other creative means, we serve to meet this vital need normally met through a local church. This includes, but is not limited to, pastoral guidance, performing weddings, conducting funerals and memorial services, hospital calls, sick calls, jail visits, and offering the sacraments of baptism and communion.⁷⁷

The organization thus posited racing as a time-intensive threat to spiritual engagement, necessitating the expansion of “church” to racing spaces. My interview research revealed that, at least among Topeka-area racing participants, a minority attended church services on a regular basis. However, every interviewee professed a belief in “God,” as exemplified by a driver’s remark, “I believe in God; you don’t have to go to church to know that there’s a God.” While this “God” was generically named, it was almost certainly rooted in Biblical conceptions, particularly since nearly every interviewee attended Protestant or Catholic institutions as a child.

The hegemony of Christianity circulated between personal identities and race track iconography. I encountered no non-Christian equivalents to Racers for Christ, and witnessed only Christian ritual and symbolism (to the exclusion of Islam, Hinduism, etc.),

⁷⁷ “About RFC,” Racers for Christ website (Accessed February 22, 2016): <http://teamrfc.org/about-us/general/>.

indicating its hegemony as operational faith in the Kansas racing community. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow recently examined the structuring role of religion in Kansas in *Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America's Heartland*: he argues that while “red state religion” is certainly not homogenous, evident in Methodist-Catholic divisions, Christianity has served as a key focal point for Kansans’ interactions in churches and beyond.⁷⁸ Race tracks similarly operate as local, somewhat intimate social spaces in which participants interact and collectively negotiate values. Jeffrey Scholes and Raphael Sassower, in *Religion and Sports in American Culture*, have commented on the quasi-religious functions of sports-related spaces in general:

The interaction between the sacred and the secular does not mean that their identities are lost as such. They use each other to enrich themselves without undermining the other; they feed off each other rather than fight. This means, for example, that a sports bar can convert into a kind of modern temple where patrons show devotion by donning team jerseys and sidling up to their “altar” to watch the game.⁷⁹

Racing events may be characterized as both conduits and versions of the Church, broadly speaking: attendees find both Christian ritual and secular reiterations of it. The race track serves as a modern temple, indeed.

Within the prayer ritual, frequent references to nation facilitated a smooth segue into “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Anthems were variously presented as live performances or pre-recorded versions, with a single driver circling the track as an American flag billowed out the window. Through this ceremony, nation and automotive

⁷⁸ Robert Wuthnow, *Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America's Heartland* (Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁷⁹ Jeffrey Scholes and Raphael Sassower, *Religion and Sports in American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 12.

technology were welded together both visually (the car and flag in motion) and aurally (anthem and low engine rumble as mutual accompaniments). Spectators continued to nearly unanimously stand in silence, hand over heart or held behind, the occasional comments met with a “Shhh!” However, once the anthem was complete, and applause given, participants immediately resumed motion and conversation. It was remarkable to experience, as if the crowd has been paused with a device, the prayer/anthem offered, and the spectators un-paused once again.

While there are no explicit references to “God” in the American national anthem, it nonetheless occupies a key position within the “civil religion” theorized by Robert Bellah nearly a half-century ago. In examining nationalist mythology, he pointed to a “public religious dimension” that is “expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals,” built around the idea that the American nation-state operates in accordance with, and under the approval of, an unspecified “God.”⁸⁰ While Bellah focused largely on the discourse of the “Founding Fathers” and subsequent U.S. Presidents, Michael Butterworth has more recently applied this concept to modern sporting events, particularly Major League Baseball and the Super Bowl. Addressing the nationalistic ritual that takes place around game play, including performances of “The Star-Spangled Banner” and “America the Beautiful,” he argues that such demonstrations (in conjunction with military drills and other practices) reify the elevated militaristic ethos of the post-9/11, “War on Terror” American positioning in global context.⁸¹ Kansas dirt-track

⁸⁰ Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (Fall 2005; originally published 1967): 42.

⁸¹ Michael Butterworth, “Ritual in the ‘Church of Baseball’: Suppressing the Discourse of Democracy after 9/11,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (June

patriotic rituals typically did not include such explicit militaristic displays, possibly having declined since the immediate post-9/11 period, though they were common on “Military Appreciation” nights. It should also be noted that within Bellah’s model, while anthems clearly draw on the model of religious hymns, “civil religion” is theologically unspecified; in contrast, at the race track, “In Jesus’ name, Amen” directly preceded, and thus applied a specifically Christian lens to, the American anthem.

In tandem with the auto racing sphere’s larger identity dynamics, the prayer-anthem also reified the centrality of maleness and Whiteness within conceptions of U.S. nation. As will be explored below, my fieldwork revealed that men occupied nearly all positions of authority and visibility at the Kansas dirt track, including as drivers, announcers, and officials. Furthermore, Whiteness was ubiquitous: participants’ self-identification of “White” or “Caucasian” matched the apparent Whiteness that pervaded each race audience. In turn, the leadership of the prayer/anthem by nearly all White and male figures constructed legitimate religious and national authority around these identities. They invoked God in the interest of protection and safety, whether that of the present individuals, military personnel, or imagined members of the American nation. In each case, masculinity was “welded” with protection and authority, including through the male prayer leader’s self-designation as the assembled crowd’s representative communicator to a higher power.

2005): 107-129; Ibid., “Fox Sports, Super Bowl XLII, and the Affirmation of American Civil Religion,” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 32, no. 3 (August 2008): 318-323.



Figure 1.7: Nation, authority, and masculinity at Lakeside Speedway

There did exist an exception to male-centeredness on the track: the singing of the “Star-Spangled Banner.” Anthem performers were predominantly female, specifically young women in their teens and early twenties. However, rather than read this as a performance of female authority, I interpret the deployment of young female singers (some of whom bordered on childhood) as serving a nationalist-political purpose. Particularly since the Second World War, the United States has wielded tremendous presence overseas in the forms of both “soft” and “hard” power, occupying an active subject (and, arguably, imperialist) position. In this context, the battle hymn’s symbolic construction of the nation as a battered flag is tenuous. In turn, through performance of “The Star-Spangled Banner” by (White) young women, U.S. nation is reconfigured as innocent through its association with childhood and femininity.⁸² It is also in need of

⁸² Robert Strassfeld explored the function of “innocence” in justifying American imperialism, particularly in the wake of War on Terror torture revelations, in “American

protection, an imperative occasionally served by the presence of male-majority military personnel during anthem renditions. Privera and Howard examined the reification of such dynamics in post-9/11 media representation, especially that of soldiers; they found that masculinity and Whiteness were re-centered early in the “War on Terror” era. The deeply male-gendered soldier ascended in status, while American Whiteness was positioned against the threats of Brownness and Blackness, particularly in Middle Eastern and Latin American contexts.⁸³

Ongoing U.S. military human resource needs also materialized at dirt tracks, during and outside of the prayer/anthem ritual. In addition to the anthem soldier drills, the Kansas National Guard was well represented at these race tracks, from billboard advertising to live recruiters. For example, during a 2012 race at Thunder Hill Speedway, the announcer repeatedly notified the crowd that “Sergeant John” was greeting people and giving out free backpacks by the main concession stand, though his lack of visitors indicated little interest in the pitch. The following week, at Heartland Park Topeka’s “Military Appreciation Night,” the announcer asked all veterans to stand; the crowd applauded as he noted that these soldiers “provide security and freedom,” making “our way of life possible.” The announcer then instructed spectators to hold up our miniature American flags (included with admission) during the national anthem, sung by a Purple Heart-awarded soldier while a driver slowly circled the track, his own flag displayed. Around an hour later, a group of some three dozen young adults in matching camouflage fatigues, who appeared to be National Guard members, swept into the

Innocence,” *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 37, no. 2 (2006): 282-286.

⁸³ Privera and Howard II, “Masculinity, Whiteness, and the Warrior Hero: Perpetuating the Strategic Rhetoric of U.S. Nationalism and the Marginalization of Women,” 29-37.

bleachers and sat all around me. I was struck by the youth of their faces, which soon also reflected misery: many were not prepared for the roar and dirt of these races, spending most of the evening rubbing eyes, shielding faces, and plugging ears. I wondered if any of these cadets, so vulnerable to the conditions of a Kansas automobile race, would one day find themselves in worse conditions in a faraway place.

Competition and Conclusion Ritual

The completion of the national anthem marked the initiation of competitive racing mode. On a typical race night, there were around four classes of cars present to compete (most commonly Stocks and Modifieds, within which there are subgroups, and occasionally Late Model and Sprint classes as well). Race nights tended to be divided into two competitive periods: the shorter “Heat” races (first period) determined who qualified, and in what order, for the longer “Feature” races (second period) later in the night. Each Heat was made up of four to eight drivers who raced for around five laps. A fifteen- to thirty-minute intermission followed the completion of all Heat races, marking temporary suspension of competition. This was resumed with Feature (or “A-Main”) races, one for each class, with up to twenty-four drivers per Feature. This is the race that “counted” the most; that is, the Feature winner was considered that class’s primary victor of the night, receiving the most prize money and a trophy, with the runners-up typically earning smaller monetary rewards.

During the intermission mode, race tracks usually featured some sort of event that involved the track’s sponsors. This might entail a product giveaway and, in one case, a raffle for the chance to win one hundred Kansas Lottery tickets (I had to laugh at the idea

of a lottery for the chance to enter another lottery; participants were engaging with layers of chance). In other instances, track officials invited spectators to temporarily occupy the space of competition by entering the track for such events as three-legged races or a “candy grab,” in which a group of children ran onto the track to pick up pieces of wrapped sweets. By doing so, spectators were able to temporarily become part of the spectacle, as the actors in a public performance, before resuming their viewership role.

The primary spectacle was the competitive action; during this mode, in both Heats and Features, a group of officials worked in unison to manage each race, enacting that particular track’s procedural rules and overseeing driver safety in the cases of collisions.⁸⁴ The lead official, commonly known as the “flag man” (a label whose gendered nature will be examined) was located at the Finish line, directly in front of the main spectator area, in an elevated stand ten to twenty feet above the track surface level. Another two to four officials were positioned around the oval track, usually in the infield and at the Pits entrance/exit. The lead official used push-buttons to control four synchronized traffic lights, one located at each of the four turns in the track. Each race began with the drivers slowly circling the track while all traffic lights displayed yellow; when they were well-ordered and arrived at Turn 4, the official turned the traffic lights to green, at which the drivers accelerated into the beginning of the race. From this point, officials monitored the race activity for disruptive moments. If a collision resulted in one or more immobilized cars, the lead official switched the lights to yellow (indicating a “caution” mode), signaling for the other drivers to slowly circle the track while tow truck drivers

⁸⁴ My use of the term “collision” will be consistent and with reason: the commonly used term automobile “accident” implies a lack of intention, and given the complexity of “intention” (at subconscious and conscious levels), I have chosen the more neutral description “collision” to describe hard contact between race cars.

removed the colliding parties. The “flag man” also notified drivers and spectators of the end of the race: he waved the white flag as the leading driver initiated the final lap, then the familiar checkered flag as the winner crossed the finish line for the last time.

During periods of action, spectators continued to actively interact with the races through widely shared gesticulations. When encouraging a particular driver, they frequently stood as the driver passed, then repeatedly pointed or waved their arm to the right (the direction of the race, as viewed from the bleachers), urging the driver on. At first I scoffed at this reaction, given that there was little chance that a driver would actually witness such encouragement; what was the purpose? However, I realized that I had done the same at other competitive sports spectacles, offering bodily gestures that communicated encouragement for a player or team. Such actions seem to reflect a desire to include oneself *in* the competition, in order to feel a deeper connection to the “action” taking place on the track. Regardless of one’s conscious belief that (s)he is actually affecting the race’s outcome in any way, a spectator gains a deeper relationship with the spectacle, blurring the line between the two, through an *active* fanship that communicates back to the game. Dennis Kennedy has written that sport spectacles, in contrast with most types of spectacles in the nineteenth century, were innovative in their encouragement of audience participation.⁸⁵ It appears that at contemporary race tracks, fans have embraced this agency through explicit expressions of glee, anger, astonishment, and other emotions elicited by the drama at hand. This might include a fist pump in times of approval; a dismissive wave, with one or both arms, to express condemnation; or both hands on the sides or back of the head in moments of shock.

⁸⁵ Dennis Kennedy, *The Spectator and the Spectacle: Audiences in Modernity and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 156-158.



Figure 1.8: Spectators follow the action at Heartland Park Topeka

Another common gesture was what I term the “point.” In contrast with the waving point (to encourage drivers), this was a stiff-armed, pointed finger toward a particular location on the track. Spectators would typically do so to show others that a disruptive element, such as an immobilized car in the aftermath of a collision, was present. As such events were common (multiple collisions were to be expected during a Feature race), the “point” was a regular element within the bleachers area. At times, the lead official would initiate a caution (yellow flag), and it was difficult to discern why this had occurred; I learned to look around at other spectators, of which one would oftentimes be dutifully pointing in the direction of the event (stalled car, oil spill, etc.) that had initiated this break in competitive mode. Ultimately, *I* adopted the “point”: if a yellow flag was initiated, and I spotted the cause among others’ confusion, I would point in the direction of, for example, the loose car parts that had fallen on the track and triggered the “caution.” This type of gesture came with the responsibility of communication; I was

now the informant, no longer the invisible ethnographer huddled in the back of the bleachers. It also “points,” in fact, to Seligman et al’s argument in *Ritual and Its Consequences* (2008) that ritual acts must be understood not just as collective events, but as smaller-scale moments of interaction as well.⁸⁶

Following the conclusion of each Feature race, a trophy presentation honored the winning driver. (S)he would drive an extra lap around the track and pull the car to the Finish line, emerging from the vehicle and removing helmet to receive the trophy, which was typically gold-colored and featured some combination of a bowl, columns, or a miniature car replica.⁸⁷ With the trophy in hand, the driver was photographed by posing in front of the car, and, in most cases, (s)he was interviewed over the loudspeakers. This allowed the driver to construct his or her identity in the most direct way, through discourse, and most winners followed the path of “respectability” by thanking those who helped with the effort (sponsors, friends, and family), complimenting the track, and avoiding criticism of fellow competitors. Some were especially exuberant, standing and even jumping on the car to celebrate. After his victory, the driver Blake Dickinson hopped out of his car, flashed a grin, and suddenly began sprinting up the track toward the outside fence, behind which I sat; as I wondered what was happening, the announcer declared, “Here comes the Dickinson fence climb!” Sure enough, he quickly climbed a dozen feet up the chain link fence, then descended with smile intact.

⁸⁶ Adam Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁸⁷ *I use the double-gendered pronoun “(s)he” to indicate the possibility of female lead officials and winning drivers in Kansas, though I did not actually witness a female “flag man” or Feature victor.

Upon completion of the final trophy presentation, most spectators moved as a mass to the exit, re-entering their own cars to depart for the night; fans were also allowed to enter the Pits area at no extra cost once the final race was over. While some people interacted with drivers, others simply wandered and took in the sea of technology, dozens of automobiles that possessed significantly more power than the vehicle they were about to drive home.

The Dirt Track as Theater of Ethics

During competition, the lead official carried out a particularly authoritative function: if (s)he judged that a driver was competing over-aggressively, such as deliberately initiating contact with other cars without gaining any advantage, the lead official would pull out the black flag. In a moment that drew much anticipation and attention from viewers, the official first pointed this flag stick directly at the offending driver, then disqualified him/her with an animated wave of the flag. This move typically drew cheers and howls from spectators in the bleachers. Of course, the judgment of rules violations was quite subjective; for example, determining whether contact was “deliberately” initiated, and even the definition of “deliberate” (does it need to involve conscious intent?), seemed to be particular to the official’s interpretation.

The subjectivity of such verdicts, in the context of frequent collisions and aggression between drivers, opened a space for debate between racing participants (competitors, officials, spectators) on the ethics of conflict. Auto racing generally features *primary* conflict in the form of the competition itself, between two or more parties, as they seek to win a particular contest. In turn, racing also features *secondary*

conflict between participants, such as clashes involving competitors and officials over the enforcement and nature of the rules. When witnessed by an audience, the race spectacle is converted into a theater of ethics. Spectators may actively evaluate events and align themselves with one party over the other, thus aligning themselves with the values reflected by the chosen party's actions. For example, at Heartland Park Topeka, the driver Darryl Tucker was black-flagged for repeatedly initiating contact with others' cars (he had a reputation for this kind of behavior). However, Tucker refused to return to the Pits, instead slowly circling the track in his car with the others. The announcer, ever-narrating, noted that "officials will not appreciate this behavior." A tow truck entered the track in an effort to escort Tucker off; however, Tucker spun his car away from the truck twice, eventually shifting into reverse to drive, not slowly, back-end-first to the Pits. Meanwhile, many spectators enthusiastically yelled, waved and gestured for him to leave the track. The announcer remarked, "Hopefully he does not *hit* anybody! Now ladies and gentlemen, that is not a good scene," before adding, "We also want to thank the drivers that are out there right now, doin' exactly what they are supposed to do, and that is be out here at the speedway to *race*." Thus spectators received a public performance of conflict between authority figures, supported by an announcer wielding the power of argumentative narration, and a lone rebel.

While this level of conflict was unusual, it indicated that secondary conflict (in tandem with primary conflict) was a deeply compelling element of racing for spectators, who were offered active participation through alignment with involved parties. In her study of another agonistic spectacle with significant grassroots iterations, American professional wrestling, Sharon Mazer focused on this element; while such wrestling

deviates from auto racing in that it features an explicitly pre-scripted outcome, it shares the “morality play” dynamic of the race track. She argues, “professional wrestling is...a sophisticated theatricalized representation of the transgressive, violent urges generally repressed in everyday life...[It is] an invitation to every participant to share in expressions of excess and to celebrate the desire for, if not the acting upon, transgression against whatever cultural values are perceived as dominant and/or oppressive in everyday life.”⁸⁸ Auto racing offers its viewers the opportunity to celebrate transgression through the high speed and contact-heavy driving of the competitors, though performed under the control of authority figures. When this control is challenged by drivers, the spectator is presented with a chance to judge, for him/herself, the “rightness” of parties’ actions. The Tucker event, as with other moments of conflict, clearly injected energy into the crowd. While it is easy to imagine that Tucker would be indefinitely expelled from the track for such a blatant rejection of authority, he was suspended for just a few weeks; track officials appeared to be aware that these actions generated excitement among spectators, rendering it advantageous (in terms of generating spectatorship and, in turn, track income) to treat rebellion with measured, constrained punishment. In their “Pit Podcast” a few days later, the track announcers opened with a lengthy discussion of Tucker’s actions, an indication that they perceived the incident’s generation of interest among racing fans.

During my interviews with drivers, I examined their own construction of morality in relation to such conflict. I first inquired about the effects of collisions on their relationships: “There is a lot of contact on the track. Does this create tension between

⁸⁸ Mazer, *Professional Wrestling*, 19.

drivers?” Every respondent answered in the affirmative, with a few offering an enthusiastic “Oh yeah!” Interviewees noted that these tensions resulted in both verbal and physical conflict between drivers during and after a race, all of which I witnessed in person. I then shifted the conversation to morality: “What are the ‘ethics’ of driving?” This question followed the premise that racing-related ethical guidelines, enacted on a weekly basis in a site of deep immersion, would influence and be influenced by participants’ standards of morality away from the track. Three drivers argued that there were no shared ethics to begin with, embodied by one’s laughing response, “I don’t think I’ve ever heard ‘ethics’ and ‘racing’ put in the same sentence!” Other drivers advocated a “golden rule” approach, sharing the common creed, “Race somebody how you want them to race you.”

In regards to “how you want them to race you,” the most oft-repeated ethical standard was whether one “ran clean” or not. A driver did so by avoiding the kind of “intentional” contact that might bring a black flag from the lead official. Given my lack of understanding on the distinction between “intentional” and “unintentional” contact, I sought out drivers’ criteria for determination. Responses included the following:

“If you gotta route and gouge and push, beat everybody up, you’re not drivin’. You’re tearin’ up equipment.”

“You should learn how to pass a man rather than knock him out of the way.”

“An ethical driver respects the other man’s space. That doesn’t mean he can’t do a slide job, uh, but uh, he just don’t go bump other people out of the way.”

Each respondent contended that acceptable contact results from a driver’s effort to move ahead in ranking, though speed and evasion should remain the primary strategy for progress. A trailing driver executed a “slide job” by cutting to the inside of a turn, then

cutting across the leading driver's path while fading to the outside. Interviewees generally agreed on the mantra "the guy in front, it's his track," meaning that the trailing driver should not cut directly into the leader, though there existed a gray area on what counted as unacceptable cutting and contact in that scenario.

Taking together these responses on ethics, I more clearly understood why conflict between drivers was common. Given the subjectivity of moral assessment, and a lack of clear-cut standards on what constituted "ethical" driving, it was inevitable that the materialization of ethics disagreements in intimate, violent, and sometimes painful contact would lead to clashes. In turn, parties were incentivized to defend their actions through moral justification, and some of my interviewees were eager to demonstrate that they were, in fact, on the "right" side. They highlighted their honesty (particularly in following technical rules), "clean" driving, and engagement in conflict only in response, not in initiation. By doing so, drivers and crew members staked out a high ground on the conflict in which they were involved.

However, from my fieldwork, the most striking spectacle of conflict involved driver unity in opposition to the officiating crew. At Heartland Park Topeka, driver Jeremy Smith appeared to win the Modified Feature, his first ever, after a close duel with Ben Hartman. As Smith crossed the Finish line first, he pumped his fist out the right-hand window in excitement, and his supporters cheered in response. However, a moment after waving the checkered flag, the flag man pulled out the yellow as well; as the announcer eventually explained, there was a collision in Turn 2 at the same moment that Smith finished the race. The lead official ruled that this constituted a "caution" before the race was completed, meaning that all drivers would restart (grouped together) and

race for two laps before the finish. In my growing knowledge on the rules, this seemed dubious, particularly because the lead official displayed the checkered flag to indicate the end of the race; the two drivers sitting next to me, having completed their own races earlier, called this a “bullshit” decision.

On the race restart, Hartman passed Smith during the final lap, “officially” winning the race. Following standard procedure, Smith (a non-winner) was to immediately exit the track with the other drivers while Hartman returned to the Finish line for his trophy presentation. However, Smith circled back to the Finish line and positioned his car nose-to-nose with Hartman’s, the two vehicles facing each other across a distance of three feet, the confrontation writ large. A track official then approached Smith’s car by foot, and they began screaming at each other; the official became animated, eventually kicking the side of Smith’s car with enough force that I clearly heard the impact from the bleachers. Smith pulled his car back, then forward again toward the official, who jumped out of the way and kicked the car as it passed; he then began yelling to no one in particular, throwing his red baseball cap to the dust in anger. Once Smith had left this area and returned to the Pits, the main announcer walked onto the track for his usual interview with the winner (in this case, Hartman). As the audience buzzed, punctuated by some yells of anger, the announcer began by pleading with those present: “OK, everyone, calm down.” Hartman took the microphone and said, “OK, I want to say something: that kid [Smith] drove a hell of a race.” He then declared that Smith actually earned the win, which is why Hartman would now go to the Pits area to give him the trophy. The spectators responded with widespread applause and scattered cheers; it appeared that Hartman had, for many onlookers, followed the rules of

admirable sportsmanship, directly challenging an official's decision that was largely disapproved.

I scrambled from the bleachers area and ran to the Pits, which were directly adjacent to the track, to witness the next scene firsthand. Hartman pulled his car off the track and handed the trophy, through the side window panel, to a man in his sixties, who began walking with two others through the dimly-lit Pits toward Smith's car. As I trailed the group, Smith emerged from the darkness as he walked toward us; he was young, probably in his mid-twenties, and clearly crying. When they met, the man with the trophy handed it to Smith; they hugged, Smith bawling on his shoulder. A couple dozen spectators had gathered to observe this moment, a dramatic extension of the racing performance beyond designated competitive space. Smith and Hartman's colleagues talked for a minute or two before beginning their walk toward Hartman's parking space. What followed was one of the most memorable moments in my racing experience: I trailed Smith, who was joined by two other young men, one on each side of him, as he crossed the paved Pits area. It was fairly dark, the only glow coming from the spotlights whose beams were aimed toward the oval track some one hundred yards away. In the middle, still in his one-piece driving uniform, Smith held the trophy in one hand at his hip; the three were quiet, walking slowly, emanating exhaustion rather than the jubilation that usually accompanied a new trophy. They reached Hartman's space, where the two drivers talked quietly and shook hands, Hartman appearing to congratulate him on an earned victory. Despite this reassurance, Smith never smiled, perhaps still recovering from anger, possibly feeling embarrassment for his post-race outburst. In any case, it was a somber end to the evening; this was the calm after the storm.

In the press releases issued by the race track the following day, there was no mention of Hartman conceding the victory and trophy. On the track’s website, the news story about the night’s happenings noted only the “wild finish” that resulted in Hartman’s victory. In the social media sphere, on its Facebook page, track employees published a post declaring this same result, though it generated a dozen comments from spectators that were mostly critical of the officials’ actions, with a few respondents praising Hartman’s “class” in doing “the right thing” (see Fig. 1.9).



Figure 1.9: Heartland Park’s Facebook page provides a new space in which participants may discuss racing events, in this case the legitimacy of Ben Hartman’s “official” Feature victory (participant names redacted)

That week, the announcers did touch on the incident in their online podcast, but did not mention Hartman's concession. Thus there existed a striking disparity between "official" record, as established by racing administrators, and the results determined at a more "grassroots" level: the drivers themselves. In this case, as a whole, the spectators appeared to approve of the latter.

Intense sensations

In her 2009 methodological text *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Sarah Pink notes that ethnographers have in recent decades increasingly attuned themselves to their own sensory experiences.⁸⁹ Through this process, they recognize the *embodiment* present in fieldwork, both of their informants and themselves; Pink references Greg Downey's argument that it is crucial to ask, "How does the body come to 'know,' and what kind of biological changes might occur when learning a skill?"⁹⁰ She offers the notion of *emplacement*, which includes consideration of the body's location within a space, "the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment."⁹¹ She also asserts that researchers should acknowledge the relationship *between* the senses. While the visual has generally been emphasized in European and American contexts, it is experienced in conjunction with sound, smell, touch, and taste sensations.⁹²

⁸⁹ Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* (Los Angeles; London: SAGE, 2009), 7-11.

⁹⁰ Greg Downey, "Seeing With a 'Sideways Glance': Visuomotor 'Knowing' and the Plasticity of Perception," in *Ways of Knowing: New Approaches in the Anthropology of Experience and Learning*, ed. Mark Harris (Oxford: Berghahn, 2007): 223; referenced in Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 25.

⁹¹ Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, 25.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 28.

I carried this approach to fieldwork experience at the dirt track; in turn, I encountered a rich set of intense sensory experiences that were clearly shaped by my specific location within a race track facility. Rather than the visual, I was initially most struck by the *aural* intensity present in this space, particularly as generated by the race cars themselves. The rumble of the engines, which were far more powerful and loud than those of typical passenger cars, provided a constant backdrop during a race night. In the hour leading up to the Hot Laps, this sound would gradually grow, as racing groups revved and brought their cars to life in the Pits; drivers then pulled onto the track for Hot Laps, revving their motors at high speed, transforming the low-frequency rumble into a louder, higher-pitched piercing noise. The intensity and tone of sound varied widely between classes of cars. Stocks tended to be quieter in comparison with the others, reflecting the lower power of their engines; in particular, “Compact” Stocks, featuring bodies and engines that most resembled my own Honda Civic, sounded like buzzing bees in relation to other classes. Modifieds were not only louder but combined a deep, guttural growl with a high-pitched scream; I learned to stuff foam plugs into my ears for these races, especially the Features that included some two dozen cars. Sprint cars were also quite loud, with a higher-frequency tone that resembled the sound of a jet engine more than the other classes.

Such sound was accompanied by another sensory product of the cars’ engines: the smell (and sometimes sight) of exhaust smoke, which tended to emanate throughout the night. As with most continually experienced sensations, this smell faded out of my consciousness over the course of an hour or two, but when I first arrived at the track with the races in progress, it was quite apparent. This smoke, produced by the burning fuel of

the vehicles, was occasionally accompanied by the smoke produced by cigarettes, which were sold on some track properties. In a country in which smoking has become much less commonplace over the past two to three decades (reflected by Kansas state laws that now banned smoking in most public indoor spaces), I was initially surprised to find cigarettes widespread at race tracks. However, I came to read this as a marker of a working-class environment, given the well-documented links between social class and cigarette-smoking: while Americans in the middle and upper tiers of the socioeconomic ladder have greatly reduced smoking rates overall, those in the lower rungs are more likely to keep up the habit.⁹³ Thus while I was most aware, in the olfactory sense, of burning products, I recognized the subjectivity of this experience: in my middle-upper-class upbringing and present-day existence, smoke was not a common element of day-to-day life (much like the roar created by loud, powerful engines). In turn, with unfamiliarity comes sensory consciousness and awareness. For those individuals immersed in such sounds and smells on a day-to-day basis, over a period of years, the “normality” of these dynamics may render them to the sensory background.

One particular element entered the forefront of my consciousness throughout fieldwork: the dirt. As I learned over the course of five years in the area, the Kansas landscape is largely defined by dirt, which in turn saturates day-to-day life as a ubiquitous element. My movement across the state led me through hundreds of miles of farmland, which often stretched to the horizon; the bare dirt of winter gave way to crops in the spring, gradually growing and then browning in the fall, before returning to the soil

⁹³ Kaori Honjo et al, “What accounts for the relationship between social class and smoking cessation? Results of a path analysis,” *Social Science and Medicine* 62 (2006): 317-328.

once again. Furthermore, the surface of the roads themselves was frequently comprised of dirt: around 100,000 miles (over 70%) of Kansas roads are non-paved, a striking contrast to the normalcy of asphalt and concrete in my home state, North Carolina.⁹⁴ In some instances I drove to race tracks along these dirt roads, the hovering brown and gray clouds acting as a preview for the conditions to come.

Airborne dirt provided the primary “feel,” in addition to the hardness of wood and metal bleachers under me, that I encountered at the track; however, it offered visual sensation as well. At times, my open notepad would accumulate dirt from the clouds that rose from the track, dislodged and thrown into the air by rapidly spinning tires, then carried by the wind to land on my paper. Echoing the darkened skies of the 1930s Dust Bowl, these clouds most commonly emerged from *dry* tracks, in which the dirt was not sufficiently moistened to remain in place; the thickest clouds lent an eeriness to the race spectacle, as cars would disappear into a haze of brown before reemerging, ghostlike, with a roar, as they circled back toward my location in the bleachers or at an oval-side fence. I learned to wear wraparound-style sunglasses to limit the amount of particles penetrating my squinted eyes; all the same, on some nights I arrived home with dark patches around the area where the lenses had been. I could then run my hands rapidly through my hair and watch the dust fall out, memorabilia that had traveled miles to the sink. One Sunday morning, I rubbed my eyes and dirt fell from the lashes, having rested there since the previous night’s races. I will admit to some pride in these moments, as

⁹⁴ “KDOT Quick Facts January 2012” brochure (Accessed September 9, 2015): https://www.ksdot.org/Assets/wwwksdotorg/pdf_files/2011-quick-facts.pdf. During my time in Kansas I joined the growing “gravel-grinding” bicycling movement in the eastern part of the state, which involved long-distance riding on dirt roads and was best accomplished with tires whose deep treads were reminiscent of the tires on race cars.

they served as reminders that I had truly ventured into the field, the “elements,” and at least tasted a piece of the earthiness not commonly associated with a professional, white-collar intellectual. Hence dirt engagement may also be linked to class, a connection to be further explored in the following chapter.

However, in some instances, the dirt transformed from nuisance into danger, particularly in the form of mud clods. On one night at Thunder Hill Speedway, I took my position, along with a few others, directly next to the “Do Not Stand” sign posted on the fence by Turn 1. I was enthralled by the Modifieds’ sheer speed, which was much more apparent at such a close view as compared with my usual perspective up in the bleachers; from my current spot, the cars passed within twenty feet of us, though we were protected by a cement wall and chain-link fence. I gained satisfaction in self-perceived toughness as I braced against the chunks of mud being thrown in our general direction, most broken into small clods as they collided with the fence. I held my ground until one of these clods hit me directly in the face, not causing any injury, but certainly providing enough motivation to back up a dozen feet away from the track. Over the course of three years, I observed many spectators who simply treated these flying chunks of earth as an insignificant, expected element of dirt-track viewing. While watching near a fence bordering the track, spectators would casually lean to the side, or turn their face away, to avoid being hit, then resume watching a race without further acknowledgement of the incoming dirt projectiles.

Sensory intensity was most evident at the beginning of a race, particularly that of a Feature (oftentimes involving some two-dozen cars). In this moment, having slowly circled the track as a group, the drivers simultaneously pressed hard on their accelerators.

This act initiated the roar of the engines and quickly spinning wheels, dislodging the track's dirt; on some nights, the wind then carried it, and the exhaust emanated by the cars, directly into the spectator seating area. Over time, I gained a feel for the five- to ten-second delay between the first acceleration and the arrival of dirt and smoke to my own location, exhaling at that moment. However, as the group of cars broke apart during a race, the smoke and dirt would build into a continuous mass in the air, subjecting the viewer to its effects with little option for avoidance.

By contrast, such affective intensity at the track actually became most clear, for me, upon reentering my own vehicle at the end of the night. I would walk across the parking area to my car, open the door, sit in the driver's seat, and close the door, initiating a feeling of relative serenity. In this moment, my environment transitioned from collective engine roar to quietude; from bright spotlights to the low lights of my dashboard; from race cars' rapid motion to the stillness of my surroundings; and from incoming dirt to a lack thereof. On those nights when I left with the final races underway, the intensity of the track was still apparent. I once drove out of the Heartland Park Topeka parking lot, opened my driver's-side window (now a half-mile from the track) and was met by the muted but still clear roar of the engines, wafting with the dirt from the brightly-lit space embedded in dark, surrounding countryside.

Technologies of Destruction

In the interest of contextualizing the production of such sensory intensity, the concept of the *technological sublime* is informative. In his 1994 text *American Technological Sublime*, David Nye outlines the general growth of awe-inspiring

inventive spectacles, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from railroads to space exploration.⁹⁵ More recently, Ben Shackleford applied the concept of the technological sublime, in “Masculinity, Hierarchy, and the Auto Racing Fraternity,” to his study of NASCAR pit crews; he argues that a major stock-car race “involves both the sensory and visceral impact of technology on human perception.” Shackleford divides the race viewer’s experience into three stages: (1) ordinary sensory experience, (2) the moment when “reality becomes distorted by the magnitude” of the races and the accompanying sensory intensity, and (3) the process by which “perception recovers from the shock of tremendous scale and power to register the subsequent events with a perspective forever changed by a new relationship to spectacle.”⁹⁶ This third stage applies to my sensations upon exiting the track and returning to the relative serenity of the car; however, while my perspective was “forever changed,” I adjusted to the normality of “ordinary sensory experience” fairly quickly. This allowed for my next experience of a race track, particularly when following a break of weeks, to once again be spectacular, if not to the same degree as the very first time.

The sensory intensity of a race was not simply due to the speed and power generated by the machines; the most spectacular moments were, arguably, events of destruction. Following on the definitions of “technology” presented in the introductory chapter, I here introduce a new conception: the application of knowledge toward a particular goal. Dirt-track races may be deemed “technologies of destruction” in that users (particularly drivers) apply a destructive ethos toward automobile driving, an ordinarily less destructive activity, and subvert its respectability into a ritual of

⁹⁵ David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

⁹⁶ Shackleford, “Masculinity, Hierarchy, and the Auto Racing Fraternity,” 188.

transgression.⁹⁷ As one driver remarked, “I mean, where else can you go as fast as you want, running into the person beside you, on purpose or on accident, and not gettin’ in trouble for it?” Destructive damage resulted from both these collisions and the extreme force applied by drivers to their machines. In stark contrast with the driving experience familiar to most people, competitors put the “pedal to the metal” and pushed their cars to the threshold of functionality; when that threshold was crossed, parts of the machine would crack, bend, and/or catch on fire. On some occasions, engines “blew up” (overheated), leaving a trail of white smoke that rose from the track and brought a strong burning smell to spectators. Thus even when drivers were not directly clashing with the officials or each other, they enacted resistance to the system that existed outside of the track, from road laws to conventional ideas about proper automobile care.⁹⁸

The most spectacular moment of destruction, in my perception, occurred during a Stock car race. As a leading driver entered Turn 1 with the pack clustered behind him, his car sprang a fuel leak, trailing a line of the liquid for about a hundred yards to Turn 2. Simultaneously, another car released a fireball downward, thus igniting the fuel leak line and creating a three-foot-tall wall of fire that the rest of the pack, nearly two dozen cars, drove through. Along with others in the bleachers, I jumped to my feet at the incredible

⁹⁷ Cotton Seiler examines driving, and the importance of its responsible, law-abiding practice, as a central component of American citizenship in *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁹⁸ Despite a public emphasis on “respectable” driving, scholars have touched on the very real dangers to people, the environment, and the automobiles themselves posed by the United States’ driving culture. See: David Blanke, *Hell on Wheels: the Promise and Peril of America’s Car Culture, 1900-1940* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007); Jim Conley and Arlene Tigar McLaren (eds), *Car Troubles: Critical Studies of Automobility and Auto-mobility* (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2009).

sight. As most drivers pulled to the opposite end of the race track and stopped, one car stalled out directly next to the flames; its driver climbed out of his window in a matter of seconds, hopped over the fire (now burned down to a foot tall), and jogged to the infield. As the flames gradually burned down over the next couple minutes, the crowd buzzed. Eventually all that was left was a black, burnt line marking the trail through the light-brown dirt.

Such violent events resulted in noticeable aesthetic changes over the course of a season. In early spring, the cars were remarkably clean and shiny, with straight-edged body panels featuring bright decals; in that sense, they resembled many of the passenger cars in the spectator parking lot. However, over the course of the year, they were transformed into dented, scratched, black-stained machines, each mark telling the story of a collision with another car or an immovable concrete barrier. For those involved, the vehicles offered visual representation of their own violent, intense experiences; as will be illustrated in the following chapters, drivers lived through the most intense sensations of anyone at the track.

Identity at the track: Spaces, roles, aesthetics

While scholars have heavily addressed rhetoric in analyzing how identity is constructed, non-linguistic markers are also revealing and crucial to a well-rounded examination. In that spirit, this section addresses identity dynamics in the forms of non-linguistic phenomena. Analysis is based on my observations of how certain identity structures, particularly race, gender and class, were reflected by the organization of racing participants into certain spaces at race tracks, which were intimately related to the

distribution of roles and power in the racing sphere. By examining race, gender and class as distinct but intersecting categories, I will demonstrate that the race track tended to represent an exhibition of powerful White masculinity, as well as a largely working-class culture that nonetheless exhibited class diversity, particularly among drivers. I will also examine how research experience was shaped by my own identity as an ethnographer entering these spaces.

Race at the Track

My approach to observing racial dynamics was particularly fraught with risk; based on visual judgment alone, I could offer only an external interpretation as to the racial identities of those around me at a race track. That is, given the occasional incongruence between one's *self*-described racial identity and that ascribed by others, as well as the larger argument in critical studies that "race" is an imprecise, historically and socially situated category, I was not entirely comfortable assessing the identities of others without direct consultation. On the other hand, I felt that it would be self-blinding to avoid such observations altogether; thus I will offer my assessment of the *apparent* racial dynamics at these race tracks, in terms of demographics and space.

In general, throughout Kansas, apparent Whiteness consistently marked racing participants in all capacities. Recent U.S. Census data does reveal that 85-90% of Kansans continue to self-identify as White, with 11% describing themselves as of "Hispanic origin" (on the Census, this is separate from the question on "race").⁹⁹ However, even this proportion appeared to be outweighed at race tracks, at which I

⁹⁹ "United States Census Bureau website: State & County QuickFacts: Kansas": <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/20000.html>.

estimated 90-95% of participants (drivers, spectators and employees) to be White, with the occasional non-White Latino- and Black-appearing individuals present in small groups (those of Asian-appearing identity were nearly absent). This makeup was even more striking in the Pits areas, where it was extremely rare to see someone who appeared to be non-White. However, as I made these observations on physical characteristics alone, particularly skin color, it also important to note that this was a space of *tanned* Whiteness. As I would realize during my interviews with those in the community, the working-class identity of many participants was tied to outdoors work, whether paid or unpaid, while outdoor leisure activities (including racing) were common as well; in turn, their appearance reflected exposure to the sun. I also encountered a surprising phenomenon, particularly in eastern Kansas: at some tracks, children of color (appearing to be Black and/or Latino) were under the care of White female guardians. While I can't be sure whether this more often reflected adoption or mixed-race parenting, such arrangements did disrupt the racial dynamics that generally prevailed.

The embeddedness of Whiteness was perhaps best revealed through visits to race tracks in areas that were marked by significant *non*-Whiteness. For example, Thunder Hill Speedway is located inside the eastern edge of the Prairie Band of Potawatomi Nation Reservation, yet I encountered no explicit cultural markers of Native identity (acknowledging the diversity and hybridity of modern Native culture), and found the spectators to be nearly unanimously White-appearing (acknowledging that people of Native descent may be White-appearing). Demographic disjuncture between race track and surrounding area was most striking in Dodge City, a town of around 30,000 residents located in southwestern Kansas. Donald Stull and other scholars have studied the

globalized multiculturalism prevalent in this region, driven by immigrant labor in meatpacking and other industries; the most recent U.S. Census revealed that over half of Dodge City residents self-identify as “Hispanic or Latino” in regards to ethnicity.¹⁰⁰ My visit to the downtown area, on a hot August afternoon before the Saturday night races, confirmed this pluralism. Town officials had fostered a Whitened “Old West” cowboy image through the downtown Boothill Museum, the naming of the main road as “Wyatt Earp Boulevard,” and other references. However, twenty-first century Dodge City reflected a clear international presence. I overheard conversations in Spanish and other languages; I strolled by an “African Super Store” with a group of young Black men congregating in front. I capped off my walk with a visit to Tacos Jaliscos, a Mexican restaurant which served the most delicious tacos (carnitas, al pastor and chicken on my plate) that I’d tasted in years, as I sat among a seemingly Latino/a-dominant clientele.

My visit that night to Dodge City Raceway, located on the southern edge of city limits, provided a stark demographic contrast. I saw just two small groups of Latino/a-appearing fans (among hundreds), and encountered little in the way of food, language or other practices that would indicate an internationally multicultural site. The crowd was heavily White in appearance, much like every other track I visited in the state. Thus it seemed that, as of 2014, recent immigrants had not yet ventured to dirt-track racing sites

¹⁰⁰ Michael J. Broadway and Donald D. Stull, “Meat Processing and Garden City, KS: Boom and Bust,” *Journal of Rural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2006); Molly DesBaillets, “Cultural Pluralism and Social Capital in Garden City, Kansas” (Ph.D diss, University of Kansas); Allegro and Wood (eds.), *Latin American Migrations to the U.S. Heartland*; A.G. Sulzberger, “Hispanics Reviving Faded Towns on the Plains,” *New York Times*, November 13, 2011: http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/14/us/as-small-towns-wither-on-plains-hispanics-come-to-the-rescue.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0; “United States Census Bureau website: State & County QuickFacts: Dodge City (city) Kansas” (Accessed May 15, 2015): <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/20/2018250.html>.

in significant numbers. Though the factors behind this persistent racial dynamic are unclear, it was striking to witness such divided space in the context of a globalizing southwestern Kansas.

Gender at the Track

While the racing sphere as a whole reflected significant gender diversity, there were clearly gendered practices and responsibilities in terms of the organization of participants into certain spaces. The most gender-diverse area was the bleachers, where I observed a fairly even balance between male and female participants; most spectators appeared to be different-sex couples, married or otherwise, and were frequently accompanied by children (race tracks tended to offer discounts, if not free admission, to young attendees). However, while the vast majority of women seemed to be with male companions, same-sex groups and individuals (those spectators seemingly unaffiliated with any group) tended to be male; this was especially true of older male fans, who were commonly located in seating areas closest to the track.

In regards to employees, those located in the admission and concessions areas were typically female-majority. This placed women in the position of greeting and guiding customers toward purchases of tickets, food, and other items. At some venues, young women were charged with selling items such as “50-50 tickets,” a lottery by which half of the money was funneled toward winning drivers, the other half going to the winning ticket purchaser. Combined with the demographics in the bleachers, women were commonly represented in those spaces and roles outside of direct involvement in the

competition; employee duties tended to revolve around the facilitation of revenue flow, with minimal influence over the outcomes of the actual races.

By contrast, men were dominant (to the point of near-unanimity) among those positions and practices connected to the competition. Such organization was most evident among “flag men,” among which I never witnessed a female lead official. This position, literally elevated above the track, presented a visual merging of masculinity and power; the lead official determined when to begin, pause and end races, as well as when to “black-flag” (expel) drivers who violated track rules. Furthermore, I witnessed a few instances in which a child was brought up to the flag stand to join the lead official and wave the green flag to begin the race; I saw only boys in this position.

The other flag men and tow-truck drivers, while not wielding the same level of authority, were also highly visible participants in the competitive space. In particular, they performed acts of coordinated technical mastery, most prominently in the cases of auto collisions and the subsequent procedures to remove immobilized cars from the track space. In his study of the “Pit stop” ritual in NASCAR, Ben Shackelford argues that such practices, widely viewed by live and television audiences, “operate both as a consequence and a cause of strong notions of a stratified, intense, exclusively masculine work environment.”¹⁰¹ At community dirt tracks, while this spectacle was viewed by much smaller audiences, the performance of the yellow-flag (caution mode) ritual carried the same dynamic: a group of uniformed men employed their own tools (tow trucks and other instruments) in order to address mechanical failure and facilitate the resumption of competition.

¹⁰¹ Shackelford, “Masculinity, Hierarchy, and the Auto Racing Fraternity,” 180.

Among drivers, a male majority was similarly present, consistently making up 90-95% of competitors at tracks across Kansas. Thus the male driver was rendered normative, locally attaching masculinity to the particular qualities (technical-automotive skill, competitiveness, aggression, and transgression) embodied by oval-track driving. By contrast, in the small minority, female drivers were conspicuous when present. On a single occasion did I witness a car class with a significant proportion of female drivers: during a 2012 race night at Thunder Hill Speedway, the Sport Compact field featured three women out of six competitors total. These cars were small (“compact”) and featured much less power, moving slowly and emitting a buzz that was bee-like relative to the roars of Modifieds and Stocks. As the drivers circled the track, a silver-haired man in the bleachers turned to three high school-aged girls (whom he seemed to know) and asked with a laugh, “Hey, can you drive that fast?” Thus even when female drivers were present, they tended to drive less powerful, “lower”-class cars that generated less status and respect among spectators. There was not yet a critical mass of women in the most common classes (larger Stocks, Modifieds and Sprints) around Kansas.

Turning to the Pits area, drivers and their helpers were also heavily male-dominated. Mechanics, who sought to increase performance by adjusting weight distribution, shocks and springs, tire pressure, and other factors, were almost entirely men (see Fig. 1.10).



Figure 1.10: As dusk approaches, a group of men assess potential mechanical adjustments before the night's Feature race

While women were certainly present in the Pits, they typically played the role of observer rather than directly engage with the automobiles. As Chapter 3 will illustrate, my work with a few of these groups unveiled more specific ways in which this dynamic was reproduced.

As a whole, then, dirt-track racing offered a spectacular model of male power: qualities of authority, rationalization, and technological engagement were ideologically welded with masculinity through public performance of these duties by men. On the other hand, moments of gender disruption, in which male participants stepped outside of the boundaries of masculine normativity, perhaps best indicated and reinforced such boundaries through satirical performance. For instance, during a race night intermission, two men competed to win tickets, being given away by a local country music station (92.9 "The Bull"), to a concert featuring country musicians Kenny Chesney and Tim

McGraw. The entire performance took place on the dirt of the front straightaway. Each contestant ran to a bag of clothes containing a long dress; he was required to put it on, then run to a hula hoop, successfully spin it on his hips three times, and run through a banner printed with a logo for “The Bull.” Many onlookers laughed as the men struggled to put on the dresses; the host of the event, DJ “Billy T,” jokingly propositioned a contestant in a pink dress (“Hey, what’re you doin’ tonight?”). Ultimately, the man in the pink dress successfully hula-hooped and ran through the banner; he then walked along the track, still in the dress, flamboyantly tossing a purple scarf around his neck, drawing another loud laugh from the audience. The humor of the event drew attention to these actions *as* transgressions; they posed no serious challenge to norms of male dress and behavior. Furthermore, the pink dress was not only strange because it was donned by a man; *no one* at the track wore pink dresses, aside from small children, as both male and female adults heavily tended toward the gender-ambiguous, working-class jeans-and-t-shirt outfit discussed below. The long dress, particularly when paired with a scarf, connoted a queer bourgeois style that drew laughs for its gendered and classed strangeness in this space.

I witnessed other less prominent but similar displays of light-hearted gender-bending, such as male spectators dancing to the songs played over a track’s loudspeakers, inevitably drawing laughter from others in the bleachers. Perhaps the strongest *non-satirical* challenge to masculinity norms was at a speedway in Missouri, where the lead official, while male, sported long hair (kept in a pony tail), long fingernails, and had supposedly flagged (judged) at least one race in a long dress. While I wasn’t sure as to

the reason behind the latter act (intended satire or not), it was striking to witness the rare authority figure play with aesthetic gender norms.

Class at the Track

The concept of “class” may be interpreted in multiple senses, material and ideological. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on classed elements in terms of practice, possessions and other markers exhibited by racing participants (later chapters will address discursive constructions). In *The Color of Class*, Kirby Moss emphasizes that “class,” as a measure of social status, extends beyond measures of education and wealth to include indicators from gender and race to “eating habits”; thus it is difficult to precisely arrange individuals or groups into a class hierarchy.¹⁰²

Throughout this text, I join Moss in emphasizing “class” as entailing more than one’s capital income; the present chapter will emphasize exterior class markers in track spaces.

It became clear in my early visits that participants widely adopted the markings of working-class identity. Clothing fashion was dominated by t-shirts, denim jeans, and either sneakers or casual brown shoes, including work boots. Considering fashion as a class marker in conjunction with gender, these choices did not greatly vary between male and female spectators; thus while I have outlined gendered separation in terms of roles and practices, there was not a particularly strong separation in regards to dress, as jeans and t-shirts seemed to be adopted as unisex wear. Historian Diana Crane has traced the evolution of such pieces, noting that jeans were originally a specific marker of working-class labor before their wide adoption around the mid-20th century. However, even as

¹⁰² Moss, *The Color of Class*, 15.

mass “leisure” clothing they retained a sense of “honesty” and working-class values. T-shirts (while frequently marked with symbolic logos) tend to match the informal, working-class ethos of blue jeans.¹⁰³ Due to the consistency of t-shirts (and in colder weather, cotton/polyester sweatshirts) at race tracks, I began to think of this space as not just “blue collar” but “collar-free”; if the collar communicates a sense of work-based formality, this was widely rejected among those in dirt-track bleachers. However, sneakers or non-dress brown shoes (particularly boots) do convey a sense of function; they may be used to both “play” (for example, attend a dirt race) and “work” (particularly in the case of manual labor). Work boots also tend to be brown, matching the color of dirt and thus conveying a sense of being built *for* use in the dirt. These fashion items are predominantly (though not necessarily) less expensive than more “formal” clothing, such as designer-label shirts, pants and shoes. At one race at Lakeside Speedway near Kansas City, a young man, probably in his late teens or early twenties, walked into the bleachers wearing a black button-down suit; I watched as he received a number of double-takes from other spectators, usually followed by looks of amusement. I was sitting next to an acquaintance who laughed and remarked, “What’s this? Going to the prom?”

Other markers of working-class identity were present, including linguistics. I typically overheard language, such as “Hey man, where you goin’ at?”, that did not follow the grammar rules and diction enforced in formal education and white-collar work spaces. I also heard more “coarse” language than I had typically encountered in more affluent spaces. In a particularly funny and revealing moment, I was interviewing an older former driver at his house when his twenty-year-old grandson and fellow racer

¹⁰³ Diana Crane, *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender and Identity in Clothing* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 176-177.

walked into the kitchen with a yell: “Dumb fucker!” (The grandson later explained that he had just narrowly avoided a collision on the street with another driver.) My interviewee, the grandfather, appeared unfazed at first, then looked at me, playfully attempting to convey shock (betrayed by a smile) as he covered my recording device and said “Heeeyyy, what??” I knew by this point that such language was common within the dirt-track racing community, but this longtime driver appeared to suddenly become conscious of it in my presence. Though I didn’t ask (a missed opportunity) why he feigned shock, it appeared that, as the subject of an academic study conducted by a member of a research university, a truly “white-collar” space, he felt compelled to offer a more “respectable” version of himself and his family.

Conclusion

Through this opening overview of Kansas race tracks, I have initiated a central argument of this text: as a shared practice, dirt-track racing serves as a cultural locus around which participants “collide” (sometimes quite literally) to exchange ideologies and practices. This is a circuitous, fluid process, in which all involved (drivers, spectators, and others) both perceive cultural elements while also (at various levels of influence) contributing toward them. I have traced particular ideologies that were visible across Kansas tracks, including the normalization of product consumption and law enforcement, Christianity and nationalist-militarism, and White-male authority. Furthermore, drivers enacted self-reliance and conflict, while negotiating technology, climate and earth, in what may be collectively framed as a particularly Heartland-regional performance of masculinity. An outsider might find none of these elements surprising,

and in fact reinforcing the stereotypes of auto racing and Heartland culture. However, it is crucial to trace the processes by which such ideologies are negotiated, through an in-depth study examining details, down to the dirt, in order to reveal the human subjectivity behind such ideas and actions.

This subjectivity included my own. During early field visits to Kansas tracks, I was very conscious of both my surroundings and myself, entering a new space with complete unfamiliarity and without an “insider” guide to connect me to the site. Furthermore, the fact that I carried a notebook and pen in hand, frequently writing as I sat in the bleachers (an unusual action there), was likely to draw attention. However, as I gained experience in these spaces, I did pass tests of knowledge on occasion. Near the end of my first year of research, a woman in the Heartland Park Topeka bleachers (apparently a first-time visitor with her husband) turned to me and asked, “So how many cars do you guys run?” I responded, “Oh, four divisions...probably seventy-five or eighty,” silently taking pride that she located me as part of the (subtly male-gendered) track in asking how many “*you* guys run.” A sense of confidence and belonging would be crucial to my final season of fieldwork, in which I transitioned to more direct participation-observation work with drivers and their groups. This methodological turn paves the way for the following chapters.

Chapter Two

Racing Rhetoric: The Construction of Identity by Racing Participants

I don't wanna be around non-racing people, because racing people's a real tight-knit family, and you might, you know, fight with 'em on the weekends, but you love 'em all week long [...] You know, everybody else is phony. Everybody else in the world is out searchin' for something; that's why they're on drugs, alcohol, you know, do everything wrong, because they can't figure out who they are or what they like. And most racin' people understand what they like. And that's the draw of racin'.

Buddy Mann uttered these words with a tone of self-assurance as we sat on his front porch.¹⁰⁴ Now fifty years old, dressed in work boots, shorts, and a racing t-shirt, sporting short-cropped graying hair and a pair of crutches that indicated his recent knee surgery, Buddy had already spent the first fifteen minutes of our interview sermonizing like a zealous preacher. The gospel was racing, and he spotted a potential convert in me. In spending nearly his entire life at race tracks and garages, Buddy had discovered a world in which he found community and purpose; his fourteen-year-old son, seated next to us and wearing an amused smirk, was the current disciple driving the Manns' race car.

Drawing on such conversations, this chapter turns to racing participants' meaning-making of racing. A central question guides analysis: how did participants construct their personal identity in relation to the Kansas dirt-track racing community? In surveying around forty hours of conversation, I found that the racing sphere (in conjunction with other social sites) provided a set of structuring functions for those involved. Specifically, participants largely adopted a populist stance in understanding and endorsing the racing sphere as a social site infused with localism and self-reliance.

¹⁰⁴ Unless specified otherwise, all names included in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

Drivers frequently pointed to the structured productivity offered by their involvement in mechanical and racing “work,” and interviewees generally emphasized a strong sense of community, marked by broad accessibility and involvement for “all kinds” of people. Discussion of such accessibility was consistently built on references to *class* diversity, accompanied by silence on gendered and racialized organization; this selectivity facilitated imaginings of a generally diverse racing space.

In his historical examination of gender, specifically masculinity, Michael Kimmel unearthed an early American male archetype that resonated in my observations of contemporary dirt-track racing. Kimmel describes the “Heroic Artisan” as follows: “On the family farm or in his urban crafts shop, he was an honest toiler, unafraid of hard work, proud of his craftsmanship and self-reliance.” However, the Heroic Artisan was soon overshadowed by industrialization. In his place, the “Self-Made Man,” who thrived in the capitalist marketplace and demonstrated success (materialized in the form of wealth) in public, “would emerge triumphant in the nineteenth century, and the mobility and insecurity of the Self-Made Man came to dominate the American definition of manhood.” Kimmel argues that the hegemony of this brand of masculinity has been remarkably consistent to the twenty-first century, in correlation with the ongoing dominance of global capitalism, despite the appearances of other (subordinated) masculinities.¹⁰⁵ The Heroic Artisan model of manhood has nonetheless resurfaced in particular places and times, including through turn-of-the-twentieth century Populism

¹⁰⁵ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (2nd ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6, 13. This argument largely mirrors that of R.W. Connell in *Masculinities* (1993; 2nd ed. 2005); for specific discussion on the consolidation of “transnational business masculinity” power at the turn of the twenty-first century, see *Masculinities*, 263.

(briefly but highly influential in Kansas), boxing culture, and twentieth-century libertarianism.¹⁰⁶

In turn, my interviewees (including drivers themselves) tended to frame the Kansas dirt-track driver as a hybrid of the Heroic Artisan and Self-Made Man: a hard-working, self-reliant man who (with the help of a small group) repairs and customizes his automobile in order to maximize performance during the next race. This performance serves as a metaphorical enactment of “Self-Made” competitive capitalism, though racing participants emphasized that the actual financial rewards were far outweighed by other incentives for participation. I argue, then, that participants were drawn to the racing sphere by opportunities for performative empowerment. In the context of a post-industrial capitalist system, in which my informants predominantly performed industrial labor for others and were subject to wage-based control, auto racing (in the forms of vehicle modification and driving) entailed a more sovereign confrontation with tangible, oftentimes achievable goals. By turning to a *metaphorical* version of competitive capitalism, staged in an intimate space with familiar others, participants recaptured control over their labor through engagement with racing. Bernard Suits’s reflections on “game” participation address the creation of para-spheres of competition: “playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”¹⁰⁷ Through their participation in racing, competitors chose to confront a series of obstacles from vehicular malfunctions to dirt’s lack of predictable traction. When considering why anyone would

¹⁰⁶ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 74-75 (Populism), 93-94 (boxing culture), 157 (libertarianism). On the Populist movement in Kansas, see: Scott G. McNall, *The Road to Rebellion: Class Formation and Kansas Populism, 1865-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

¹⁰⁷ Suits, *The Grasshopper*, 43.

voluntarily engage in such an activity, particularly given the high expense of doing so, causality is illuminated by the interlocking contexts of capitalism and identity ideology. Spectators gathered in predominantly working-class spaces to find interconnection and watch as drivers, almost entirely White and male, drew on Heroic Artisan-esque “work” to stage a public performance of Self-Made Man competitiveness. Drivers discussed the centrality of this “work” in our face-to-face conversations, and respondents generally framed the racing sphere as a localized, democratized space that offered a sense of connection perhaps lacking on the outside. In the context of American oligarchy, participants embraced the racing community’s offer of both individual sovereignty and collective empowerment.¹⁰⁸

I conducted twenty-six long-form interviews, typically one to two hours long, in order to learn about respondents’ lived experiences and perceptions of their identities in relation to the racing sphere.¹⁰⁹ All interviewees primarily resided in eastern Kansas, with half living in the Topeka metro area and the rest in Kansas City, Wichita, Chapman, Lawrence, Salina, and Belleville. Most interviewees were current or former drivers, with others in the roles of mechanical assistants (“Pit crew” members), racing archivists, and event organizers. All drivers were White and male; I did reach out to primary informants in an effort connect to female drivers, but without success. While White and male drivers

¹⁰⁸ During the course of my research, Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page garnered international media visibility with a study of socio-economic power and legislative process in which they declared the U.S. to be an oligarchy: “Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens,” *Perspectives On Politics* 12, no. 3 (2014): 564-581.

¹⁰⁹ This approach was guided by oral history scholars’ writings on the value of attention to *how* interviewees craft memory. See: Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader* (2nd ed.) (London: Routledge, 2006).

were in the great majority at race tracks across the state, the absence of non-White and female drivers in my networks led to a certain homogeneity of identity that narrows the focus of this study. In order to access the experiences of women in some capacity, I ultimately turned to the wives and mothers of current drivers. However, identity diversity is still present among my interviewees, particularly along the lines of class, religious devotion, and age.

In regards to documentation, I include extensive direct quotation; my subsequent transcription choices invariably take on a classed political undercurrent. Transcription will reflect interviewees' intonations and pronunciations when speaking, in order to convey both words and the manner in which they are spoken. For example, I delete the ending "g" if not pronounced (such as "racin'" instead of "racing"). In doing so, I follow Aaron Fox's similar method in his 2004 book *Real Country* when documenting speech among working-class Texans:

I am concerned here not to play with the stereotypes of working-class speech as "lazy," "ungrammatical," or "substandard" in any respect. As any linguist knows, and as any educated person ought to know, there is no such thing as an "ungrammatical" dialect, and indeed one goal of this volume is to demonstrate the grammatical regularity and expressive power of certain features of working-class Texas speech, rooted in the persistent orality I describe as a central dimension of Texas blue-collar culture.¹¹⁰

As the writer of this text, I have the privilege of meticulously crafting my language, and scholarly language is expected to match "formal" grammatical standards. But as a North Carolina native who frequently drops the ending "g" in my own spoken verbs, I reiterate

¹¹⁰ Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), xiv.

that the purpose of speech is to communicate, and thus no dialect is objectively “correct” in doing so.

Racing Community and/as Family

Interview analysis begins, in the circular nature of the track, with the question that closed each conversation: “In general, what do you enjoy most about your involvement in racing?” The prevailing element, cited by a clear majority of respondents, was their sense of connection to *community*. My fieldwork observations revealed that although the central racing site, the oval track, featured individualized competition between drivers, racing space is marked by layers of social networks. At the broadest level is the interregional and international dirt-track racing community, which reaches as far as Australia and New Zealand.¹¹¹ At the next level is the Heartland region network, a circuit of drivers and spectators traveling across space, the race tracks serving as primary intersection points. In turn, each track features a primary participant network, interacting with outsider arrivals, and within *this* space I found subgroups largely organized by driver affiliation.

Interviewees frequently discussed such social networks, composed of both “blood” relatives and friends; in fact, “community” and “family” were conflated through discussion of the racing community *as* family. For example, driver Blake Dickinson cited the appeal of “the *family* atmosphere” before clarifying this as a reference to “my entire family – there are people, not necessarily *blood* family, but *my family*, people that I

¹¹¹ Cultural studies scholarship on Australian or New Zealander dirt-track auto racing appears to be limited if not non-existent; I discovered these areas’ dirt-track scenes through my experience at the Knoxville (Iowa) Nationals, discussed in Chapter 3.

hold dearest to me who love this sport as much as I do, and I love being with them.”

Driver Carey Schmidt offered an emotionally charged reflection on his feelings about the racing community: “I just think that dirt-track people – [pauses, getting choked up] – *ah!* – y’know, I don’t know what else to say about it, but...they’re just *family*, kinda, really is what it is.” Janet Miller, mother of a driver, discussed this dynamic as well:

Janet: It’s just – family’s important, and the family’s – it’s not just *us*, it’s the friends.

Steve: Sounds like an *extended* family.

Janet: Yeah, oh yeah, exactly. It’s just huge! You know, and the people, the friends, become very close friends, and...so...it’s just who you are, it gives you a good identity I guess, of something about you, and someone to talk – something to talk about.

Janet’s final comment raises an important point: racing was “something to talk about,” as well as something to do together, and was important simply as a common focal practice through which participants connected to each other. Young driver Jake Graner described the Pits as “my paradise,” saying of the hundreds of other drivers and mechanics there on a Saturday night, “That’s *that* many people that just are on the same page as I am, they understand me y’know, we’re all alike.”

Connection to community appeared to be strengthened by participants’ deep familial roots in their place of residence. With the exception of a single driver from Pennsylvania, all interviewees were Kansas or Kansas City (Missouri) natives, and nearly all were born in the same town in which they now lived.¹¹² Most respondents reflected on

¹¹² This may be traced, in part, to socio-economic and geographic factors. A recent U.S. Department of Commerce study indicated strong correlation between education status and mobility, as college graduates were twice as likely to move between states than those

their upbringings through a tint of nostalgia, particularly when touching on family and outdoors life. While natives of rural areas tended to construct childhood memories around physical labor, others frequently emphasized “play” and social life, with the older respondents most likely to contrast the past against the present. For example, sixty-seven-year-old former driver Marty Baldwin remembered Winfield as a “nice town, I liked living there,” before adding that he and his friends would just “cruise” a lot: “If you ever saw the film *American Graffiti*, very much my youth. Very much.” Even Lucas Allison, just past his thirtieth birthday, relegated his 1990s Salina-area upbringing to a bygone time, describing it as “just typical small town, you know – we didn’t have all the stuff they have now, we played outside.” These forms of nostalgic imaginary reminded me of a 2012 race night at Heartland Park Topeka, dubbed “Back to the 50s Night.” At one point, the announcer (too young to have lived during that decade) mused, “Sometimes I wish we could go back to the fifties...things seemed a little simpler and a little easier.”

Childhood recollections invariably included racing, in which nearly every interviewee had become involved from a young age. In fact, when I asked the question “What was your first exposure to auto racing?”, some respondents had to clarify between their first *memory* of racing and their first exposure, the latter of which predated the

with no formal education beyond high school; a small minority of my interviewees held a college degree. The same study also revealed that the “Midwest” (including Kansas) reflected the largest domestic outmigration rate in the country during the 1970-2010 period.¹¹² Robert Wuthnow has added nuance to these findings by noting that, more than outmigration, Kansas is primarily marked by residents’ in-state movement from small towns to cities and corollary “edge cities.” Sources: David K. Ihrke and Carol S. Faber, “Geographic Mobility: 2005 to 2010: Population Characteristics,” U.S. Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration (Accessed September 14, 2015): <https://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/p20-567.pdf>; Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland*, 5-6.

former. Lucas Allison recalled attending races to watch his father drive, but had been informed by relatives that he was first brought to a track on the fifth day of his life. While this was an unusually early start, every driver had been involved with racing, in some capacity, by their teen years, and over half were driving competitively at that age. Around half of the current drivers' fathers had raced cars, while others had worked as mechanics and taken their children to watch dirt-track races. Thus I found an intergeneration-familial transfer of racing interest and participation, with driving most often reproduced patrilineally from fathers to sons. Of the five women interviewed, two had first become involved with racing through dating their now-husbands. As Melanie Costa said of her driver-husband, "When I started datin' Richard, if I *wanted* to date him that means I had to go spend time in the garage [laughs]." The other women recalled attending races with family members and friends, eventually joining (even meeting) their current husbands through racing. Martha Miller, now seventy-five, met her future husband, Luther, while working as a "trophy girl" in the 1950s at a Topeka-area track. In Martha's recollection, Luther's father had won a race, and Luther wanted to accept the trophy, but to his disappointment "I kissed his dad instead." Taking these varied experiences together, it was clear that dirt-track racing, as a cultural field, was entrenched early in participants' lives as a foundational nexus in their social life.

In the present, "nuclear" family structure was ubiquitous. Every participant over twenty years of age was engaged, married, widowed, or divorced, reflective of the centrality of marriage (if sometimes ending) among my sample. Most respondents described themselves as well-connected to direct and extended "blood" family, an intimacy seemingly related to close geographic proximity resulting from limited

migration. While some characterized the racing community as a form of family, respondents disagreed on the compatibility between racing competition, as a set of practices ranging from the garage to the track, and “blood” family relationships. A few drivers sought to include their spouses, children, and parents in their racing operations. For example, Richard Costa was accompanied to each race by Melanie and their thirteen-year-old son, Trevor, who helped as members of his “Pit crew.” In our interview, Melanie noted that while “I have missed important life events, if you will, in our family, because of racing,” “on the other end of the spectrum is, we get to spend time together,” referring to the many racing trips that the family had taken. However, most drivers responded that it was a “challenge” to balance racing time with family time, as they engaged with competition practices largely on their own or with non-relative acquaintances. Norm Sanders, now eighty-one, actually quit racing in his early thirties after being confronted by his wife about spending inadequate time with their children. He recalled his revelation: “She’s right, I need to, I need to be a father.” Two accomplished former drivers, Mark Wakefield and Larry Allison (grandfather of Lucas), admitted that they prioritized racing over family for years, and were now trying to forge deeper connections with their partners and grown descendants. As we sat in his living room, one wall lined with racing trophies, Larry discussed this precedence:

Larry: I put racing first. [Pauses] Racing was the only thing I was ever addicted to, and I was addicted to racing. I would, uh – whenever the race dates was, that was number one priority. Everything else fell in place however it fell into place.

Steve: Did your wife find that difficult, or did you have sort of have an arrangement that worked with that?

Larry: Um, well, she didn’t like it sometimes.

Even among the Costas, who were united as a family racing team, I heard a refrain familiar in the racing community: “I had racing before I had you, and I will have racing after you leave.” Richard supposedly said this to Melanie early in their dating life, and other drivers touted this adage, which posited a fragmented, hierarchical relationship between racing and dating in which the former’s priority was legitimized through no-nonsense prior communication. Whether or not Kansas drivers *actually* prioritized racing over relationships, the declaration “I had racing before I had you, and I will have racing after you leave” connotes masculine power through possession (“had”) and a stated preference for racing, a male-homosocial site, over commitment to relationships with women. In this formulation, while the racing community could be considered *as* family, the time and energy devoted to racing stood in conflict with family as well.

Despite such potential tension, community remained central to the drawing power of the racing sphere. Jennifer Miller recalled joining her husband Ryan’s racing group through marriage; even in the role of spectator, she felt a strong sense of familial group identity. As most of her own family hailed from the Northeast U.S., Jennifer’s entrance into the Miller racing operation, which included extended relatives, “definitely changed my perspective on family, and family time, ‘cause I never really knew what it was.” In regards to community, racing participants collectively discovered “what it was” through interaction in and around the track.

Racing Populism

When discussing the racing sphere and their position within it, interviewees frequently adopted a populist rhetorical framework. At its core, populism is a form of

political expression. Most broadly, it entails an embrace of “the people”; this position has been folded into a wide range of political ideologies across the globe, expressed through “culture-bound and context-dependent” iterations.¹¹³ Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, in reviewing scholarly and political conceptions of populism, posited “discursive style” (broad rhetorical expression across society) as a useful model of analysis.¹¹⁴ I here focus on the “discursive style” by which populism permeated interviewees’ characterizations of the racing community. National and historical context is provided by Michal Kazin, who has identified four primary beliefs that marked American populism during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the exceptionalism of American citizen equality, “the people” as productive and honest, “elites” as corrupt and dependent on labor by “the people,” and the need for a combative approach to unseat such elites.¹¹⁵ In turn, I propose a locally oriented “soft populism” among my interviewee group. They frequently described racing community members as productive and honest, in their embrace of “the people,” but only occasionally expressed overt opposition to (and never advocated overthrow of) larger structures of power, including “elites.” However, respondents differed in their assessment of social leveling in the dirt racing sphere, ranging from arguments for a socially “flattened” site to descriptions of clear hierarchies at or between tracks.

¹¹³ David Arter, “The Breakthrough of Another West European Populist Radical Right Party? The Case of the True Finns,” *Government and Opposition* 45, no. 4 (2010): 490. Cited in Noam Gidron and Bart Bonikowski, “Varieties of Populism: Literature Review and Research Agenda,” Weatherhead Center for International Affairs (Harvard University) Working Paper Series (13-0004): 3-4.

¹¹⁴ Gidron and Bonikowski, “Varieties of Populism,” 5-14.

¹¹⁵ Michal Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 16; cited in Gidron and Bonikowski, “Varieties of Populism,” 22.

“The people” connotes commonality, and interviewees invoked this quality when touching on fellow racing participants. I asked, “What kind of people *attend* dirt-track races?” and “What kind of people *drive*?”, open-ended questions intended to provide a window into respondents’ interpretation of identity in this community. I was interested in both what they said and *didn’t* say, the latter possibly indicating identity elements so ubiquitous that they faded into invisibility as naturalized pieces of the racing sphere. A few respondents used the language of commonality in describing spectators as “everyday people,” “people on the street,” “everybody,” and “just regular people.” When discussing diversity among racing participants, most interviewees turned to class markers. Some, such as track photographer and mechanic Dave Allison, portrayed the race track as a mixed-class collective that drew “all kinds of people. I mean, there – I see people in the stands that, uh, live in quarter-million dollar houses, I see people in the stands that, y’know, are livin’ paycheck to paycheck.” Others proposed a working-class identity that spanned dirt-track racing, with Jennifer Miller doing so through an oft-referenced marker: “If you like beer, you’ll fit in just fine.” However, some interviewees did trace a classed organization of spectators by race tracks or, appropriately enough, “car class” groups. Driver Blake Dickinson remarked that tracks near Kansas City were “more civilized” than those in rural areas, though he also argued for a general absence of the class-elite by positing their aversion to dirt itself:

Now, it is still not, not a *high-class* area? Because – no offense to most, to any stereotypical high-class person – they don’t like to get dirty. And we got dirt in the air, flyin’ around. So you got guys out here, that in my opinion *work* for a living, that can be classy. And then you have your guys that are as stereotypical hillbilly as you can get. No teeth, out there

in their overalls, um shirtless, out there yellin' at somebody, throwin' something at 'em. I mean you have such a broad spectrum of race *fans*.

Blake, speaking from the perspective of a supervisory engineer with a four-year college degree, both made his own claim to working-class identity and differentiated people who “work” from those in a tier below. In his historical study of American populist rhetoric, Kazin found this hierarchy, in which the “people” occupy an idealized status between corrupt elites and unproductive poor, to be a common element.¹¹⁶

Blake also introduced a sense of “class” that was shared by many other respondents: they characterized particular people and groups as “classy” or not, a category that was rooted in socioeconomic class markers but also carried notions of morality and civility. Interviewees frequently identified non-“classy” fans through such indicators as dental hygiene, dress, and propensity for violent, uncontrolled behavior. A few participants in Modified car classes positioned themselves as more “classy” than those in Stock cars, the other closed-wheel category with which they typically shared a race track, by pointing to Stock participants’ tendency toward conflict (such as shouting matches and physical fighting) off the track. In turn, those in “open-wheel” racing, Sprint and Micro Sprint cars, positioned themselves above all closed-wheel car classes in general. Buddy Mann energetically situated himself, as a mechanic and driver’s father in Micro Sprint racing, over a nearby track at which Stocks and Modifieds were common:

Everybody down there needs to buy a dental plan, and I’m right with that. Oh there’s some good people down there, there’s some high-quality individuals, but there’s more – and that’s what gives dirt-track racing the bad name? When you got all the trailer trash? And believe me, I lived in

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 16.

a trailer when I got outta high school, um, and I don't hold nothin' against people livin' in a trailer, 'cause *I* did for a while. Um, but my point is, that redneck style...?

Buddy claimed a connection to working-class status, particularly in his past, yet separated the act of living in a trailer from “trailer trash” (or “redneck”) identity, basing this distinction on *behaviors* more than economic opportunity.

Exceptional in the passion of his response, driver Carey Schmidt also touched on race and class markers, though his language was a bit more coded. He described the people he encountered at a race track:

The people are just...they're *great people!* I mean, they're just super-duper nice, I mean *all* of them. I mean – you go up into the stands and meet anybody up there and they're all super-duper nice people. I mean, y'know you get out here in the real world, y'know, you got, you got your hoodlums, and all that other stuff y'know um...you don't see none of that at the race track. You don't see no *gangs* – *nothin'* like that. [...]
Y'know, you might catch a few *drunks* here and there, but you don't see violence, and...that's just the kind of people I like to be around, I mean it just kinda takes you away from the real world for a little while, you know what I mean? For a few hours. Where you ain't gotta listen to that '*boom, boom, boom*' [impersonates heavy hip-hop rhythm], y'know that beat when you're goin' down the road. Next-door neighbor cussin' at his next – his wife, or somethin', y'know. I just – the people are just different people. *I* don't know how to describe it. They're just different.

Carey presented the track as a kind of utopian oasis through which he could escape the “real world” and the many negative aspects found in it. Through his reference to “gangs” and recreation of loud hip-hop music, he spoke in coded language on Blackness, while other comments (on “violence” and domestic conflict) were less explicitly connected to

identity. Like other respondents, Carey's frequent use of "y'know" added a sense of assumptive common knowledge to his comments, as if I (his audience) should already share such assessments. Carey also joined others in positioning "working-class" status, with which he identified, above those who lacked "class" and thus occupied a lower social tier. At a broad level, I found that respondents both proposed wide class diversity and their own elevated identity within the racing sphere; once again, this reflected populist rhetoric through the construction of a certain meritorious "us" against "them", whether "the people" ("us") were composed of specific racing populations or the dirt-track community as a whole.¹¹⁷

Self Identification: Class and Race

While interviewees varied in their perceptions of class identity and organization across the racing community, I found more overlap in answers to the question, "How do you self-identify in terms of class?" Twenty-one out of twenty-six respondents described themselves with some variation of "middle-" or "mid-" class. This level of self-classing homogeneity was not entirely surprising, given the intimacy of the racing network; as class self-identification is relational (there must be a "middle" against which status is measured), they likely measured their own class identity relative others with which they shared a close connection. Collectively, these individuals constructed a version of the "middle" in tandem with each other.

In explaining identification with the "middle," most respondents measured class by wealth, remarking that they possessed adequate but not excessive resources. Driver

¹¹⁷ Gidron and Bonikowski, "Varieties of Populism," 2.

Lucas Allison commented, “We have a house – it’s not big, but there’s nothin’ wrong with it. Um, y’know, [my wife]’s a schoolteacher, so she doesn’t make an exorbitant amount of money, and um, I spend way too much money on racing, so...” A few respondents introduced a declinist narrative, noting that they felt that middle-class status was increasingly difficult to achieve. Eighty-one-year-old former driver Norm Sanders remarked, “the middle class is disappearing, and that’s, that’s kind of a scary thing,” which he (a former union worker) attributed to the decreased power of organized labor. Mechanic Terry Miller felt a personal sense of downward slippage in the present:

Terry: I, I think we’re getting less closer to the middle class than we used to be [chuckles], ‘cause it costs so much money now, but...

Steve: *What* costs so much money?

Terry: Everything. I don’t know why your money doesn’t seem to go as far as it used to, back in the, back in the day. It seems like that to me. Just, like gas, I know you *make* more money than you used to, but I still think everything has gone up higher than your wages have, so that gets you in a lower, a lower, you know...if you was *upper*-middle class, you’d, now you’d be in the *middle*- middle class, it’s just harder to have extra money to do racin’ and stuff like that. That’s what *I* think, anyway.

These types of responses indicated an anxiety accompanying self-perceived “middle” status, particularly a sense of instability in terms of one’s position in the system. Given that every interviewee self-identified as “working” or “middle” class, I began to perceive racing populism as an expression of working- to middle-class solidarity, built through shared practice and corollary values, in the face of such slippage.

However, it should be reiterated that “the people” is a frequently bounded entity.

My general fieldwork revealed a ubiquity of apparent Whiteness; I examined its

rhetorical construction through conversation with informants. I directly invoked this category through the question “How do you identify yourself in terms of *race*?” Around half of respondents paused when asked this, usually with a smile, appearing to be surprised by my inquiry; some asked that I repeat the question or clarify my meaning. Ten respondents replied with a simple “White” or “Caucasian,” though over half tentatively framed this as a question, such as “White?” or “Caucasian – is that the answer?” Other interviewees introduced a classed version of Whiteness. As I sat with driver Robert Campbell in his low-middle-class neighborhood in Topeka, he answered, “I’m White, they call me redneck, so yeah.” I asked him to clarify the meaning of “redneck.” “I’m redneck, I’m country...um, yeah, I don’t necessarily know if there’s a full definition of that. I’m as country as country can get, for where I’m at [chuckles].” Robert, who drove a low-expense Stock car, thus embraced a rural version of working-class Whiteness, indicating the potential expansion of “country” identity beyond “country” land. Two younger respondents, both in their twenties, resisted my inquiry on race. After Jennifer Miller described herself as “White” with a laugh, I asked if this was an odd question. “I don’t know – everybody, doesn’t matter *what* you are, everybody can do whatever, I mean, I don’t know, I can even – I don’t know. It’s just what I am, I guess.” Young driver Shaun Baker framed his thoughts this way:

I, I’m really weird about race, ‘cause when someone says “race” I think of “racing.” [...] What I’d put in high school is, when they asked for race, I wouldn’t put anything – I’d put “other,” I’d put “tan,” ‘cause I – I guess Caucasian would be my race, but – or whatever, but – more – y’know, if – it’s, it always, it always says Hispanic or African-American or Caucasian, but I’m *American*, so, y’know everybody in America is *American*. So, I dunno, I don’t like to identify myself as something else, and once that

happens, everybody's like "Well, you know, I'm Black, I'm White," if you say one thing they'll get mad. That's how everything is right now, it's really "race-y," and I kinda don't like the world like that [chuckles]. Especially in America, you know? We're supposed to be gettin' out of it [chuckles] – hopefully soon.

While Jennifer and Shaun were more resistant than others, I found that interviewees generally expressed puzzlement and amusement, as well as occasional discomfort, in self-identifying by race. As illustrated in the following chapter, my fieldwork with informants confirmed that race, in tandem with gender organization, operated as a largely invisible category in regards to rhetorical acknowledgment, indicating the embedded normativity of Whiteness and centeredness of masculinity. While interviewees explicitly framed the racing sphere as class-diverse, they avoided discussion (unless instigated) on race and gender in racing. Respondents thus propagated the narrative of a diverse, widely inclusive racing community; they embraced fellow racing "people" through a populist framework, but avoided the limitations of such inclusivity.

"You Run Dirt, Or You Don't Run"

In direct relation to class identity, I found that the *dirt* of dirt-track racing emerged as a key populist-pastoralist symbol. I asked, "The vast majority of race tracks in Kansas, and the surrounding states, are made of dirt. Any ideas on why this is?" Most respondents expressed uncertainty, though a few older drivers conjectured that Kansans were simply accustomed to racing on dirt after its ubiquity for generations, thus characterizing dirt as an essential element in the state's identity. Former driver Marty Baldwin, now in his sixties, recalled watching dirt-track races in Wichita as a child and

assuming he would drive on the same surface. As Marty told me, “I know more about dirt, ‘cause we didn’t *have* any asphalt here. [...] [Aside from Kansas City] I can’t think of any other paved tracks in the whole state, when *I* drove there were none. None. You run dirt, or you don’t run.” George Wakefield, another former driver of similar age, offered a similar assessment: “Well, it’s in our history. [...] The drivers want to race on dirt, the crowd wants to see dirt, and that’s why it’s been popular. [...] It’s hard to change – it’s a mindset, I guess.”

Other participants pointed to concerns over cost, as asphalt-surface racing is faster and thus results in higher wear and tear on auto parts, particularly in the cases of high-speed collisions. Mechanic Hal Jeffries provided an insightful perspective on this issue; he had worked for years in road construction, and noted that widely varying temperatures in the Heartland region wreak havoc on asphalt and concrete roads, due to expansion, contraction and ice-related cracking. Thus dirt roads (whether in public or at a race track) cost less to *maintain*, indicating a budgetary logic for the fact that 70% of Kansas roads are dirt-based. I brought up this issue with an official at Kansas City’s Lakeside Speedway, whose once-paved track had since been converted to dirt, and he confirmed that the latter’s lower maintenance costs had been central to that change. Thus for race competitors and hosts alike, dirt represented not only a key component of the state’s history through agricultural use but also class-based accessibility through cost effectiveness.

However, when I asked, “Do you prefer [watching/driving in] dirt-track or asphalt racing? Why?”, respondents overwhelmingly pointed to a different reason behind their dirt preference: they found it more exciting than competition on asphalt. Interviewees

frequently discussed forms of *disruption*, the element I had noted as a constant during my experiences at race tracks, as the source of excitement. Some respondents specifically contrasted dirt disruption with the monotony of asphalt-surface races, which they described as “boring.” Driver Ryan Miller did watch many NASCAR races, the best-known of which are staged on paved tracks, yet explained his preference for dirt by discussing spectacular elements:

The mud flyin’, the, the excitement maybe, goin’ three-wide into a corner, through a corner, door-to-door, side-by-side. Uh...and when you get a bunch of guys that can do that pretty well, I think it puts on a hell of a show, compared to like – like, [NASCAR is] at Talladega [...] where they’re just nose to tail, and they’re about two wide, usually? And they’re that way all day, until about the last thirty-forty laps, and they start really goin’ at it? To me, that’s more borin’ than watchin’ – I’d rather watch Modifieds go around, or Late Models, or anything, I mean – just the *excitement*.

Car sponsor Nathan Aiken echoed Ryan’s comments on the repetitive nature of NASCAR before touching on the dirt itself, as viewed from the spectator’s perspective:

Dirt – dirt has a life of it – it’s a living object. You know, dirt’s alive. So, it *changes*! Um, the dirt track changes with every round of the cars, because you’ve got, you’ve got dirt clods that’ll get thrown up, you’ve got, um, more chances of blowouts, you’ve got – there’s just more chances for...shifting of first, second and third. You know – it’s a constantly moving rotation, so that, I think probably, is my fascination with – it’s not stagnant. You know, you get on asphalt, those are pretty stagnant races. Get on dirt, dirt’s a living organism and so it’s, you’re always subject to change.

I was struck by Nathan's observation that dirt-track racing's disruption was rooted in the dynamic nature of the dirt itself: "it's a living object." Other respondents similarly pointed to disruptive "action," such as cars passing and colliding, as a source of dirt racing's appeal. Driver Logan Murphy specifically pointed to his enjoyment of expertly "getting' in the corners" in order to win a race, while Robert Campbell savored the opportunity to go "slideways," the term he used to describe a car's sliding to the right as a driver was "in the corners," with the vehicles frequently "rubbing" on each other in light collisions as they did so.

Other interviewees discussed the draw of dirt through more abstract philosophical perspectives. Ryan Miller's wife, Jennifer, remarked that she enjoyed the cars' sliding action, but when asked to expand, she said with a laugh, "I don't know, just looks – *cool*." After a moment to think, she added, "It doesn't make sense, I think that's probably what's so interesting about it. Like, turn right to go left. You know, it just doesn't, like, doesn't make sense, like, you know? It's why it's *cool* – 'cause it doesn't make sense [chuckles]." Former driver Dale Pearson also mused on his draw to this act of turning:

I don't give a damn to go to a race where I can't see dirt flyin'. I don't know why, I've been to asphalt races, and I enjoy – hell, I enjoy any kinda racin', but – it's still not the same as – and, and the thing – as kids, and as a driver and everything else, the sight of that damn car comin' outta that corner, like this [tilts his hand to the side], is just, y'know – you drive with the *back* wheels as much as you do with the front, y'know? You gotta turn right to go left, like they said in the movie.

Dale was referring to the 2006 animated film *Cars*, specifically a scene in which the main character (Lightning McQueen, an anthropocentric race car) attempts to race on a dirt

track. Accustomed to pavement, he struggles, repeatedly sliding off the outside of the oval as he egotistically ignores an older character's recommendation to "turn right to go left." I had witnessed drivers using this standard method of turning on a dirt track: they were guided leftward into a curve by the track's banking, then jammed the wheel to the right in order to control the car through the rest of the turn (Fig. 2.1).



Figure 2.1: Utica native Jack Petty demonstrates the “turn right to go left” technique at a 1965 race in Oklahoma (Source: Jack Petty personal collection)

Aside from this particular action, a few other respondents explained their dirt preference through a familiar mantra in the dirt-track racing community: “Dirt’s for racin’, asphalt’s for gettin’ there.” I was struck by the working-class pride implanted in this statement; pavement, which incurred higher maintenance costs, was rhetorically rejected from dirt-track space and framed as appropriate for passenger driving only.

As illustrated by Ryan Miller’s and Nathan Aiken’s statements above, respondents also turned to NASCAR as a useful entity against which to construct dirt-track racing’s appeal, frequently in the language of localism and classed access. Though

most interviewees expressed some interest in NASCAR, it was usually half-hearted and accompanied by nostalgia. Some interviewees lamented the design standardizations that had resulted in cars that were basically identical aside from the particular corporate logos that covered the bodies of both drivers and their automobiles. In a similar vein, respondents were also turned off by the sheer amount of money needed to run a NASCAR team; in their view, this had contributed to the conformity and detachment of the drivers themselves. As Janet Miller commented:

It's *changed* so much; it's become so commercialized. [...] Money has become more of a factor, and the *teams*, the teams with the money and stuff. It used to be, like, the good ol' boys, and you could talk to 'em in the pits. Now – like Clint Boyer, who's from around here – they get *money* to show up. Y'know, back in the day, when NASCAR was just kinda comin' around, I think a lot of those drivers would just come back and do those things and you – the fans had more accessibility to 'em.

Janet sensed an increasing class gap between the spectators and the idols who were both wealthy and enacting financial barriers for fan access. Furthermore, her reference to the “good ol' boys” reflected a longing for NASCAR masculinity past, in which working-class men were more closely positioned to racing fans. These types of men, and this version of masculinity, could still be found at local dirt tracks, which offered a version of racing that some of my informants felt had been lost in the major leagues.

One of the older drivers, George Wakefield, told me a story that most clearly touched on the relationship between community dirt-track racing and the “elites” of NASCAR. He was competing in a 1970s Nebraska dirt race that drew the famous NASCAR driver Bobby Allison; in George's memory, Allison drove all the way from Alabama in his red Camaro sports car and entered the “race of the states.” The lead

official initiated the contest with a wave of the green flag, and as George told me, “One thing about racers, when that green flag drops, they don’t care who they’re racing; you know, there is no hierarchy, there is no social level like this, you know, there’s no respect.” He said that Allison was soon in last place, covered in the mud flung by the cars in front of him. George was parked in the Pits directly next to the famous driver, and at the end of the race, Allison exited his car, “threw his helmet down, threw his goggles down,” and announced that he was going back to his hotel. “Did you see those animals out there!?” he said to someone nearby. George spotted him later that night at the hotel; George laughed as he recalled that a Kansas driver backed up and accidentally “stomped all over Bobby Allison’s feet,” adding insult to a night of injury. George emphasized that he remembered Allison as a “nice guy,” and when I asked George if he enjoyed the humbling of a NASCAR driver, he steadfastly responded, “No,” adding of that group, “They’re just one of the guys, they’re also a racer.” However, I couldn’t help but notice some pride in his gleeful telling of this story. A wealthy, famous driver from outside the region had failed spectacularly on a Heartland grassroots race track; if “Dirt’s for racin’, asphalt’s for gettin’ there,” Allison had “gotten there” a lot better than he raced. George’s description of “no hierarchy” and “no social level” framed the dirt track as a meritocratic site, unlike the outside world in which drivers like Bobby Allison enjoyed the wealth and recognition unavailable to those in the local racing community. By this account, as a space for “the people,” the dirt track embodied the populist ideal.

Racing Work

As previously discussed, populist rhetoric tends to exalt the work ethic and productivity of “the people.” My fieldwork revealed a similar elevation of “work(ing)” among dirt-track respondents: they emphasized that participation in racing, particularly maintenance and on-track performance, was a productive activity with tangible results. By “results,” I refer to both the material (functional automobile) and performed (driver’s operation of it as competition).

The laboring of the track may have been most emphatically illustrated while I was sitting in the bleachers at Lucas Oil Speedway in southwest Missouri, waiting for the Heat races to begin, as classic country music buzzed from the loudspeakers. I snapped to attention at the playing of Aaron Tippin’s “Working Man’s Ph.D.,” a 1993 country-rock ode to blue-collar manual labor. It included this chorus:

Now there ain't no shame in a job well done
From drivin' a nail to drivin' a truck
As a matter of fact I'd like to set things straight
A few more people should be pullin' their weight
If you wanna cram course in reality
You get yourself a workin' man's Ph.D.¹¹⁸

Against those who aren’t “pullin’ their weight,” a coded criticism of welfare assistance, Tippin constructed masculinity around powerful, machine-driven labor, appropriating an intellectual title and applying it to manual work (which is granted authenticity in its connection to “reality”). The song hit home for me: I was doing intellectual work, reaching for my own Ph.D. However, when in the racing sphere, surrounded by men

¹¹⁸ “Aaron Tippin - Working Man's Ph.D.,” Youtube website (Accessed January 12, 2016): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2t7ECnE43QE>.

manipulating and deploying machines to produce great power, I occasionally felt a sense of inadequate masculinity. Was I a “workin’ man”? Did researching and writing, which produced no immediate tangible material results aside from the printed word, qualify me for this title? And how was “workin’” central to conceptions of racing masculinity? These questions guided my exploration of productivity as framed through auto racing discourse.

Work Off the Track

I approach “work” as productive activity, regardless of resultant financial compensation; however, I did not explicitly define this term during interviews, in the interest of accessing how respondents understood the concept of “work” within their own lives. I first broached this topic by asking, “Growing up, what sort of *unpaid* work did you do?” Rural natives were particularly likely to discuss extensive manual labor, such as livestock care, that was a formational part of their childhood. They also judged this a reasonable expectation, as illustrated by Mark Wakefield’s observation: “If we were paid anything for that, it was very, very small. But of course we had room and board, we were living there.” After recalling jobs in baling hay, plowing, and taking care of animals, Mark concluded, “We were farm boys.”¹¹⁹ Non-rural natives, while less likely to frame

¹¹⁹ In their study of masculinity norms among rural Iowans, part of the anthology *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*, Gregory Peter et al found a similar link between manliness, hard work and dirtiness. They posited a “sharply bounded monologic masculinity” in which young men were compelled to “cross the boundary into manly manhood” through rites of passage involving labor and a willingness to “get dirty,” thus demonstrating productivity and toughness. Gregory Peter et al, “Cultivating Dialogue: Sustainable Agriculture and Masculinities,” in *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*, ed. Hugh Campbell, Michael Myerfield Bell, and Margaret Finney (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 27-45.

“work” as a central part of their childhood, touched on house-cleaning, lawn-mowing, and other assigned tasks in and around one’s childhood home. A half-dozen respondents also worked for their family business, in each case managed by their father, in the areas of drywalling, plumbing, construction, and veterinary services; they were socialized and mechanically trained in such practices from a young age, and nearly all ultimately worked in their respective fields in adulthood.

In regards to current paid labor, the vast majority of interviewees, including all but two active drivers, had spent most of their careers in jobs that included physical labor as a major component. They worked in such industries as building maintenance, construction (roofing, drywalling, etc.), home appliance repair, hardware construction, lumber processing, and sorting for a recycling center. The two drivers in computer-based “office” work both emphasized that they enjoyed auto racing as an escape into the world of dirt and industrial materials. Blake Dickinson, a mechanical engineering design consultant, also enjoyed job-based opportunities to go “out in the field and get dirty measuring a piece of equipment,” which he contrasted with time spent in his “office cube, staying clean, and playing on a computer.” His use of the word “playing” to describe computer-based activity pointed to the elevation of industrial “work” among even those respondents in less industrial occupations. And while it was rare that male respondents explicitly pointed to the masculinity embedded in manual labor, they commonly discussed these spaces as male homosocial sites in which they worked with “the guys.”

I also turned to interviewees’ engagements with machines in their jobs. Nearly every respondent had engaged in work that they described as “technical,” and most still did so through structural construction and maintenance. I inquired as to what they

enjoyed about using machines, and three particular themes emerged. First, respondents took pleasure in *developing and demonstrating their expertise* with machines. Air conditioner repairman Larry Allison relished “the challenge of diagnosing the problem, and, and then of course, working to fix it,” while veterinary assistant Jennifer Miller enjoyed using an EKG machine because “it gives you different perspectives, I mean you can see inside and outside [of animals], you know?” Her husband, Ryan, had taken his welding skills beyond the context of paid work, and showed me with pride his business card holders and a Christmas wreath, all created from reconfigured horseshoes. Ryan also touched on the second theme of respondents’ enjoyment of “technical” work: they enjoyed the “hands-on” aspect, particularly the *kinesthetic use of one’s body* as opposed to more sedentary activities. The term “office” surfaced as symbolic of non-manual, intellectual activities, and Ryan commented, “I wouldn’t be much of a person sitting in an office all day.” I asked: Why not? “I like to be able to get up and move around. Build stuff with my hands, obviously – I mean, I like working with tools, and um, to me this seems like it’d be a little more relaxed than an office job.” Jake Graner, who at twenty was just entering the plumbing profession, also highlighted his aversion to sedentary activity: “I still enjoy being active, being outside, a lot more than I could handle sitting in a classroom, or, y’know, sitting in an office.” However, seventy-three-year-old Luther Miller touched on the costs of such hands-on work to his hands themselves. When I asked what he enjoyed about his drywall work, he replied with a chuckle: “It gives you arthritis in all your knuckles, and then you get a cortisone shot.” He added that his doctor attributed Luther’s arthritis to this work (“that’s why my hands are wore out”), but “That’s life. I held my own [raps his hand on the table].” Luther framed his body as

sacrificed, proudly touting his self-reliance with a punctuating knock of his worn knuckles.

Luther was also invoking the third and final theme of respondents' enjoyment of machine-based work, which tied directly to the others: *productivity as reflected by tangible material results*. Particularly when working with "hard" materials, industrial work resulted in structures that unambiguously indicated productivity. Norm Sanders reflected on the utility of forklifts to handle "large loads" of lumber ("it's surprising what you can do with a machine, you know"), and Logan Murphy discussed the volume of materials he could move around at a local recycling center ("Y'ain't gotta do much - like, run a couple controls and the machine does most of the work"). George Wakefield, who attended the U.S. Army Engineer School, had built a number of machines, including Sprint cars and engines, over his seventy-year lifetime. He said he took particular satisfaction in the last step: "I like doing that stuff, 'cause when you get done [...] hopefully you can make it a pretty competitive product."

Racing Work

George's discussion of productivity spanning his racing and non-racing activities points to my central thesis of this section: racing participants, particularly drivers and mechanics, posited a productivity present in both paid, occupational "work" and their racing "work." Productivity created a link between the two spheres, and some drivers and mechanics framed "work" (as performed in paid occupations or racing) as the foundational element of their identity. This was certainly true in the Miller family, as reflected by separate interviews with Luther ("Yeah, 'cause [racing is] all I've ever done,

besides work”) and his son Terry (“I mean, [racing is] all I’ve ever done. [...] I’ve only neither done drywall or worked on cars my whole life”). Jake Graner reflected on how his racing engagement, dating back to competitive driving as a six-year-old, had shaped his “values” through particular lessons: “‘You gotta work hard to achieve what you want,’ er y’know that sorta thing, I think a lotta that started *at* the race track.” The word “work” was widely distributed throughout the racing sphere, from the phrase “working on the car” to announcers regularly describing drivers “working” around the track or “working” past each other when passing, thus discursively laboring the race track.

Material productivity was most evident in the maintenance “work” performed between races. When I asked, “Do you work on your own car?” (unintentionally contributing to labored language), every driver responded in the affirmative, though they ranged from more basic to advanced expertise and abilities in regards to mechanical engagement. I followed up: “Why do you do the maintenance yourself?” Most respondents remarked, with a laugh, on the simple fact that they could not afford to hire a professional mechanic; quick replies included “Have to,” “No other option,” “Nobody else offered to do it for me, I guess,” “I didn’t have but just my friends,” and “Well, the easiest answer is I can’t afford to pay someone else to do it.” These phrases were tinged with a pride in self-reliance, and many drivers discussed how performing maintenance resulted in both deeper integration with the machine (strengthening their ability to drive it on a race track) and a sense of control over the car’s performance. Driver Shaun Baker said of car maintenance, “I love it – I know that if something’s wrong it’s my fault,” while Lucas Allison added, “I do like to do the setup myself, just so I know that it’s right, and if we get to the race track and it’s wrong, I can’t blame anybody else but myself.”

These men thus savored the self-reliance they achieved through connected forms of expertise in machine maintenance and machine operation (driving). Regarding gendered organization, it has been observed that men nearly completely occupied positions of maintenance and driving; thus, in addition to competition, *productivity* was male-gendered through material practice in the racing sphere.

Through their discursive embrace of such productivity, respondents drew on historically rooted archetypes in the context of both region and gender. William Barillas has noted that Heartland pastoralist representation includes the “Midwestern tinkerer” model, which is the “solitary inventor or mechanic who became a hero in the late nineteenth century and who persists in popular culture to this day.” He argues that this archetype grew out of the “work ethic and egalitarianism of midwestern family farm ideology,” though its iterations are not necessarily tied to ruralism.¹²⁰ While my respondents’ pride in maintenance expertise clearly pointed to “tinkerer” identity, they also emphasized an industrial productivity reflective of the Heroic Artisan male figure discussed in this chapter’s opening. Industrial productivity and resultant performance, as criteria by which success is measured, are central to one’s understanding of structural forces within (and, perhaps, the appeal of) dirt-track racing. Participants openly acknowledged the importance of capital and material resources in shaping one’s success on the track, yet on-track performance was the key measure *of* success, with drivers valuing such performance over any financial rewards might follow. For the majority of drivers, who had little chance at winning Features, participation in racing (and the occasional better-than-usual performance) was itself rewarding.

¹²⁰ Barillas, *The Midwestern Pastoral*, 34.

Dirt-track racing is thus embedded in the modern capitalist system and yet offers a reward structure that de-emphasizes capital returns. This indicates an alternative model of work and reward that carries gendered implications. In her book *Stiffed*, Susan Faludi explores public constructions of masculinity, particularly in relation to labor and compensation, in the second half of the twentieth century. She argues that post-World War II promises of greatness for American men, best symbolized by the moon mission, ultimately fell short through such events as the Vietnam War and the growth of corporate America, the latter entailing the rise of purpose-deficient middle management positions and broad instability through restructuring and deunionization.¹²¹ Surveying the American landscape at the turn of the twenty-first century, Faludi describes an “ornamental” culture in which rampant consumerism and a lack of “functional public roles” had decimated opportunities for value and meaning; she laments the loss of utilitarianism and productivity that had long defined American manhood.¹²² Kris Paap explored a contemporary utilitarian space through research for *Working Construction*, her 2006 ethnographic study of White masculinity in the context of blue-collar labor. She points to the decline of labor organization as a root cause of the “structural inequality” reflected by decreased wages and job security; thus personal empowerment through material productivity was accompanied by disempowerment in regards to location in organizational structure.¹²³ In Paap’s account, construction labor productivity is measured by financial rewards controlled by someone above:

¹²¹ Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: the Betrayal of the American Man* (New York: W. Morrow and Co., 1999), 24-30.

¹²² *Ibid*, 34-35.

¹²³ Paap, *Working Construction*, 30-33.

Like all social exchanges...the acquisition of the social and physiological wages of masculinity has its price. A closer look at the interpretive cues provided to the men reveals not only that the male workers are constructed *as men* through their work but also that this public masculinity is tied to their location in the market economy and thus to their successful production of profit. These men become bound not only to their ongoing public performances of masculinity but also to the need to prove their value as workers through the production of profit for the employer.¹²⁴

Both Faludi and Paap applied a gender lens to the laborer-labor disconnect frequently addressed in Marxist analysis, positing this as a laborer-*masculinity* rupture as well.

While my racing informants did not explicitly discuss labor-based emasculation, respondents' comments on class slippage did indicate a sense of instability for some; in this context, dirt-track racing may have provided a more stable reward structure.

Productive success was not measured through capital accumulation, and in fact participants regularly noted that, over the past half-century, financial rewards for high performance ("purses") have fallen far below the operational costs of racing. Instead, productive "work" resulted in a functional race car. Thus race-car driving may be framed as both a *product* and *form* of work: the maintenance stage produced an automobile capable of competitive performance, while in the resultant driving stage the performer enacted productivity by overcoming the obstacles created by the racing "game" (namely, to complete the course faster than others while following predetermined rules).

Furthermore, the driver typically guided a small group of friends and relatives through this racing project, wielding power and sovereignty that they likely did not experience in paid occupational context.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 109.

Consideration of driving as productive practice illuminates competitors' focus on improved performance in this "game." Many drivers cited patience and calmness as essential to navigating the controlled chaos of a dirt-track race: Richard Costa repeated the lesson he had offered his son, "In order to finish first, you must finish," while Logan Murphy articulated the apparent paradox of success through careful driving: "They say 'slow is faster.'" Others traced their victories to a balance of patience and assertiveness, which together formed the disposition of controlled aggression so commonly associated with normative masculinity; it reflected power over both one's own temperament (self) and his surrounding competitors (others).



Figure 2.2: A sign at Humboldt offers straightforward guidance for drivers

Control of the car itself was also highlighted, particularly through the descriptors "feel" and "finesse." Blake Dickinson used the phrase "good feel in your butt," by which he meant one's sense of how the car (through its tires) connected and gripped, or not, to the track:

And you have to translate that *feel* into your foot. And your foot needs to have – I guess, positions? Uh, it's not, like, an on/off switch, you don't wanna go all the way *flat*, or all the way *off* – you wanna just have a good feel of the, I guess, *limits* of the switch, or the limits of the pedal, so you can apply more power to the wheels when you have the added traction.

[...] What you need to master is traction.

This was a vivid description of how, through his body's "feel" and reactant applied pressure to the accelerator and brake pedals (in conjunction with hands on the wheel), Blake had more effectively integrated his body with the automobile in order to produce functional performance. Strong "feel" was predicated on anticipatory "reading" of the dirt track, which allowed a driver to find the best traction and thus fastest execution of a turn. Former driver George Wakefield noted that he learned to avoid the "shiny" part of the track, which was slick; however, once the "goofballs" (less competent drivers) laid down a "tacky layer of rubber" by driving on this section, George targeted it for its added traction. He also joined Dale Pearson in pointing out the importance of "driving ahead," which involves looking 50-100 yards down the track in order to assess and react to others' actions. Through these various strategies, drivers improved their performatic productivity through more efficient (faster) movement on the dirt.

The relationship between automobile racing and masculine power may have been most strikingly illustrated by eighty-one-year-old Norm Sanders's story of his unconventional first foray into oval-track driving. He and driver Richard Costa both discussed their unsuccessful attempts to play high school football; Richard recalled being laughed off by coaches for his small stature, and Norm was deemed "too small for football, and uh, not tall enough for basketball," as "the little guys kinda got looked over

– overlooked a little bit there, y’know.” In the face of such rejection, Norm managed to still make an impression on his Kansas City-area high school’s athletic field:

While I’m tellin’ you this, I’ll just well be truthful ‘bout it. I hold the track record there at that school, I’m sure it’s never been broken. One night I was out in my ‘thirty-two Chevy, my buddy and I we were ridin’ by there ‘n’ I said, “Gate’s open there, man, I always wanted to drive a car around a *track*.” ‘N’ he said, “There’s nobody *here*, let’s just do it!”, so I pulled in there with that ‘thirty-two Chevy ‘n’ I started runnin’ the half-mile track there at the school. And uh, they had cinder tracks then, [talking excitedly] I’m throwin’ cinders, I put it up into second gear ‘n’ I’m throwin’ cinders all over, slidin’ around those corners, maybe about three or four laps ‘n’ the coaches come *runnin’* outta the school there, bangin’ their clipboards ‘n’ blowin’ their whistles, so they uh – “We need to talk to your dad right away, soon as we can.” And that’s the first time they’d ever shown any interest in the rest of my family, so I was impressed with that. But anyway, to make a long story short, uh, that was my first time on a track, and it didn’t work out very well [chuckles] I got in trouble over it, I had to – I think I missed a couple days of school from that, I had to have my dad go up there ‘n’ get things squared away.

Over sixty years later, Norm felt the lingering sting of adolescent rejection from male athletic preserves. The description of his response, a form of redemptive revenge, is striking in its violence; he deployed his automobile, a powerful machine, to run on (and damage) the site from which he’d been turned away. Thus while his body was deemed inadequate for the types of productive activities demanded by football and basketball, he turned to a machine to demand recognition at his high school and, later, dirt tracks where such driving was sanctioned.

As previously mentioned, for most drivers, satisfaction in the driving itself was important given the unlikelihood of Features victories. However, some of my informants had actually won Feature races and even track season points championships; they emphasized that the victory, as an officially recognized accomplishment, was the highest racing goal. As we sat and talked at his dining-room table, driver Lucas Allison pointed to the plethora of trophies adorning his living room, and noted that he and his wife had clashed over the decorative appropriateness of this collection. He explained to me, “It’s not the trophy, it’s what the trophy *represents*,” before touching on the great amount of time and effort he devoted to racing. Carey Schmidt, who had recently accomplished his goal of a season points championship, more explicitly clarified his non-monetary motivation for driving:

Nobody races for the money, ‘cause you’re *not* gonna get – you’re not gonna get rich off small-time dirt-track racing like I’m doin’. You know, you’re not gonna get rich on it – it’s – it’s for that little plastic trophy at the end. I don’t do it for the money. If they didn’t pay me a dime out there, I’d *still* go out there and race. I like racing that much, you know? They can not give me a check at all and I’m still gonna – and you go ask any one of them other guys out there and they’ll tell you the same damn thing. You’re passionate about racin’, it ain’t the money. Nobody cares about the money. You don’t *make* no money, really.

Both of these men elevated the *act* of winning as the highest reward; the trophy was valued as symbolic of this act, while the drawing power of monetary prizes was not touted by a single driver. In fact, Carey highlighted the trivial pre-symbolic worth of the trophy by noting its “little plastic” character. These valuations reiterate respondents’ larger framing of productivity as a central component of the dirt-track racing sphere:

drivers enacted productive labor (in many cases mirroring that of their manual-labor careers) through their involvement with racing, yet gauged productivity through results that were measured not in capital, but in material experience.

Conclusion

In his study of working-class Texans, Aaron Fox touched upon country music spaces, especially bars, as sources of escape from class-based struggle:

Almost never does [their] gaze scan the distant night skies for signs of a workers' paradise, a working-class revolution, or even a modestly more democratic state. But one can detect the faint outlines of an imagined paradise where the gaze does fall, usually during ritual experience, often with the aid of inebriants, and always accompanied by story and song.¹²⁵

Twenty years later and some seven hundred miles north up Interstate 35, I found a strikingly similar “imagined paradise” located not on sawdusted floors but rather the dirt and concrete of Kansas racing spaces. Whether roaming parking lots or conducting face-to-face interviews, I rarely found open-air political expression on such broad issues as tax policy, environmental and health protections, or American military action overseas. Instead, residents of the Kansas racing sphere emphasized identification with, and interest in the politics of, a community in which participants were intimately linked through shared racing interest. For drivers in particular, through the “game” of racing they found obstacles that may be “arbitrary” yet preferable to the structural obstacles present a post-industrial economy. A man might spend the day producing profit for the company’s

¹²⁵ Fox, *Real Country*, 32.

owners, but he could spend the night producing a machine capable of being piloted around a half-mile track at thrilling speeds.

This chapter opened with Buddy Mann preaching on the many benefits of racing; one week earlier, driver Richard Costa had offered a more conflicted assessment of his relationship to the track. He smiled as he attempted to explain why, at age fifty, he continued to race after an on-and-off career of over three decades:

Richard: My dad started it, and I've got the bug, and, like I said, it's, it's to some sort it's a disease, it's a, it's a want and a desire that I have, uh...

Steve: "Disease." Why "disease"?

Richard: You can't get *rid* of it. I can't, I can't shake it. I mean I *tried*. I tried last summer, I couldn't do it [chuckles], I couldn't do it for a whole year [...] I think it's a, I think it's a disease. I mean they say alcoholism is a disease, not sure if I buy that or not, it may be, but I do think racing is something similar.

Steve: "Disease" has sort of a negative meaning with it – it *could*, it *can* – do you see that, as in racing havin' sort of a negative side to it, or is it just – you just mean *addictive*, that's the only reason you say "disease"?

Richard: Um, there *are* some negative sides to it! Back when we were racin', back in the nineties, there was one year we raced two cars. And we spent every bit of twenty-five to thirty thousand dollars that year. And I think our total prize money for the year might have been like thirty-five hundred dollars. And we won a lot of races! [...] So we had a really good year [chuckles], and we lost twenty grand! Right? That's not a disease? [Chuckles] I mean – the joke is, "You know how to make a small fortune in racing? It's easy. You start with a big one." Start with a big fortune [laughs] and you'll be able to make a small one by the time you're done. And so, to that aspect, it's a disease.

Richard then recalled that, in young adulthood, he had friends who habitually drank heavily and used drugs; by contrast, he much preferred the "addiction" of racing, framing

it as a more productive and less harmful activity than substance abuse. However, he also openly acknowledged the detrimental effects of racing on his financial assets. In that sense, racing was an empowering enactment of competition, offering a parallel alternative to capitalist processes, yet simultaneously drained Richard's own capital resources. I would learn, through my direct fieldwork with racing groups including Richard's, that this somewhat ironic correlation of processes was accompanied by widespread processes of cultural exchange in day-to-day dirt-track realities.

Chapter Three

Racing Routine: Community and Exchange in the (Extra)Ordinary

“I hate winter. I mean, I don’t even know why I live in Topeka.” Terry Miller stared at the race car, then looked around the Pits in the orange light of dusk, interwoven with the cool air that signaled the approaching end of another racing season. The Miller family jointly owned a Modified car that was currently driven by Terry’s son, Ryan, who with a few friends was now making mechanical adjustments in anticipation of his Heat race. Terry savored his interactions with their “Pit crew” as well as the machine itself. He remarked that if he had a choice, he would simply spend each winter in his garage, surrounded by cars; and if he had the money, he could generate enough heat to pull it off. He was happiest with his hands touching metal, whether that of his many tools or the Millers’ race car that now rested before us. For the time being, Terry would have to enjoy tonight, which marked the end of the Heartland Park Topeka racing season, before soon settling into the dormant winter wait for another year to begin. I listened to Terry as I stood next to him in the Pits, mostly nodding and scribbling in my notepad, eventually expressing my shared loathing of the cold season despite my lack of desire to live in a garage.

Through such direct engagement with small racing groups, I examined how participants actually interacted within the “community” widely discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter is thematically focused on *exchange*, as enacted through both discourse and material practice. I traced the various circuits that spread outward from oval tracks, the central meeting points around which racing-related activity revolves, to other spaces in the racing sphere. Given the emphasis on industrialism within interview

rhetoric, particularly in references to material productivity, I will focus on how drivers and their crews performed such productivity through shared ideas and coordinated practices. Due to the male dominance of track and garage spaces I read these as exchanges of masculinity, in which men of varied ages transferred knowledge (particularly from older to younger) and thus constructed masculinity in relation to mechanical and driving skill. As a whole, these small-group exchanges reflected the appeal of “community” in its offer of intimate connection. And when the group’s driver actually hit the track (a small sliver of the total time spent on racing-related practice), they enjoyed moments of recognition by the racing community members gathered beyond the oval’s concrete outer barriers.

Ethnographic fieldwork, specifically participant-observation, is the source of this chapter’s content. I spent the 2014 racing season shadowing four primary “informants”: three racing groups (each representing an individual driver) and a videographer. In addition, I attended two large-scale racing events. While the previous chapter emerged from two-party discursive exchange between participant and interviewer, the current section emphasizes exchange between participant and participant, oftentimes in a group setting. In each context, I experienced the intimacy of the ethnographic encounter. Writing in the *American Studies* journal, David Kamper emphasized the collaborative nature of ethnography, particularly in “domestic” research:

The object of these relationships is not simply information gathering. These relationships entail a shift towards dialogic production of knowledge about culture, a shift in which cultural actors and scholars come face-to-face, recognize each other, and negotiate the power relationships in which they are imbricated...scholars of culture do not

expect to enter a cultural environment anonymously, record data, and extract meaning from that data.¹²⁶

Faye Ginsburg has also touched on this face-to-face encounter, arguing in “Ethnography and American Studies” that localized collaboration sharpens the political edge of fieldwork, as researchers are more deeply (with some permanence, perhaps) embedded in the population of study.¹²⁷ In my own face-to-face engagement during the research stage, any effort to remain a detached, “objective” observer, only seeing but not seen, and seeing through an untinted lens, was an impossibility. And in the documentation stage, I have composed the present text with an understanding that some of my informants will read and perhaps respond to my characterization of their actions and the racing sphere more generally. This understanding has created a kind of anticipatory intimacy when conducting and documenting my research, and I believe that I have created a more careful and comprehensive write-up as a result.

I also seek a balance between documentation of the “ordinary” and the “extraordinary,” also described as the “spectacular.” George Marcus has called for ethnographers to avoid “excess in descriptive and theoretical ardor, and a desire to surprise by tropes of juxtaposition,” in favor of a more balanced approach to both the exceptional and unexceptional.¹²⁸ Kathleen Stewart outlined such an approach in her method-emphatic *Ordinary Affects*:

The ordinary is a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or

¹²⁶ Ibid, 440.

¹²⁷ Ginsburg, “Ethnography and American Studies,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 489, 490.

¹²⁸ George Marcus, “The Legacies of *Writing Culture* and the Near Future of the Ethnographic Form: A Sketch,” *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 3 (2012): 429-430.

of the simple life. Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies and emergences.¹²⁹

For Stewart, to study the “ordinary” is to address the moment-to-moment, ground-level experiences of everyday life, contextualized within larger ideological and material structures comprising “an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes and disjunctures.”¹³⁰ While I focused on the race-track *ritual* in Chapter 1, my embedment among racing groups offered insight into racing *routine*, by which I refer to “ordinary” moments from standard automobile maintenance to conversation on common topics. However, not only did I also observe many extraordinary moments of disruption, whether on or off the track, but I found that participants devoted a disproportionately large amount of discursive exchange to these moments; that is, the extraordinary was itself an ordinary conversation topic. Thus I adopt “fireworks,” which I observed in both literal and symbolic forms throughout the season, as a useful metaphor to describe extraordinary events in the dirt-track racing sphere. Fireworks are spectacular in their visual and aural intensity, beyond that which is normal, and thus demand the spectator’s attention; racing “action” appeared to make the same demand.

The Millers

On a spring Saturday afternoon in 2014, having spent the previous two summers in the bleachers of eastern Kansas dirt tracks, I first ventured into the racing space not visible from those metal seats. The Miller family, with whom I connected through a

¹²⁹ Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 4.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

mutual friend, lived just inside the I-70 loop that encircled Topeka. I pulled my compact Honda Civic into the square-shaped, gravel driveway that separated their house from a large garage; in the latter structure sat the race car around which the Millers' weekends, and some weekdays, typically revolved. On this Saturday, they were preparing the car for tonight's races at the Heartland Park Topeka race track.

This family, whose members had been racing in Kansas since the mid-twentieth century, would grow into my primary contacts and consultants during the season. Ryan, in his mid-twenties, was the currently active Miller driver; his father, Terry, was the chief mechanic and provided most of the funding for Ryan's racing. Terry was married to Ryan's mother, Janet, and they stored the car and tools in this garage on their property. Terry had raced for only one season, though he had spent years accompanying his father, Luther, on racing trips all over the country in the 1960s and 1970s. Luther had taken up the practice in the 1950s while in high school, having helped his own father, Virgil, in both his race-car driving and liquor bootlegging in the "dry" Kansas of the 1940s. Thus I could trace the clear patrilineal reproduction of racing among the Miller men, who frequently discussed racing as a foundational element of the family's intergenerational identity, creating a sense of connection between past and present.¹³¹

I had explored the possibility of racing among the family's women in interviews with them, producing occasionally ambivalent responses. Luther's wife, Martha, expressed clear opposition to the possibility, commenting, "I didn't wanna be in that race car and hurt somebody or hurt myself, so I'd rather not do it. I'd rather watch. [...] My

¹³¹ Paul Thompson has observed that family histories "can give an individual a strong sense of a much longer personal lifespan, which will even survive their own death." From "The Voice of the Past: Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader* (2nd ed.), ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2006), 26.

sister was one of ‘em that raced [her husband’s] car and hit the wall head-on, so, I thought, ‘I’m glad I’m not in it.’” However, I shared an exchange with Janet, Terry’s wife, that revealed internal struggle as she contemplated her abilities:

Steve: Have you ever raced, yourself?

Janet: No.

Steve: Have you ever *considered* racing?

Janet: I always thought I’d be good at it, but I got into Ryan’s car once, and I don’t think I could do it. There’s a *lot* more to it and than it looks.

Steve: You said they wouldn’t let you near the car. Why is that?

Janet: No – I think they think I’d be dangerous.

Steve: What do *you* think?

Janet: [Confidently] I think I could do it. [Then, correcting herself] I, I couldn’t drive the car Ryan has now, I could drive a – *maybe* I could drive, like a pony stock or a pure stock that’s *more like* a car. [...] I don’t know, especially at my age now, if I could react and do all – keep track of everything he’s got to keep track of. I mean, talk about a multitasker.

Janet was clearly torn about her ability to race, her confidence shifting multiple times in a matter of twenty seconds, ultimately leading to doubt about her ability to manage the various tasks involved in competitive driving. I asked the same question of her daughter-in-law, Jennifer (married to Ryan), who also expressed uncertainty: while she had considered racing, and at one point enjoyed driving her convertible fast on country roads, “it’d never happen, like [chuckles], just a dream. Looks fun.” I asked why this wouldn’t happen. “‘Cause it’s expensive? And I liked riding my horses better. I like – I guess you have to prepare, you just – you know what you wanna do, if you got a chance to do it just once you probably would. And then if you liked it you’d stick with it, but [trails

off]...” While the Miller women varied in terms of self-belief (or self-doubt), and none explicitly referenced gender in their responses, it seemed likely that they had difficulty imagining themselves in the role of “driver” given the continued near-absence of female dirt-track racers in Kansas. While it is impossible to attribute, with certainty, this hesitation to gender norms, it would be self-blinding to ignore the probability that young male racing participants were much more likely to model other men in the “driver” role, on the track, while female participants were more likely to imagine their role as “spectator.”

Back in the Millers’ garage on this afternoon, temperatures hovered in the seventies with clouds above, a cooling wind wafting through the large open doors. The structure itself was around thirty by forty feet, with a ceiling reaching some fifteen feet above the floor. The inside space was filled with tools, auto parts, popcorn and soda machines, along with various metal scraps that I couldn’t identify. In the middle, Terry and Ryan tinkered on the race car, a Modified whose aluminum body was white with the Millers’ racing decals adhered to the top and sides. Ryan used a brush to smooth out and firmly attach the decals to the car’s body before securing the hood over the engine; he and Terry then checked the vehicle’s nuts and bolts to ensure that they were fastened securely.

Terry’s uncle Billy (who was, in fact, called “Uncle Billy”) walked into the garage. A longtime racer now in his sixties, he acted as a consultant for the Millers’ driving. Ryan had been calling him no answer, and now greeted Uncle Billy: “You don’t have your phone on you, ya shit!” This launched the first session of “shit-talking” that I had observed in racing fieldwork, though Ryan had told me about it during our earlier

interview. “Shit-talking” was a playful act of verbal sparring, the insults softened by trust and familiarity shared between speakers. After trading barbs, Terry introduced me to Uncle Billy, who announced that he had been racing cars for over fifty years. He showed me a photograph of his own race car, referring to it as “my ghetto car” in an embrace of working-class identity. Uncle Billy added with a laugh, joining others in good-natured judgment of racing as harmful yet addictive: “I’m sixty-six now, so I haven’t learned yet.”

Terry and Uncle Billy hopped in their truck to go search for a spare shock for the Millers’ car. Meanwhile, Ryan began flipping channels on the television in the corner, eventually landing on *Rocky V*: “That’ll work.” He walked back to his car and performed a bit of mechanical improvisation, drilling a hole in the car’s aluminum side panel, inserting “blind rivets” (small, tubular fasteners) into each hole, and then using an air pressure device to knock each one into place, thus more securely attaching the side panel to the car’s frame. Terry and Uncle Billy returned with the shock, and were soon followed by the arrivals of family friends. First came Ted, who at ninety-one moved slowly but without help, easing his way into one of the many old office chairs positioned around the garage. A New York native who moved to Kansas in the 1940s as part of a military assignment, Ted told me that he had never raced cars, but had been a fan ever since he sat in famous driver Ralph DePalma’s car at six years old (I wondered about the authenticity of the story, but Terry later reassured me, “Ted don’t bullshit”). Derrick was the next to arrive; he was a slim twenty-something, one of Ryan’s friends, who designed the decals attached to the Millers’ race car. As Derrick attached a new decal featuring the car number, Ted commented with admiration, “Look at that. They don’t mess around,

boy.” Ryan’s mother, Janet, then walked in (the first woman I observed in this space) and acknowledged Derrick’s work: “Those look good.”

At that point, the storytelling began. I would learn that within auto racing circles, racing stories were a major part of downtime conversation. Janet began by recalling the family’s difficulties the previous week: their pickup truck (used to haul the trailer containing the race car) had broken down as they attempted to leave a race track in Missouri. However, another driver, Mike Freeman, was able to fix the truck and get them on the road. Janet was glad that Mike and Ryan were now “buddies,” as a couple years earlier they had experienced conflict to the point that Mike threatened to “kick Terry’s ass,” though no physical confrontation occurred. Janet then informed me (and reminded the group) that Ryan had raced against current NASCAR driver Clint Boyer, and would soon compete with former NASCAR driver Kenny Wallace; she joked, “Just rub up and get some paint on your car, and we’ll have that be your autograph.”

At 4:00, it was time to load the race car into the enclosed trailer attached to the Millers’ pickup truck. After a well-coordinated ritual in which Ryan and Terry pulled the car into the trailer with a motorized cable and hook, the three of us hopped into the truck to depart for Heartland Park. During the twenty-minute drive, Ryan mentioned the recent public spat between Jimmie Johnson, one of NASCAR’s biggest stars, and retired professional football player Donovan McNabb. McNabb had publicly commented that race car drivers were not “real athletes,” and Johnson responded by defending the physical skills involved in racing.¹³² Ryan and Terry strongly aligned themselves with

¹³² “McNabb stands by comments after pace car ride,” *Yahoo! Sports*, March 23, 2014 (Accessed November 8, 2015): <http://sports.yahoo.com/news/mcnabb-stands-comments-pace-car-155000630--nascar.html>.

Johnson; after Terry noted that the driver had actually competed in marathons as part of his own training, Ryan invoked the language of labor by remarking that McNabb (a quarterback) just handed the football off to someone who would “do the real work.” He also remarked that many NASCAR Pit crew members had competed in football and other sports, a sign that “the guys on Pit row – they ain’t no sissy boys, that’s for sure.” Thus Ryan and Terry defended the athletic masculinity of race drivers and crew members by linking racing to sports that reflect clearer physical effort, such as running and (somewhat ironically) football. While the gender commentary was obvious, I also noted the pervasive Whiteness of auto racing; a defense of racing masculinity acted (if not on a conscious level) as a defense of White masculinity, whose visibility had declined relative to the locally popular sports of football and basketball.

Despite an afternoon of preparation, this night’s weather would prove incompatible with racing. I did gain my first glimpse of the Pits area before the races, as the Millers joined dozens of other groups in unloading their car from the trailer and performing a final mechanical check-up before the competition. I also ventured onto a dirt oval for the first time, struck by the steep banking of the track (around fifteen degrees) on each turn, as well as the hardness of the tightly-packed clay surface. However, the dark-blue storm clouds in the northeast sky were quickly approaching. Anticipating the storm, Terry and Ryan loaded the car back into the trailer; just minutes later, heavy hail began to fall, and with no chance of racing tonight, we jumped into the truck and departed the track. The hail created a thunderous explosion on top of the truck, leaving small dents in the roof, though Terry appeared unfazed by the damage. I then

enjoyed the shelter of the Millers' garage until the hail had moved on, thanked them for the accommodations, and departed for home.

When I returned to the garage on another Saturday afternoon, it was abuzz with talk of "the fight." Terry and Ryan regaled me with the story that would be repeated throughout the evening: driver Dennis Hoffman had been involved in an on-track conflict with teenaged driver Jimmy Foreman, leading to a physical fight between their fathers in the Pits. According to the Millers, Dennis's father, Tom, punched Jimmy's father, Jack, from behind. In turn, Jack (whom Terry described as "probably six-five, three-eighty, and not fat") beat Tom Hoffman into unconsciousness. While Terry lamented the fact that drivers weren't kept separate after each race in order to lessen the chance of such conflict, he told the story with a smile and a gleam in his eye that betrayed some enjoyment in connection to the event. Soon afterward, two of Ryan's friends arrived at the garage; Ryan asked them, "You see the fight last week?", restarting the conversation. The men described Jack Foreman as a contemporary version of Paul Bunyan; the Millers' neighbor and racer Paul Jordan held up a closed fist and remarked that Jack's first "is like four of these." The conversation also served as a dialectic of ethics, particularly in terms of assigning fault: it was generally agreed that Tom had initiated the confrontation by "sucker punching" Jack in the back of the head, thus inviting the beating that followed.

These men were thus constructing social memory by recreating and interpreting conflict through interpersonal discourse, bringing me in as an audience. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli has touched on the significance of social memory, arguing that even "'wrong' tales...are so very valuable" in reflecting "the interest of the tellers, and the

dreams and desires beneath them.”¹³³ While I did not witness the fight, and could not weigh others’ accounts against my own, I was most interested in the ideologies embedded in such stories, such as the Miller consensus that Tom deserved his beating due to initiation of the fight with a “sucker punch.” In this instance of post-race “fireworks,” responsive violence, even if disproportional, was sanctioned. Driver Richard Costa, addressed in the next section, also weighed in on the fight the following weekend, though his response was more ambivalent:

It was a fight – there were no guns, there was no death threats, there was no – I mean, it was a fight. Um – does it have its place at a race track? I mean [chuckles], watch it on TV. They make a big deal out of it on TV, and you know, people get on *Sportscenter* because of it, right? So, it happens. Racing’s a highly charged environment, and like I said, we all work hard on our stuff, and when we feel somebody’s wronged us, we’re gonna do something back. That one happened to take place in the Pits and get physical.

I was struck, so to speak, by the fact that these observers did not seem particularly fazed by a confrontation that had resulted in an unconscious man. Richard actually framed the fight as ordinary: “It happens.”

Back in the Millers’ garage, Ryan’s friend Alex helped with the maintenance, but he would miss the races tonight for his bachelor party. Ryan, who was Alex’s best man (but skipping the party to race instead), was not happy about the timing of the wedding: “You planned it right in the middle of racing season, which is horseshit!” He then added with a laugh, “Well I guess the boss [Alex’s fiancée] told him when it was gonna happen.” Alex quickly responded with a reference to Ryan’s marriage: “Well, *you* know

¹³³ Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 2.

how it goes.” Their exchange launched a conversation about who “wears the pants” in each of their relationships. Even in this male-dominated space, I found that men oftentimes jokingly (or half-jokingly) lamented the power that women wielded over them. Just a few minutes later, Ryan’s mother walked into the garage as he was fiddling with the car, leading to a rapid-fire exchange:

Paul [to Ryan]: Momma’s here, get your ass workin’!

Terry: ...or at least *look* like you are.

Ryan: Wait, who’s here?

Paul: Momma.

Terry: Your boss.

Marty (family friend in his fifties): The one that wears the pants in the family!

Terry: That’s right.

Ryan: Yeah!

Soon after that, Ryan’s wife, Jennifer, walked into the garage, leading to Marty to exclaim with a laugh, “*There’s* the one that wears the pants in the family!”

Whether discussing male-male or male-female relationships, these men collectively constructed ideas about gender and power. It was not simply a discourse of male power, however; as driver-interviewees had openly talked about the dangers and injuries they sustained through racing, the Miller group now posited a parallel vulnerability in relation to women. Sociologist Sofia Aboim, in analyzing broad gender structures, has argued that male hegemony is necessarily maintained through processes of hybridization and appropriation:

...masculine power (and change) is dependent not only on its ability to oppress the dominated, but also stems from ongoing inner struggles

between different forms of domination...hegemonic masculinity – or dominant forms of masculinity – is not just a symbol of domination over women and other forms of masculinity, but rather it is at the outset particularly dependent on conflict and tension within it.¹³⁴

She adds that “hegemonic masculinity has to incorporate the other,” including those aspects deemed “feminine,” and I read these men’s expressions of vulnerability as such an incorporation. However, particularly in the garage, they did so with a wink and laugh; this was a collaborative performance of satire. I was reminded of the spate of hit film comedies since the turn of the twentieth century that feature man-child protagonists who are comically inept (in regards to career, relationships, etc.), yet usually achieve greater status and a sense of “manhood” by the closing credits. Colin Tait has examined this “absurd masculinity” in his writing on Will Ferrell, the torchbearer of such comedies; Ferrell’s performances of comic masculinity and femininity (occasionally at the same time) include a starring role in *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*, in which he plays a simple-minded NASCAR driver who rises, falls, and rises again, as measured by racing and romantic success.¹³⁵ I did not observe such extreme gendered behavior quite replicated among my racing informants. However, in addition to light-hearted commentary about their submission to women, racing men also playfully enacted aggression toward each other, such as driving a four-wheel motorcycle or golf cart in the Pits, suddenly swerving toward a friend or relative, and then veering away while both laughed. Taken together, I judged this constant playfulness (whether in dominance or vulnerability) as, of course, fun, but also indicating an underlying awareness of the

¹³⁴ Aboim, *Plural Masculinities*, 39.

¹³⁵ R. Colin Tait, “Absurd Masculinity: Will Ferrell’s Time-Bending Comic Persona,” *The Communication Review* 17, no. 3 (2014): 167-168.

instability of masculinity. Through diffusive humor, these men lightened the realization, if only subconsciously felt, that it is impossible to fully live up to the model of an all-powerful man.¹³⁶

On this particular Saturday, the Miller group headed to Heartland Park by late afternoon. Recent heavy rains had drenched the track, and though it was still tightly packed, the mud was much slicker than usual; after his Hot Laps, Ryan offered his “reading” of dirt conditions to Terry: “It’s choppy, not consistently tacky.” Meanwhile, I began to explore the Pits. I was especially struck by the collective sound of the cars: when dozens of Modifieds lined up to enter the oval track, their engines combined to generate a deep, loud rumble that reflected the power of these machines. During the intermission between Heats and Features, the rumble was replaced by an electric buzz as mechanics used whirring generators and impact wrenches to loosen and tighten lug nuts.

I also took this opportunity to gauge how class dynamics, which were so often referenced by my interviewees, materialized in the Pits community. The classed organization of this space was clear. The Millers raced in the “A-Mod” class, the most expensive at Heartland Park, and had invested in two permanent, side-by-side parking spots (or “stalls”) in the Pits, one each for the truck/trailer and the race car. Their racing efforts were boosted by economic and social capital, the latter entailing assistance exchanged with surrounding racing acquaintances. If the Millers needed a particular part or advice on car adjustments, they were typically able to find help from nearby groups; in return, the Millers offered the same services. While these higher-“class” cars and groups

¹³⁶ Sociologist Michael Kimmel has extensively written on the impossibility of “real-life” men meeting the expectations of a dominant male model. As an example, see: *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (New York: Harper, 2008).

were positioned in the center of the Pits, lower-“class” cars tended to be located on the outside edges. At one point I wandered to the edge to touch base with Robert Campbell, a Stock car driver whom I’d interviewed. He was chatting with Darryl Tucker, who had led track officials on a chase before exiting backwards out of the oval (see Chapter 1). Standing next to their heavily dented and scratched cars, Robert and Darryl carried on a conversation that reflected working-class linguistics, including the frequent use of “fuck”s and “shits”s to start each sentence (“Fuuuuck, you saw what happened out here a couple weeks ago!”). As I returned to the Millers’ central space, I realized that while the spectators’ parking lot was marked by a low level of hierarchy, the competitors’ Pits lot reflected social organization rooted in class and social networks. Furthermore, this brief excursion was a reminder that I’d had little success building relationships with Stock drivers as compared to participants in higher car classes (Modifieds and Sprints). I had attempted to accompany four different Stock car drivers and crews to the track, but my repeated phone calls and text messages produced no site visits. While I cannot pinpoint exactly why Stock drivers were resistant to my fieldwork, I felt that my role as a representative of the flagship university of Kansas, working on a doctorate degree, elevated my projected class identity; perhaps this created a level of comfort among racing participants who viewed themselves as “high class,” or carried aspirations of that status, while others experienced a class-based disconnect with my identity and research.

This and subsequent trips to track Pits also opened my eyes to how other drivers joined the Millers in externally customizing their vehicles. Each car featured a different number, which was functional in regards to viewers distinguishing between drivers on the track, but numbers also took on symbolic meaning. For example, each generation of the

Miller drivers adopted the same number, first established by Luther's father Virgil in the 1940s; I had witnessed a similar number transfer among other racing families. Drivers commonly incorporated this number into their digital identities, from social media profile pictures and usernames to email addresses. Furthermore, at Heartland Park nearly half of the race cars featured slogans printed on the back or front bumper: examples included "LET'R RIP TADAR CHIP," "RAT MOD," "SWAGGER 7," "Ready For All Yielding to None," and "Drive Angry!" (next to imagery from the popular video game Angry Birds) (Fig. 3.1).



Figure 3.1: Heartland park competitors exhibit their personal slogans for the driver behind

These slogans reflected a mix of aggression and confidence, while "LET'R RIP TADAR CHIP" linguistically projected the working-class identity embraced among racing participants. In his study of Mexican-American "lowrider" car culture in Texas, Ben Chappell notes the significance of customization for automobile consumers:

A customizer – without conspiring or plotting any intentional revolutionary purpose – seeks to manifest a difference in things from the way they are offered by producers, that is, from their designed, intended, or marketed commercial forms...for people whose received identities situate themselves outside the driver's seat of the cultural economy, customization serves, on an attenuated scale, to assert a measure of authority, and one that matters.¹³⁷

While my own subjects did not experience the level of ethnically and culturally based otherization as Mexican-American lowriders, the embeddedness of working-class masculinity among dirt-track drivers pointed toward an imperative for a “measure of authority” among this group. Race car drivers and crews reached for “authority” in the form of recognition by an audience of fellow community members; through such customization, my race-track informants converted the act of consumption into a process of (re)production. Luther Miller, the family's patriarchal elder, had told me of his own participation in this process a half-century earlier: “All my life, we built ours out of – we went to the junkyard and found something that looked like some of that high-dollar stuff, and we come home and *made* it.” He lamented that, by contrast, today's racers could simply “call up a racing shop” to have their parts delivered and even assembled on the car. For Luther, contemporary drivers and crews had lost touch with the (re)production process, acting as passive consumers who relied on money more than constructive know-how; the service economy had displaced a form of labor that was central to his vision of racing.

I continued to shadow the Millers during the summer. The family sold fireworks, and in the weeks before Independence Day they converted the entire garage into a

¹³⁷ Ben Chappell, *Lowrider Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 66.

fireworks store, inviting their large network of Topeka-area drivers to an annual racing party. When I arrived at 6:00 in the evening, I was astonished to find the entire driveway and front yard covered with dozens of race cars and some one hundred people eating hot dogs, chatting, and checking out the vehicles. I swung by the grill to greet Terry and Janet before exploring the car exhibition. Ryan was chatting with his friend and fellow racer, Max, who declared that he would soon quit racing in order to be involved in his children's hobbies. Ryan offered a skeptical reply: "Awww, whatever." Max hoped his son would soon take up wrestling; after Ryan joked that it was "just a bunch of men wearing spandex," Max replied, "Yeah, but whoever ends up on top is a *real* man." As a whole, the large party reflected the interconnectivity in the racing community, with the Millers serving as a focal point. When I left, Terry and Janet were still pulling hot dogs off the grill as people wandered up and down the aisles of brightly colored boxes containing Black Cat and Hot Rod fireworks.

This sale, in fact, foreshadowed the various kinds of "fireworks" that I would witness the following weekend. After a Feature race in which Ryan's right-rear shock fell off, ending his night, I stood next to his car and watched the July 4th fireworks show in the eastern sky. My attention was disrupted by three young men who walked directly in front me, one bumping my arm in a clearly intentional encroachment of space. Sensing conflict, I turned around to see one of the men, driver Devin Peterson, yelling at driver Paul Jordan (the Millers' Pits neighbor) for what he deemed to be an unethical on-track move. Devin, a stocky five and a half feet tall, appeared to be drunk, stumbling as he held a can of beer. Paul, at least six inches taller than Devin, immediately yelled angrily in return as he backed Devin right up to Ryan's car. Paul then led Devin into the

dark, three-foot-wide space between Jordan's and the Millers' trailers, talking to him sternly as would a father to a child. Meanwhile, one of Devin's friends engaged in a shouting match with Ryan's sister, Amanda, leading her boyfriend, Connor, to intervene before yelling at the now-retreating man, "Yeah, keep walking! Keep walking!" As I took in the territorialism at work, tensions exploding from an outside invasion into the Millers' Pits area, Paul and Devin emerged from the shadows, amicably chatting after an apparent resolution to their conflict. It was striking that in just ten minutes, a near-physical conflict had given way to comfortable socialization. Like fireworks, the initial explosions yielded to quiet, at least until the next show.

Over the next two months, I increasingly shadowed other informants, though I kept in touch with the Millers. In September, as some tracks began to shut down with the end of summer, I joined the family on two final trips to Heartland Park. Driver Robert Campbell had earlier informed me that the track's owner had been losing money for years, and was in the process of filing for bankruptcy; I watched spectator attendance steadily decline, now down to no more than a couple hundred people sprinkled across the bleachers. "So *this* is what a dying track looks like," I said aloud.

At this point, four months into my time with the Millers, it was clear how my role had changed. The night before, Janet informed me by text message that the driver Jimmy Fischer had threatened to wreck Ryan's car tonight in retaliation for a previous on-track collision. Upon learning that I would be in the Pits, she responded, "Good, we could use some more muscle," to which I replied that I might lose my funding if the University of Kansas learned that I was involved in dirt-track brawls. By this evening, I had also become more integrated with the group through involvement with the maintenance, at

least as a close observer. In the darkness of the Pits, I shone a flashlight on whichever auto parts required attention, from Terry’s “deglazing” (removing caked dirt) and “siping” (creating tiny incisions to increase ventilation) of the tires to others’ adjustments of steel bars beneath the car. Despite the simplicity of this job, I did enjoy acting as a productive member of the group.



Figure 3.2: Racing, materialized: a siped tire

I also took the opportunity to don Ryan’s helmet and climb inside the car for the first time. I had considered the possibility of entering races in order to gain a more intimate perspective on the sensory experience of driving; such ethnographic athletic role-playing (itself imbued with masculinity) has a history, from Loic Wacquant’s study and participation in boxing to George Plimpton’s season of training with, and briefly playing quarterback for, the Detroit Lions football team.¹³⁸ However, I was blocked by a

¹³⁸ Loic J. D. Wacquant, “The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel about Their Trade,” *Theory and Society* 24, no. 4 (1995): 489-535; George Plimpton, *Paper Lion: Confessions of a Last-String Quarterback* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

handful of logistical/financial factors, from my lack of a truck and trailer (needed to haul the car) to the possibility of jeopardizing relationships with other drivers through my novice (and potentially perilous) racing. On this night, I squeezed Ryan's helmet over my ears and awkwardly climbed through the driver-side window (there were no movable doors) into the seat. I was struck by the extremely limited sightline of the driver, who gazed through the optical tunnel of the helmet's open visor and had no side-view or rear-view mirrors for peripheral vision. The "windshield" was made of a metal grate, which protected the driver from flying rocks and other debris. The hard aluminum seat offered little cushion, and the bare aluminum steering wheel featured small studs to increase one's grip on it. Even in this state of stillness, it was clear that inhabiting a race car bore little sensory resemblance to occupying a passenger car, particularly in the contrast of its exposed-metal hardness against the softness of my own vehicle's interior. Racing was thus a performance of "hard" masculinity in both conceptual and material forms.

Ryan eventually piloted his car back onto the track, where he finished fourth, the best placing I'd seen of him all year; the anticipated conflict with Jimmy never did take place. The Millers then invited me to join them for a post-race meal at Denny's, the twenty-four-hour chain diner. I pulled into the restaurant's parking lot to find an extension of the racing social network, indicated by the Millers' and other groups' trailers parked to the side and behind the main building. Inside, the mood was jovial; our server and the Millers clearly knew each other, frequently joking and "talkin' shit," and the Millers also called out to other racing groups around the restaurant. I headed to the bathroom and found a man offering to remove people's Pits wristbands with his switchblade. As I exited, he said with a smile, "Well, want me to cut it off?" I decided

to join this trust exercise as a member of the Heartland Park network; I held out my wrist, and he deftly sliced the bracelet away. “See, they got great service here!”

The following weekend, Heartland Park Topeka hosted what would turn out to be their last dirt-track race for eighteen months. In front of another sparse crowd, foreboding the closure of the track for the entire next season, Ryan reached second place at one point in his Feature before a belt underneath the car broke loose, leading to a near-total loss of power, and Ryan pulled into the infield. However, while the season was over, this *night* was not quite; one more round of fireworks was brewing. Jimmy Fischer, who had threatened to wreck Ryan a few weeks earlier but did not drive on the track tonight, walked by the Millers’ Pits space and began a heated back-and-forth with Connor, who once again exhibited his territorial nature in yelling “Yeah, *keep* walking!” as Jimmy retreated back to his car. Jimmy’s friend, an older man, then confronted Connor, sparking a face-to-face shouting match that ended with the other man backing away as well. Meanwhile, Ryan’s sister, Amanda, again initiated a shoving match with one of Jimmy’s friends, a reminder that these “masculine” conflicts were certainly not limited to male participants.

Once the conflict simmered down, the storytelling began. For the next half hour, whenever a new person walked over to the Millers’ Pits spot, a member of our party would regale them with the tale of “the fight,” focusing on (1) what happened and (2) why the Millers were morally justified in responding to the Fischer group’s invasion of their territory (much like Devin Peterson’s group a few months earlier). A visiting woman declared, loudly enough for the Fischer group to hear, that Ryan had

demonstrated his masculinity: “Well, at least you’re *man* enough to bring your car, unlike that pussy Jimmy Fischer!”

Terry and I then climbed back into his truck, ready to go home. As we sat and chatted up front, *another* fight broke out to our right (this one not involving the Miller group), as two men tackled each other and fought for about ten seconds, circled by an audience of a couple dozen people. The lighting in the Pits was now dim, and the two men appeared as shadows, swinging at each other until a few other shadows jumped in to pull them apart. However, seconds later two nearby women angrily gestured and exchanged words, and the audience turned to see if their verbal conflict would to blows. One of the Millers’ friends, a man in his sixties, grabbed a “birthday sign” that had been created for Terry’s recent celebration: the paper plate read “It’s My Birthday, Show Me Your Boobies.” He stood next to the yelling women, smiling and holding the sign. I supposed this was an effort to diffuse anger with humor, and couldn’t help but laugh at the total scene, though it also seemed that his objectifying language was undercutting the legitimacy of this female-female fight. Terry and I just watched, staying in the truck, and he joked that these fights indicated the end of the racing season; people were taking advantage of their last chance to bring lingering “beef” to the surface. Whatever the causes, I found the fights to be clear examples of how the spectacle of confrontation (complete with an audience) could reach from the oval track to other racing spaces. Satisfied with the performance, our group was ready to exit, and Terry pulled his truck and trailer slowly out of the dark parking lot and onto the dark highways home.

The Costas

During an early-summer visit to Heartland Park, the Millers introduced me to Richard Costa, a member of their racing network. Just a few dozen yards away in the Pits, Richard ran his racing operation with the help of his wife, Melanie, and teenaged son, Trevor. Now fifty years old, somewhat short and stocky with a salt-and-pepper beard, Richard had grown up in a small town on the east coast before moving to Topeka at the age of eighteen. He had first been exposed to racing as a small child by attending his father's races; after a stint in soap-box derby racing, Richard took up go-kart racing in Topeka, winning "a lot of races, a lot of championships" over a decade. At one point his financial struggles raised the stakes for a particular race:

So I decided, 'I'm gonna go race. I'm gonna race for the three hundred [dollars] to win.' And we won. And I'm convinced it's because the other guys didn't have near as much at stake as I did [chuckles]. I couldn't afford to lose that race, because I – I won the race, paid my rent, had food, had cat food for the cats, I was in good shape. But it was literally a decision I had to make – it was not a very *responsible* decision, but it turned, turned out OK.

Richard, whose comments on the negative financial impacts of racing concluded Chapter 2, had engaged in the rare act of racing *for* money, believing that this alternative "mode" (financial incentive) increased his performance. After dabbling in Stock-car racing, he took a break to help his son in "quarter-midget" racing until Trevor literally outgrew the car. Richard then began helping friends with their race cars, remarking to me in the language of playful condemnation, "And that's a recovering alcoholic going to a bar to watch people drink. So that didn't work out too well." Drawing on his income from computer programming work, Richard purchased a B-Modified car in 2013, and he and

Trevor had been working on it in the year since. Richard wanted badly to win just one Feature race, particularly for his son; though he clearly valued the time spent with Trevor in the garage, a victory would both validate their efforts and demonstrate Richard's driving prowess, as performance, with his son in the audience.

A few days after our interview, I visited the Costas at their large, well-furnished home sitting on a pond just east of Topeka. They owned a garage that was a little larger than the Millers', around forty by sixty feet in area, with most of the wall space similarly filled with numerous auto parts, tools and scrap metal. Next to a motorboat and Harley-Davidson motorcycle, Richard lay underneath the car, fiddling with the undercarriage. He'd been in a bad collision the previous weekend at Heartland Park, so he and Trevor needed to "get the majority of the car together" before the next races. I settled on the concrete floor with my notepad and watched Richard work. He was dressed in a sweaty gray t-shirt, mesh shorts and white sneakers, his hands black with oil, as he led this session by offering spoken instructions that followed a "to-do" list written on a nearby whiteboard. While Richard led the knowledge exchange, adolescent Trevor demonstrated expertise through questions, observations and terminology that, at times, I simply couldn't follow. I had researched the technical inner-workings of automobiles through texts and videos, attempting to learn how vehicles' many pieces worked in tandem, yet it became clear that every driver and crew member that I observed (each of whom had worked on cars since childhood) possessed far superior understanding of such mechanical logistics. Richard's and Trevor's collaborative work offered a valuable insight into the development of such knowledge. To borrow from psychologist Howard Gardner's "theory of multiple intelligences," my own graduate work emphasized

“linguistic intelligence,” the ability to communicate and conduct analysis through language, which is also the means by which such intelligence is taught.¹³⁹ While mechanical and driving skills were clearly learned through linguistic methods, as evidenced by Richard’s oral and written instructions to Trevor, there was a crucial “bodily-kinesthetic intelligence” being acquired as well. The development of motor skills, particularly in regards to one’s use of the hands, is achieved only through, in common parlance, “learning by doing.” Western society broadly carries a divide between “mind” and “body,” and I had in fact attempted to gain mechanical knowledge through only the “mind” in regards to linguistic acquisition.¹⁴⁰ However, deep integration with an automobile, whether in the mode of maintenance or operation, is achieved through a hybrid linguistic-bodily-kinesthetic learning process that may be characterized as the remarriage of mind and body.¹⁴¹

Here in the garage, I was also struck by the sheer *power* being exerted: between the weight of (thus potential power exerted by) steel and iron parts, and the “power tools” that generated enough energy to act upon and modify these parts, there was a great deal of force being produced in the garage. In turn, at the race track, these sturdy metal parts were needed to withstand the power produced by (1) the engine (whose explosions propelled the other parts into rapid motion, creating torque) and (2) the other drivers and their cars, which posed the threat of collisions during competition. While racing entailed

¹³⁹ Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: the Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 78. My informant Janet Miller, a teacher of physical education, actually first alerted me to the theory of “kinesthetic intelligence” and how it might be applied to racing knowledge.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 206-208.

¹⁴¹ The theme of mind-body-machine integration runs heavily through Robert Pirsig’s classic philosophical treatise *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York: Morrow, 1974).

the collisions of car bodies moreso than human bodies, this dynamic was reflective of the power vs. power spectacle so central to popular American sports.¹⁴² As I pondered this phenomenon, Richard instructed Trevor to “Fire ‘er up,” and the car’s engine exploded to life; the roar was loud enough that I physically jumped in response. My acculturation was clearly still in progress.

One week later, I witnessed such power on display at Humboldt Speedway, to which I accompanied the Costas on their trip for the Friday night racing program. I met Richard and his “Pit crew,” as he described Melanie and Trevor, in a Wal Mart parking lot; they arrived in a red pickup truck towing an enclosed white car trailer. I hopped into the backseat, and with contemporary country music playing on the radio, we passed through the rolling fields, wooded areas and crop farms that lined the southward route. After missing a turn, Richard jammed on the accelerator in order to reach Humboldt by 6:45; the Costas would have little time for unloading and preparations for Hot Laps.

When we arrived, I stepped out of the truck onto the mud, grass and gravel of the Humboldt Pits area. The Costas worked together, quickly, in order to prepare for the first races. Richard and Trevor circled the car, tightening nuts and checking tire pressure, their well-established routine now in motion. Around us, the Pits were coming to life, the

¹⁴² At this point in 2014, sports/news media featured extensive coverage of the growing awareness that high-contact sports, particularly football, imparted detrimental long-term neurological effects on its players (including Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy), heightening the likelihood of mental illness. Such media narratives included conjecture that football was doomed for extinction within decades, due to spectators’ growing unease with the extent to which the performers were sacrificing their health. Though I was skeptical of the possibility of football’s extinction within a half-century, given its embeddedness within American culture, I wondered if violence between machine-actors might ultimately serve spectators’ lust for carnage, or if human suffering was a central and necessary component of this spectacle. If machines sufficed, car racing (in which violence is certainly experienced by human actors, but damage is imparted primarily on machines) might find an open avenue for consumption.

whirring of tools giving way to the rumble, and eventually roar, of engines. Richard drove the car to the track entrance while Melanie, Trevor and I climbed up into a wooden deck, installed on top of a trailer that overlooked Turns 3 and 4, to watch his Hot Laps run (Figs. 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4).



Figure 3.3



Figure 3.4



Figure 3.3, 3.4, 3.5: The experience of seeing, ascending, and looking out from the Humboldt Speedway Pits viewing stand

After the Hot Laps were completed, we met Richard at the Costas' Pits area; he remarked that he wasn't getting enough "grip" around the turns, so Melanie and Trevor installed new tires and altered a few bars beneath the car. This adjustment was intended to encourage the car to "roll," or tilt, to the right on the curves, increasing downforce and thus traction on the right-hand tires in order to facilitate left-hand turns.

The mechanical work paid off. Richard crossed the finish line first in his Heat race, and a few minutes later he arrived at our space with great pep, zipping his car toward the outer edge of the Pits, spinning into a 180-degree turn, and lining up next to the truck and trailer. Lifted by a clear burst of energy, he hopped out of the car and intently watched Melanie's phone video of his race. Trevor raised the vehicle with a floor jack, he and Richard then removing wheels while Melanie used a flat-headed shovel to scrape mud off the bottom of the vehicle. Richard performed more adjustments on the panhard bar angle, which would allow the car to tilt even more to the right during his Feature race. He informed me of this strategy as he swigged a bottle of red Gatorade,

sweat in his hair and a glimmer in his eyes. I asked Richard what it felt like to win the Heat: “After what I’ve been through [referring to mechanical failures] the last month? It was awesome.” He had also enjoyed being interviewed by a track official, as the winner, after his Heat race.

The Costas finished up their checklist of adjustments, and Richard, seemingly anxious to start his Feature, climbed back into the car before the Stock cars (racing next) had even lined up. Melanie, Trevor and I returned to the viewing stand to watch the Stock race; as it neared conclusion, the B-Modified drivers arrived at the track entrance and revved their engines, the cars resembling grumbling animals in anticipation of the contest. Once they entered the track, Richard occupied the second row during the standard two parade laps. The cars roared to life with the green light, and Richard maintained his fourth-place position for around five laps, narrowly avoiding two other cars that spun out around him. But then disaster struck. He lost a bit of control on Turns 1 and 2, sliding into the outside wall, orange and yellow sparks flying off the car as its right side dragged along the concrete barrier. Though he managed to exit Turn 2, Richard skidded even harder into the barrier at Turn 3, and the car rode up onto the wall, its right side aiming straight up into the air (from the Pits tower, we could see the underside of his vehicle). Richard managed to pilot the car back onto the track wheels-down, landing with a bang, but he immediately sped off toward the Pits.

Faces grim, Melanie and Trevor descended the viewing stand stairs and walked back to the Pits area. Richard arrived moments later, climbing quickly out of the car and throwing his gloves and helmet onto the roof. He asked Melanie for a flashlight and directed it to the underside of the car to check for damage; the family then worked

together to load the car back onto the trailer. Keeping my distance, I watched Melanie and Jeremy (with surprising maturity for a thirteen-year-old) carefully negotiate and manage Richard's subdued anger after the race. They were initially quiet during his inspection, but when Richard made a somewhat light-hearted comment ("Well, the car was running well until that last part"), Melanie and Trevor heartily offered encouragement that the car had indeed performed at a high level.

Richard suggested that we head to the main bleachers to watch the final race, which seemed wise in the interest of allowing his frustration to subside before the ride home. During the Modified Feature race, my attention was once again drawn to "fireworks" as two drivers repeatedly made contact with each other. Ultimately, one of the drivers followed the other to latter's Pits spot, and a few minutes later an announcement rang over the loudspeakers: "We need a Sheriff's deputy in the Pits." By the time we strolled back to the Costas' parking area, a security official, his four-wheel motorcycle's red and blue lights still flashing, was talking to people at the spot where a fight had broken out. Richard and his family did not seem particularly interested in this confrontation, and we hopped into the truck and slowly exited the property, returning to the smooth pavement of country highways. From the back seat, I took in the serene, quiet darkness that accompanied the end of each race night, heat lightning in the distant sky to the west. Trevor fell asleep to my right; up front, Richard and Melanie continued to discuss the race they had just experienced together, as well as the next one to come.

Joe Alma

On a Saturday afternoon in June, I wrapped up a visit to the Kansas Auto Racing Museum in Chapman, located in the north-central part of the state, and hopped back onto I-70. Driving forty miles west and four more south along paved and dirt roads, I reached Salina Speedway for a Saturday night race program. This is where I first met Joe Alma, who climbed out of his car near the main entrance, greeting me warmly before getting straight to work. Now in his seventies, Joe had spent four decades in the printing trade for Hallmark. Upon retirement, he began shooting videos of dirt-track races all over the Heartland region, uploading them to his Youtube website channel. Tonight he was capturing Salina racing from various angles, and I followed him up a flight of wooden stairs to the press booth above the main bleachers. In my first moment in a race track booth, I looked through the large windows to see the entire track and surrounding wheat fields, all clearly visible from this elevated position. Joe set up his audio equipment; he would record the announcers' sound feed, later laying it over his own video before posting the mashup to Youtube.

We then descended the stairs and headed toward the Pits area. Joe strolled along the clay in his blue jeans, baseball cap and trademark polo shirt bearing the logo of the local television show with which he worked. He carried a small camera that was equipped for installation on race cars' roofs, facing forward; this would record video from an angle that departed from the more common bleachers or media booth perspectives. As I walked with Joe, it became clear that many of the drivers knew him already. He moved easily and casually from car to car in the Pits, inspecting them up close as he chatted with the men making mechanical adjustments. Joe eventually

approached Jimmy Gerhardt, an accomplished twenty-something driver in the “Mod Lite” class (small, lighter version of Modifieds), about mounting a camera on Jimmy’s car during his first Heat race. The driver was happy to oblige, replying, “Just do whatever you need to do,” before one of his helpers added that he watched Joe’s videos “all the time” and promised that Jimmy’s driving would produce useful footage. Joe carefully clamped his camera to the car, attaching clear tape to the lens for protection from incoming dirt and rocks during the race. We then moved toward a fence that ran along Turn 3, joining a dozen spectators as they watched the opening Heats. During his race, Jimmy deftly steered his car around and past the others, securing a victory that seemed to please Joe; he had captured driver-perspective video of a successful run.

As the night continued, I noted how the drivers and their crews appeared to genuinely enjoy the attention offered by Joe, who offered his subjects increased exposure through media projection of both races and interviews with drivers. His Youtube channel hosted around 1200 of his videos to date, and Joe’s claim that it had received over one million views total (“which is beyond comprehension”) was credible based on my own review of his page. While not distributed through any major media outlets, this “grassroots” (as he described it) operation was, for many drivers, their best chance for recognition beyond the track itself. With the car’s roars competing with our voices, Joe commented on the ease with which he approached drivers for camera mounts and interviews, as well as his own motivations for this voluntary “work”:

I’ll be honest with you, most of the racers on this level get very little, um, what do you wanna call it – *attention*? So uh, yeah, they take any – anything they can get. And really, you can’t blame ‘em, for the amount of money and stuff, and sponsors that they’ve got out there. I mean uh, I do

it because I love it? Um, like I say, I've been around it for years and years, my cousin raced. And uh, I do it for the fun of it, I'm retired. I mean uh, I'll be honest with you, what else you got to do? [Laughs] I used to be a big fisherman, but I don't do that much anymore.

Joe's analysis rang true in my observations; as illustrated by Richard Costa's enjoyment of a post-Heat victory interview at Humboldt, some dirt-track drivers seemed enthusiastic about whatever attention they could generate, including as a participant in my study.

Returning to Robert Post's conceptions of racing "performance" as both that of machines and competing "actors," dirt-track drivers' embrace of their performatic role, and the accompanying desire for recognition, was a crucial factor in facilitating the face-to-face encounters necessary to both Joe's and my projects. A key class dynamic was at work: unlike elite-level drivers, such as those in NASCAR, local dirt-track racers needed to find alternative routes toward exposure, and Joe's alt-media operation was their best bet.

Over the course of the night, as we continually moved between the Pits area and the bleachers (from which he video-recorded the Features), Joe offered his perspectives on various topics. He joined the larger declinist narrative that was emerging in my interactions with racing participants, especially those in their 50s and older: as indicated by shrinking crowds, driver counts and reward purses, combined with the increasing cost of staying competitive, Kansas dirt-track racing was moving in a troubling direction.

Though Joe was encouraged by the growth of some cheaper parts, such as Crate motors, he added with a laugh, "When [drivers] cut down on the cost of the motor, they spend it on the rear end or new tires every week." Thus he perceived an inevitable zero-savings result in the pursuit of high technological performance. He also noted that "back in the old days," the Pits hosted more drinking and fighting but no women and children, who

were not allowed in these areas. Over the grumble of engines around us, he declared, “Originally it was a *man’s* game.”



Figure 3.6: Salina Speedway Pits

Joe returned to this theme as we sat in the bleachers later that night. He was concerned by the state of the “male psyche” in the contemporary sports world, noting that when he playing high school football despite his small stature, he was inspired by his coach’s frequent saying: “Winners never quit, and quitters never win.” By contrast, he commented of today’s young men, “I don’t see a lot of them lasting long in a lot of stuff.” Furthermore, while his parents essentially forced him to move out of the house (or pay for rent) upon high school graduation, “how many parents can or will do that today?” Joe concluded with an observation rooted in his career in the printing trade: “I guess, as they say, stuff was more black and white then. Now it’s got so many colors to it, you don’t know what black and white is.” He returned his attention to the track, his camera

mounted on a three-foot-long plastic stick wedged between his knees; he watched the camera's small screen flipped out and displaying live video, a tiny version of the roaring, rapid action a hundred feet away.

After this initial meeting, Joe and I periodically attended races together, most often at Lakeside Speedway. During the July 4th races there, he mentioned that he might be able to get me into the track infield. We walked to Turn 4, and with a shouted recommendation that I “stay within the poles!” (referring to concrete-barriered areas in the infield), Joe sent me down the sloped track and into the infield grass. I hadn't fully prepared for this moment, and temporarily froze when entering the infield; I recaptured my bearings and quickly moved behind a pickup truck where an official was standing. From this perspective, the sensory affects (discussed in Chapter 1) were all the more intense: the cars were both *louder*, as I was no longer positioned above them in the bleachers, and *faster*, zooming past me less than one hundred feet away. My stomach jumped when a group of Modified cars hit Turn 3, next to which I was positioned. As the drivers turned “slideways,” their car noses turned almost directly toward me during the rightward slide, I experienced an optical illusion by which the cars seemed to be coming straight toward my position. Though I consciously knew that each car's centripetal force would take it safely down the track, to look down the nose of a vehicle as it traveled 80-100 miles per hour was thrilling.¹⁴³

As the racing season wound to a close, Joe and I made a September trip to Valley Speedway in Grain Valley, just south of Kansas City. Joe used the term “grassroots” to refer to tracks that reflected a low level of financial investment in general; he told me

¹⁴³ I captured video of this moment, from my perspective in the infield, and uploaded it to Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KpImQoLct2g>.

ahead of time that Valley Speedway was very much “grassroots.” Upon our arrival, I understood this designation: beyond the muddy Pits, there was a single section of simple metal bleachers, backed by a small broadcast booth, next to the dirt oval. Joe claimed that a driver had originally built the track, and had configured the dirt through the following logic: “Well, I just got on the grader, and started gradin’, and when I thought it looked right, I quit.” (Joe laughed as he recited this line.) The current owner faced a larger hurdle: responding to a series of complaints from nearby residents, city officials were threatening to shut down the track for noise ordinance violations. Such a story had, in fact, caught my attention already. Over the summer I had followed media coverage of the Valley Speedway controversy, including a local afternoon radio show devoted to the subject. One caller-in explained that he would not have moved to the area if he had known about the track; the next defended Valley Speedway on the basis that racing programs were run just one evening per week for part of the year, while also arguing for the economic benefits it generated through sales of food, trailers, and other commodities. Another caller, a man with a touch of a Southern accent, asserted that “I support *all* of the race tracks,” but added, “The [caller] yesterday said he moved to Grain Valley ‘cause he wanted to retire there in kind of a peaceful neighborhood. Well if I’m gonna retire, it sure as to *hell* ain’t gonna be in Grain Valley, Missouri! Gonna be San Diego California, Orlando Florida, or somewhere like that.” As the radio hosts laughed, I contemplated how the race track was, for some, a “paradise” that was more accessible than paradises elsewhere.

Joe strolled along the path that divided the Valley Speedway’s Pits into two rows of cars, and he inspected them with barely a glance from the working crews. More

comfortable through my clear association with Joe, shadowing him and scribbling notes in a pad, I joined these close-up assessments of the vehicles without quite knowing what we were looking for. As the night progressed and temperatures dipped into the forties, Joe video-recorded races and talked to people from the Pits to the bleachers. He typically conducted brief interviews with the top finishers in each Feature; at some point mid-season I had begun to record these conversations with his stick-mounted camera, and tonight I took a turn “at work.” Joe had educated me on basic filming techniques, including a slow zoom-in on each driver’s face as he answered questions, and I carefully followed these instructions as we approached winning Feature drivers in the Pits. During a visit to Lakeside Speedway I had also video-recorded a few races when Joe needed a substitute. These were instances, paralleling my basic help with the Millers’ mechanical efforts, in which my role as “observer” had shifted toward direct participation in the study site. Unlike the Millers’ racing performance-based work, however, Joe and I shared largely documentary projects; I assisted him in the documentation and distribution of racing video, while he assisted in the research for my racing text. I considered Joe an “insider” based on his embeddness in the racing community, and realized that my self-perceived “outsider” status was more complicated than previously thought. By documenting the racing community and then distributing the resultant text among its members, perhaps I would also achieve status as a community member, if only in a specific memorial capacity. In any case, the fleeting nature of my presence did not match Joe’s longevity; his years of volunteer-capacity commitment had resulted in deep membership within the racing community.

The Manns

While all other primary informants were directly connected to Modifieds, my final group occupied a different wing of the racing sphere. I met Buddy Mann through an unusual route; after getting a mid-summer oil change on my car, I asked a mechanic if he had any connections to dirt-track racing. The mechanic replied that he did know an intense racing enthusiast, and wrote a name and phone number on his business card.

That evening, my first call with Buddy revealed the dynamics that would shape our relationship. He was talkative and assertive, immediately launching into a monologue by which he filled me in on “insider” racing information. I convinced him to save this for our first interview, which we scheduled for the following weekend. Around dusk that Sunday, I arrived at the house where Buddy lived with his wife, Margaret, and two sons; it was located in the semi-rural outskirts of Lawrence, a couple miles from the expanding commercial development at the southern end of town. This was Father’s Day, and his fourteen-year-old son, Casey, sat in a rocking chair next to us on the front porch during the interview. Buddy (introduced at the opening of Chapter 2) laid out his dogmatism from the outset: he had clear-cut ideas on “right” and “wrong,” “good” and “bad,” as delivered through a series of one-liners with which I became familiar over the following months. My interview recording began with his declaration: “You know, I never knew how I was gonna make my first million, but I knew exactly how I’d make my second and third million. I’m still workin’ on the first.” After learning that I was in the American Studies field, Buddy asked, “So which side do you tell it from?”, before clarifying this as “Left and Right.” Rather than start a conversation on the complexity of the political spectrum, I responded, “Well, we try to both,” drawing a “Good!” reply.

Buddy grew up in a small town in northeast Kansas. He described his father as an alcoholic whose own auto racing “kept him out of trouble,” and recalled spending extensive time in his father’s racing shop, as well as the nearby garages in which other racing groups worked on their cars, where he claimed to have impressed men with his racing knowledge. Buddy’s playful navigation between self-constructions as powerful and vulnerable, an imminent theme, emerged in another line: “At the extreme early age, I knew I wanted to race. And I’m probably the greatest race car driver that’s never driven. Mainly because I’m a hemophiliac.” He did play some football in high school, yet downplayed the game through conflation of athletic and masculine authenticity: “It was always about racing, it didn’t matter. Like I said – you know, uh – *real* sports require *two* balls.”

These days, Buddy worked as the primary local maintenance person for a fast-food chain restaurant, though he clarified, “I only work to get to the race track.” He primarily helped his teenaged son, Casey, who was driving a “Micro Sprint” car, similar to full-sized Sprints yet smaller and less expensive to maintain. The “Micro Sprint” class is populated by predominantly young drivers, particularly those between ten and twenty years old. Well before his tenth birthday, Casey had exhibited a passion for racing by pedaling a little car around the Pits of local tracks. Buddy took joy in recalling that revelation, and it was hard to avoid the interpretation that, to some extent, he was able to fulfill the elusive dream of racing through involvement with his son’s experiences.

A few weeks after our initial interview, I met Buddy, his wife Margaret, and Casey at a central maintenance building on the outskirts of Lawrence; we piled into their car and headed to Casey’s next race at Atchison Speedway, around fifty miles to the

northeast. The hour-long drive, along highway 59, took us through gentle hills, grass fields and farmland, with large soybean and corn plots stretching for miles to the horizon. Along the way, Buddy educated me on the differences between grain elevators (storage) and grain mills (processing) before asking, “Do you know much about farming?” As with my technical automotive ignorance, I had been found out: I replied, with understatement, “Not really.”

After driving through Atchison and exiting its northern edge, Buddy pulled up to a race track tucked among the ubiquitous corn and soybean fields. He then used his rhetorical skills to my benefit, convincing track officials to allow me inside at no expense as a media member. The Manns and I then moved into the Pits to find Dwayne, who was Buddy’s friend, Casey’s godfather, and the car’s primary sponsor, having invested thousands of dollars per year in its maintenance. Dwayne had hauled the car to the track with his truck and trailer, and we strolled up to their Pits spot now. As the others chatted, I glanced around at the light-tan dirt Pits before walking up a hill to check out the oval track. It was strikingly bowl-shaped, with short straightaways and steep banking all the way around. I was becoming aware of the sheer variety within dirt-track racing; in a corporatist market-driven U.S. marked by mass standardization, reflected by the national chain for which Buddy worked, each race track had a distinct shape, size and banking. Further taking into account varied weather conditions, drivers and their crews needed to adapt to different environments each night. Buddy had actually framed such variety as central to his life philosophy: “That’s what my whole life has been, is change. I gotta have change, like the dirt track changes. Y’know, I could never race asphalt, because it’s just the same damn thing.” I wondered if dirt racing provided a similar relief, for other

drivers, from standardized practices of consumption and labor; while elements of racing did reflect more conformity in recent decades (such as factory-produced race cars and parts), diversity in oval tracks and dirt conditions continued to present new scenarios for competitors and onlookers.

I slid back down the dusty hill toward the Pits and witnessed a “drivers meeting” up close for the first time. Dozens of drivers and crew members gathered around a small group of track officials, and I was surprised to see a female official (women being nearly absent in this role) open up the meeting. An elderly man then led a Christian prayer, most heads bowed around him (Fig. 3.7), before the track owner reminded drivers of such rules as “Be friendly to the guy in front of you” and “No driving through someone turned sideways.”



Figure 3.7: Drivers and crew members gather for prayer in the Atchison Speedway Pits

Meanwhile, some of the Manns’ friends had gathered in the adjacent Pits spot, and the five males, from Casey to middle-aged men, began to swap stories. Some likely

belonged in the “tall tale” category. Buddy recalled the moment when a Sprint car was lifted into midair by a wind gust, flying *over* a set of bleachers with spectators in them. One of the other men looked skeptical: “Ehhh, I don’t know, Buddy.” Buddy insisted it was true. This storytelling continued throughout the night, between each round of races, and reached its peak after the final Feature. At that point, with the arrival of a few other groups, the Manns’ Pits spot was occupied by some fifteen people engaged in five smaller conversations, most of which addressed tonight’s racing performance and those of the past. Another driver’s father talked to me about the Micro Sprint social environment, insisting that these groups had more “class” than those in Stocks and Modifieds. He focused on the higher levels of conflict, both verbal and physical, among the latter groups, which necessitated more security officials at those races. Buddy had made the same argument during our interview, and I was reminded of the ways in which some racing participants framed themselves, and their particular “class,” as elevated above others. Taking together these various discursive modes (from the more formal drivers meeting to informal Pits conversation), I witnessed the exchanges by which racing participants constructed this sphere in terms of events, values, and individual and group subjective position.

Back on the track, Casey made it to the Feature race, where he improved from a starting-place seventh into a finishing fifth, no damage done to the car. Buddy seemed content with the result, and despite his earlier claim that “If you ain’t first, you’re last” (a reference to Will Ferrell’s *Talladega Nights* character), it struck me that success was also measured in performance improvement and a fully intact machine. By 11:00 the roars of engines had given way to the whirs of generators, and in the calm, Margaret indicated

that she was ready to head back to Lawrence. As he drove through the dark, Buddy tried to engage in politics once more, asking “which side” I was on. “Let me put it this way: do you watch Fox News or not?” (Buddy was a regular viewer). When I laughed and avoided answering, he asked if Journalism school professors were so “liberal” that they weren’t willing to criticize Obama. I clarified that I wasn’t actually in Journalism school and thus not qualified to answer. I internally noted that my own attempts at maintaining an outwardly apolitical stance were encountering a stiff challenge.

The study of political expression is central to this project. Given the twinned rise of neoliberal politics in both Kansas and NASCAR during the twenty-first century, I expected to find their overt discursive expression in the dirt-track racing sphere as well. From the journalist Thomas Frank (*What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, 2004) to the sociologist Robert Wuthnow (*Red State Religion: Faith and Politics in America’s Heartland*, 2011), recent commentators have explored the conservative-trending politics of the state. Republican Party leaders in particular have converted Christian-alliance social capital into the voter-supported implementation of neoliberal policy, such as tax reductions for the wealthy (“business owners”) and the broad defunding of public education and health benefits. When I did find conservative political expression in the era of Brownback, it was commonly materialized in anti-abortion signage along the highways west of Topeka, reflective of an issue thrust to the forefront of Christian-conservative politics in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁴⁴ In turn, I was interested in political semiotics at race tracks, particularly as expressed through items from t-shirts to spectator vehicle stickers. However, explicit expression was rare. Even during the heated 2014

¹⁴⁴ Wuthnow, *Red State Religion*, 268, 274-276, 281-294, 298-299.

gubernatorial race, when I expected to see open support for incumbent Brownback (or perhaps challenger Paul Davis), campaign stickers were absent. While this revealed nothing about the ideological bent of race-track spectators, it did indicate that members of the racing community were hesitant and perhaps loathe to engage in the public political declarations that were more common in my “home base” of college-town Lawrence.

This hesitance was also apparent in my direct interactions with racing informants. Buddy’s engagement with hotly debated issues from economic deregulation to border militarization, and proud alliance with conservatism, was an exception among those with whom I worked. Participants tended to avoid initiating overtly political discourse, necessitating that I read values in such expression as their positions on conflict at the race track. To my surprise, the few who *did* situate themselves within national politics tended to self-identity as Democrats. In particular, three men in their seventies and eighties, including Joe Alma, aligned themselves with the Democratic Party. While this may not be equated with a declaration of “Leftism,” each respondent focused on labor and inequality issues as the basis for their identification. Joe touched on gender issues as well, once telling me that he simply didn’t understand how women could vote for Republicans, though he did not specify which values and policies were informing this comment.¹⁴⁵

By contrast, Buddy’s conservative declarations included his belief that troops should be allowed to shoot immigrants attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border

¹⁴⁵ As to why conservative politics remained muted (outside of Buddy), it is difficult to ascertain causes with certainty. Given that ethnography entails two-way “reading” processes, it is entirely possible that conservative-leaning informants assumed that I, as an academic figure, embraced liberal positions, and in turn they avoided ideological conflict through political self-muting. However, this is only conjecture.

without proper legal documents. He established this position while driving his pickup truck to the Sweet Springs Motorsports Complex in western Missouri, to which we were traveling for a Saturday night race (Casey, who with his mother Margaret responded to Buddy's political bombast with amusement, chuckled from the backseat). On this trip, we visited Dwayne's company in order pick up the race car, load it in the Manns' trailer, and haul it to the track. Operating just south of Kansas City, Dwayne was in the business of waste removal, using the large trucks located in and around his warehouse to suck sewage and "yellow liquid" (leftover grease) from various locations. Finding the car inside, Buddy and Casey went to work together: they greased bearings, added fuel, and tightened nuts as classic rock music played from a black Dewalt radio. Casey polished the car's external exhaust pipe until it shone brightly, commenting that he liked how the shine looked in photographs, and added that the Manns were "more likely to get sponsors" through this appearance. I also sensed an enjoyment of the resultant attention, reflective of dirt-track drivers' general embrace of recognition.

Once Buddy and Casey pushed the car into their trailer, we all hopped back into the truck for the one-hour eastward drive to Sweet Springs. It was a hot, sunny afternoon, and I sat lethargically in our Pits spot while the Manns' racing acquaintances began to arrive. These included Jake Graner, who at twenty years was an accomplished Micro Sprint driver with experience in national race events; Casey admired his success, and Jake viewed Casey as a kind of protégé whom he helped with tips on car setup and driving. Even though they competed directly against each other at times, I frequently watched Casey's and Jake's groups offer each other maintenance help when needed. Combined with the other Pits neighbor, Chad Jackson (twelve-year-old driver) and his

father, there existed a continuous flow of males, young to old, between the trailers and cars as they exchanged assistance and conversation.

This was to be a night of collision for the drivers around me. In his Heat race, Casey took the lead for around ten laps but lost control of the car on Turn 2, eventually rolling it over five or six times before it shook to a stop, wheels down. Standing on the edge of the track, Buddy appeared calm but concerned as he intently watched track officials run out to Casey's car to check on him. Casey exited after a few minutes, the spectators offering applause, and the crew and I headed back to our Pits space to wait for his arrival. An official towed the race car to us, another driving Casey in a golf cart. He seemed shaken and irritated, but his mood was lifted by a few visits from other teenaged drivers; one asked, "Did it hurt?", and Casey casually shook his head. He had survived while driving "Wide Fucking Open," the acronym ("WFO") printed on the side of the Manns' race car. Jake comforted Casey: "If you never crash, you aren't trying to win." Buddy turned to me with his own take: "He was driving on the edge, and the edge bit him." I did witness a touch of resistance from Casey against Buddy's teachings. The driver remarked that he was experiencing some head and back pain following the collision, leading to this exchange:

Buddy [laughing]: Well man up, boy!

Casey: Well, wait –

Buddy: I'm just kidding!

Casey: Well stop saying that, okay??

Just moments later, Dwayne offered fourteen-year-old Casey an assessment of masculinity earned: "Congratulations, your balls have finally dropped!" While resisting

his father's half-joking advice to "man up," Casey's driving aggression and survival had nonetheless generated recognition and badges of masculinity from the males around him.



Figure 3.8: Young drivers prepare to perform at Sweet Springs

Later that night, it would prove fitting that Jake had comforted Casey in the aftermath of a collision. Jake was busily passing other drivers in a Feature when he lost control of the car, much like Casey had done, and landed squarely roof-first on the track before rolling a few times. He emerged slowly from the car and sat on the dirt, head down and elbows on knees, while Emergency Medical Services personnel arrived in an ambulance to pick him up. Fifteen minutes later, Jake arrived at his Pits spots via the ambulance, walking with a limp toward his badly damaged car. To my astonishment, his group quickly resumed repairs on the car so that Jake could return for his final Feature race, despite a leg injury and neck pain resulting from whiplash. Upon returning to the track, he rubbed his car against the outside retaining wall and knocked loose the roof-

mounted wing, ending his night. I later asked Jake about his experience of the collision, and why he returned to the track:

You're just kinda "Oh, no" [chuckles]. And uh, y'know you don't really know which way you're flippin', or this or that, y'know you can't see anything, you just, you kinda hear some crunch-crunch and you just, your butt gets light 'n your head gets heavy, y'know, that sort of thing. For some reason it doesn't seem like it hurts when you're flipping, and then right when you think it's over, y'know there's that last bang, and then you're like, "Okay, that one hurt." [...] [My dad] was like, "We're done, right?" And I was like, "Heck *no!*" I was like, "This track owes us one tonight! We gotta go back out there!"

The night ended with more fireworks: during the post-Features hangout at our Pits spot, Jake excitedly reported to the group that a large fight had broken out between other drivers. Though anecdotal, the conflict challenged Buddy's contention that such savagery was much more prevalent in the "lower" classes of racing. After discussion of who was likely to blame for the fight, based on driver histories, our group departed the dirt lot around 1:00am. I looked over at Buddy as he drove us back across the border into Kansas; he was quiet but wide-awake, still wound up after another eventful night at the race track.

Dirt-track spectacles: Knoxville Nationals and NASCAR

Among his strong views, Buddy repeatedly insisted that there was one clear, supreme form of dirt-track competition: full-sized Sprint-car racing. The highest-prestige Sprint competition was the Knoxville Nationals, a nearly week-long program staged annually in Knoxville, Iowa. While not taking place in the geographic focus of my study,

the Nationals appeared to draw many Kansan spectators and drivers, rendering it relevant to my exploration of racing as connected to life and culture in Kansas. As we sat in the 81 Speedway bleachers, former driver Marty Baldwin remarked, “After you go to Knoxville, you’ll come back to Kansas and throw rocks at what you see.” Spurred on by insistence that Knoxville was the pinnacle of dirt-track racing and, in Buddy’s words, “one giant party,” I hit the road for Iowa on a Friday morning in early August.

The large scale of the Nationals became evident even before I arrived at Knoxville. Browsing stations in the car, I discovered that the National Public Radio local affiliate was sponsored by the Knoxville Raceway; given that racing and public radio were not typical partners, I judged this to be a sign of the prominence and financial power of the Nationals. I checked into my price-inflated hotel some twenty-five miles from the track (the only available lodging left) and proceeded to Knoxville, where I was greeted by heavy car traffic and thousands of people walking toward the track. These consumers were courted by dozens of vendors selling food, clothing, checkered flags and other racing-related paraphernalia. Once inside the track’s main gates I encountered an even more densely packed set of goods, particularly the brightly colored t-shirts that indicated the wearer’s attendance at the 2014 Nationals. I was also impressed by a racing simulator in which the player, after paying \$10, sat in an actual Sprint or Modified car, each of which was linked to a video game system. A group of around a dozen onlookers watched a large screen to see the player’s progress on a simulated track, while the car (though mounted to the ground) jerked to the right and left, replicating the tilting actions of an on-track car as it navigates turns.

Taken in whole, there appeared to be layers of geographically situated economies created by the large feature event. Beyond the track itself, to which one gained admission with a \$40-50 payment, vendors and consumers in tandem created peri-markets within a half-mile radius. Thus the event constituted a consumerist “spectacle,” the element of (post)modernist life first theorized in western scholarship by French intellectual Guy Debord in the 1960s. Setting up Baudrillard’s work on “the Image” a decade later, Debord defined his subject in *Society of the Spectacle* as “a social relation among people, mediated by images”; he argued that seductive images are created by capitalists in the interest of converting spectators into obedient consumers, who suffer from “false consciousness” through this immersion in “unrealism.”¹⁴⁶ This text has generated significant discussion in the half-century since; I particularly highlight Richard Kaplan’s 2012 response, in which he contends that Debord simplistically portrays individuals as “completely dependent and manipulated” consumers without agency. Kaplan advocates instead for a conception of the spectacle as a “web” in which actors, exercising tempered agency, possess the ability to “interpret cultural messages and signs.”¹⁴⁷ Adopting this analytical model, I found that the Knoxville Nationals created such a “web,” made up of many interactive strands between consumers and logoed products and services, which extended from the central spectacular space, the track itself. Even when I found a single explicit political advocacy exhibit near the track, consumer culture was rooted in its politics. A poster featured the red-letter headline “TRIGGER

¹⁴⁶ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994 [originally published 1967]), 3-6.

¹⁴⁷ Richard Kaplan, “Between Mass Society and Revolutionary Praxis: The Contradictions of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 4 (2012): 458, 468-470.

THE VOTE!” above a photograph of a stern Chuck Norris, in a cowboy hat and denim jacket (embodying his television role as a Texas Ranger), and a short text that condemned lawmakers’ “attacks on our Second Amendment rights.” “Trigger the Vote” was a campaign managed by the National Rifle Association; as the NRA is heavily funded and guided by the firearms sales industry, this was in fact a form of consumptive politics after all.¹⁴⁸

Once inside the track’s main gates, I took note of some of the identity dynamics at work. By my assessment this was a *very* White space, with few attendees that I would visually place in another racial category.¹⁴⁹ Gendered organization was also fairly clear; as I had witnessed at smaller events, the competitive space was occupied by nearly all-male drivers, crew members and track officials. By contrast, vendors were predominantly female, particularly young, slim women who wore constant smiles and called out to passers-by (“Hey, how about a raffle ticket!”). Within the oval track space, I found only one group of women featured: the “Knoxville Nationals Queen” and “her court,” the Queen having been crowned days earlier at the end of a competition against twelve other young women. Altogether, the Nationals reflected typical dirt-track gender organization in that men were dominant in “functional” competitive positions (driving, car maintenance, officiating), while women were deployed in “aesthetic” roles, selling products through the implication that they (particularly their bodies) were “available” and

¹⁴⁸ Joan Burbick examines the NRA and larger gun-based political advocacy in *Gun Show Nation: Gun Culture and American Democracy* (New York: New Press, 2007).

¹⁴⁹ While this could be interpreted as reflective of embedded Whiteness in rural Iowa, the fact that this was an event drawing onlookers from well beyond the state (and, as I would learn, well beyond the country) pointed to a pervasive Whiteness in the dirt-track racing community as a whole.

consumable as well. At an ideological level, then, masculinity was once again welded to competitive and mechanical functionality, femininity to aesthetics.

I eventually purchased my tickets and walked to the bleachers, sitting a couple dozen rows from the racing oval. Knoxville Raceway boasted around 25,000 seats, far larger than any dirt-track facility I had seen, and a few other differences were immediately apparent. First, these Sprint cars traveled at much higher speeds than the Modifieds and Stocks I had grown accustomed to watching; due to engine power, low weight, and roof-mounted wings that used incoming wind to push the car toward the inside of turns, the drivers were able to zip around the half-mile track in around fifteen seconds.¹⁵⁰ At the end of the first night, joining other spectators who walked around the oval after the last race, I also discovered the difference between the dirt at Knoxville and back in Kansas. In the latter location, post-Feature dirt was typically brown, dry and dusty; here at Knoxville, the soil was dark gray and, to my surprise, still rather moist. My shoe soles stuck to the track as I walked across it, indicating the “tacky” quality that many drivers desired in their quest for traction (Fig. 3.9).

¹⁵⁰ In explaining the power of a well-placed wing, Terry and Ryan Miller told me the story of a “Run What You Brung” race in which there were no restrictions on design; one driver brought his non-Sprint car with a huge vertical wing, described as a “billboard” due to its size, temporarily mounted on the roof. Apparently this driver was so fast (using the wing to quickly make turns) that he almost lapped the runner-up driver; however, on most weeks, without his wing, this driver “ran mid-pack,” according to the Millers. It was, they said, a sign of the potential speed produced by a wing.



Figure 3.9: Iowa’s rich soil proves to be ideal for both farming and racing, as shown at Knoxville Raceway

This difference paralleled a long history of terrestrial disparity between the states, as the tempestuous nature of farming in Kansas, driven by weather fluctuations, stands in contrast to the more stable weather and ideal soil in Iowa. James Shortridge has pointed to such difference in arguing that Iowa actually offers the closest material version of the “pastoral myth”; in turn, it seemed appropriate to find the “mecca” of dirt-track racing in a geographic area whose rich soil embodies pastoralism.¹⁵¹

The following morning, I drove back to the track while listening to radio commentators offer predictions for tonight’s “A-Main” race, in which the Sprint car national champion would be crowned. I re-entered the bleachers just in time for the Speed Sport World Challenge, an event featuring American and Australian drivers. The

¹⁵¹ Shortridge, *The Middle West*, 99.

track announcer declared that some of these American drivers had also competed in Australia, indicating a transnational exchange of racing. I had gradually become aware of the Australian presence in Knoxville, now reinforced by the group of seven Australian men, from young to middle-aged, sitting directly to my right.

More evidence of globalization was to be found inside the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame and Museum, located outside of the Raceway's Turn 2, in which the flags of Australia, New Zealand and Canada were prominently displayed. However, the dominant exhibition was the Hall of Fame membership: a red carpet bisected the opening room, with statues of accomplished drivers, positioned next to their actual cars, on each side. This week was devoted to Steve Kinser, one of the most prolific winning drivers in Sprint car history, and a statue of "King Kinser" (his nickname) greeted visitors at the front. Blonde, broad-shouldered and mustachioed, a look of stern focus on his face and the motor oil company Valvoline's logo emblazoned across his chest (backed by his Bass Pro Shops-stamped car), this representation of Kinser embodied a host of qualities embedded in racing: masculinity, Whiteness, performance, and eagerness for inclusion in the automotive-corporate sponsorship system (Fig. 3.10).



Figure 3.10: Steve “King” Kinser’s statue and car is featured at the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame and Museum during the 2014 Knoxville Nationals

The rest of the museum featured material displays of Sprint cars, uniforms, helmets and trophies, all reflecting particular drivers and accomplishments. I also found a tribute to Cheryl Glass, an African-American driver celebrated as a pioneer for her race and gender identity. Her conspicuousness and nickname, “The Lady” (singular), served as a reminder that Glass had not created a path which other non-White, non-male drivers had followed into Sprint-car racing.

That evening, I returned to my bleachers seat for the most highly anticipated program of the week: a series of smaller races before the champion-determinant “A-Main.” Such anticipation was evident in the moment I spotted a pair of red and green lights floating a few hundred above the track; I asked my Australian neighbor about it, and he nonchalantly replied, “Oh, that’s a drone,” adding that they were common at races

in his home country. Once its operator guided the drone down into his hands in the infield Pits, a small plane began circling overhead with a banner reading, “THANKS #KINGKINSER FOR ALL THE MEMORIES!” In the final moments before the A-Main, I stood up for the familiar Christian prayer and anthem, in this case American and Australian versions (both of which were enthusiastically belted out by my Australian seat mates, who were now a few beers in). The drivers were then introduced, each male performer flanked by the “Queen and her Court” for photographs, before they climbed into their cars to initiate the four-wide parade laps. With heavy rocky music blaring over the loudspeakers, fireworks began exploding out of Turn 3 while the drone flew overhead and captured video that was displayed on a large screen (Fig. 3.11).



Figure 3.11: The spectacle at Knoxville: Rock music, fireworks, and a bright sea of high-performance automobiles

With the first green light, Donny Schatz, the heavy favorite who had won seven of the previous eight Knoxville championships since 2006, quickly moved into the lead.

Many spectators had loudly booed him during the introductions, and now I began to understand why: it was *boring* to watch a race with little suspense and changes of order at the front. Dirt-track disruption, created by a sense of controlled chaos and anticipation of the violent and unexpected, was cruelly eliminated by Schatz's excellence. I laughed out loud as the announcer unconvincingly commented over the loudspeakers, "The finale should be – [pause] – great." Though the audience briefly awoke when another driver took the lead, Schatz soon regained his position at the front, eventually pulling away for an easy victory. As he ascended the podium to accept yet another trophy, most of the crowd politely applauding (and a small number booing), I shuffled out of the stadium with the others.

En route back to Kansas, deep into the wee hours of Sunday morning, I discovered the story that would briefly vault dirt-track racing into the national spotlight. A local ESPN affiliate radio station was reporting that NASCAR star driver Tony Stewart had struck and killed a local driver, Kevin Ward, who had climbed out of his car to confront Stewart after their collision on a New York dirt track. Stewart was the rare NASCAR driver who regularly ventured onto dirt tracks; his exploits seemed to contribute to an image of Stewart as "grassroots," in being in touch with "regular drivers," thus boosting his mass-level popularity. With NASCAR officials' efforts to project a more "family-values" image, including higher penalties for driver conflict, Stewart embodied the rugged, working-class "country boy" masculinity that many felt had been lost in professional Stock-car racing.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Howell, *From Moonshine to Madison Avenue*, 10; Patricia Lee Yongue, "'Way Tight' or 'Wicked Loose'?: Reading NASCAR's Masculinities," in *Motorsports and American Culture*, 135-137, 142-144.

The event jumped into mainstream media coverage, including a next-day *New York Times* article about the frequency of conflict in dirt-track racing.¹⁵³ Released spectator video captured Ward walking beside his car, angrily pointing his finger at Stewart's approaching car, at the moment Stewart jerked his vehicle to the right and dragged Ward under its wheels before his body rolled to a stop. Commentators focused on the debate over whether Stewart or Ward ultimately bore fault for Ward's death, and I looked forward to consulting my racing network for opinions. The following week, Joe Alma actually initiated our conversation about the event; he felt that Stewart had engaged in a "reckless" intimidation move, striking Ward despite a lack of conscious intention to do so. However, others placed the blame elsewhere. One week later, as we sat in the Lucas Oil Speedway parking lots, I asked Terry and Ryan Miller for their assessment of the Ward/Stewart conflict. Terry answered first: "My opinion is he didn't mean to do it," adding that Stewart felt "horrible about it" though he was probably trying to "sling a little mud on [Ward]" in retaliation. Ryan chimed in: "That kid [Ward] was smart enough to know" that the right-rear wheel on a Sprint car is "huge," and he'd heard that Ward was trying to grab the tire to "ride on it." Both Terry and Ryan referred to Stewart as "Tony," implying a felt familiarity not applied to the "kid" Ward. Ryan, again: "You've gotta think of it from Tony's point of view, he's, look how big a racer he *is*, you don't wanna ruin his life over somethin' stupid like on a, a Saturday night race, who cares?"

¹⁵³ "Death Highlights History of Confrontation for Racing," *New York Times*, August 10, 2014 (Accessed August 11, 2014): <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/sports/autoracing/a-death-highlights-racings-history-of-confrontation.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&version=HpSumSmallMedia&module=second-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&r=1>.

A few days later, as we sat at their dining room table, I asked Richard and Melanie Costa for their positions. Also referring to him as “Tony,” Richard felt that “the kid” Ward jumped onto Stewart’s car as he passed, sliding under the wheels to his death; furthermore, Ward was at fault for the collision that led him to exit his vehicle, having attempted an unlikely pass on the outside of a turn. With his usual measured assessment, Richard said, “I don’t know that I blame Tony,” and though “I’m not a Tony fan, I’m not a hater. [...] I’m glad to see Tony back in the seat.” Melanie’s response was quiet but firm: “I was saying that the kid [Ward] screwed up from the beginning, because he got out *of-his-car-on-a-race-track* [delivering these words in a staccato, steady rhythm]. You have signed your life away at that point.” However, they both conceded that Richard had also exited his car to yell at other drivers, so while it was easy to “say that I wouldn’t make the same mistake as the kid,” he might have done the very same thing.

In late September, a jury found Tony Stewart not guilty of any charges in the death of Kevin Ward. I saw the news break while watching the Speed TV channel with Luther and Martha Miller in their Topeka living room; they both approved of the decision, joining the television commentators in highlighting the fact that a toxicology report had revealed marijuana in Ward’s system on the night of his death. A few days later, Ryan also brought up this revelation, which seemed to move him from a more “gray” moralistic area to firm placement of blame on Ward, given that he might have been impaired while racing. Once again, I had witnessed how racing conflict provided opportunities, whether on television, online discussion boards or in someone’s garage, for racing participants to engage in debates of ethics.

In the wake of this media narrative fusion of NASCAR and dirt-track racing, I decided to conduct a fieldwork visit to Kansas Speedway. Reflective of NASCAR's expansion beyond the Southeast, the 1.5-mile, paved "superspeedway" opened in the early 2000s on the northwest corner of Kansas City.¹⁵⁴ The facility hosted two major NASCAR races per year; thus I ended my 2014 season with a divergent turn to a large-scale paved-track event. Following the rise of NASCAR's popularity in recent decades, scholars have examined the causes and implications of this trend. In an article for the 2014 anthology *Motorsports and American Culture: From Demolition Derbies to NASCAR*, sociologist James Wright articulates what he terms "The NASCAR Paradox." Stock-car racing, "an allegedly white-trash 'Bubba' sport," had grown in a twenty-first century U.S. commonly imagined as an "increasingly urban, citified, sophisticated, 'post-industrial' society."¹⁵⁵ Wright then translates this into an argument for a "Southernization" of the nation:

...the wild popularity of stock car racing – among Yankees and Southerners are alike – reveals a *nation becoming more like the South*, not just the South becoming more like the rest of the nation. Stock car racing thus joins country-western music and good old-time Bible-thumping religion as cultural phenomena typically associated with the South that have swept across the nation in the last few decades.¹⁵⁶

This Southern mythology of stock-car racing, so pervasive within racing's origin stories, was now applied to the *present* through Wright's argument. However, I would argue that conservatism, country-western music and "good old-time Bible-thumping religion" are

¹⁵⁴ Kansas Speedway website, "Track Facts": <http://www.kansasspeedway.com/About-Us/Track-Facts.aspx>.

¹⁵⁵ James Wright, "The NASCAR Paradox," in *Motorsports and American Culture*, 3.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 4.

associated not just with the South, but the Heartland region as well, and Wright's regionalization may represent another muting of racing in the latter context.

In the same volume, Jaime Noble Gassman analyzes the sophistication of corporate marketing at NASCAR sites, reflective of "rationalization – a growing emphasis on efficiency, quantification, calculation, standardization, and specialization." She adds that these developments entail "impersonality and homogenization," creating a risk of disconnect with NASCAR's consumer base.¹⁵⁷ In fact, a few of my interviewees cited corporatization and standardization as undesirable elements of NASCAR, in turn pointing to the dirt track as an appealing alternative racing site (see Chapter 3). My own NASCAR experience began in the parking lot of the Nebraska Furniture Mart, a gigantic structure positioned among the sea of "box stores" in this retail area.¹⁵⁸ I parked my car and walked past the Sporting KC soccer stadium to reach the Speedway's entrance; once inside, I felt a bit underwhelmed by my surroundings. This may be explained by the very nature of the spectacle, which, in the words of Amy Hughes, "exceeds the expected or the routine."¹⁵⁹ In comparison to the Knoxville Nationals, in which tens of thousands of people multiplied the population of a town to witness dirt-track races, Kansas Speedway was surrounded by vast parking lots, with its bleachers nowhere close to the 70,000-

¹⁵⁷ Jaime Noble Gassman, "The Spectacle of NASCAR: Rationalized and Enchanted by Sponsors," in *Motorsports and American Culture*, 150. The author is a 2006 doctoral graduate from the University of Kansas Department of American Studies.

¹⁵⁸ Kansas Speedway's location indicated not only the nationwide expansion of NASCAR, but also the mass movement of Heartland residents to major cities and adjacent "edge cities" over the past half century; like the other businesses in this shopping complex, NASCAR was following migrants and their money. See: Robert Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland*, 5-6, 214-253.

¹⁵⁹ Amy Hughes, *Spectacles of Reform* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 15-16.

spectator capacity. When I reached my seat, the middle-aged man to my right remarked that, despite his resale efforts, “I couldn’t give tickets away.”

A few rituals marked the periods before and halfway through the competitive mode. At the liminal state between driver introductions and race initiation, the Black Daggers parachute team (affiliated with the U.S. Army) floated into the infield, having dropped from an aircraft above. The track announcer declared that the unit had its roots in Vietnam, and the tribute to the war’s veterans drew applause and whistles from the crowd.¹⁶⁰ Paralleling dirt-track ritual, a Christian prayer and performance of the national anthem (by an Army Reserve Captain) followed. The 400-mile race also featured an intermission period during which a National Corn Growers Association representative was interviewed over the loudspeakers; he touched on the importance of the ethanol industry for the Heartland-region economy, commenting that “instead of dollars going to Iraq, they’re going to Iowa.” This pitch recalled Newman and Giardina’s description of “NASCAR Nation’ as a “Petrol Empire” in which gasoline-guzzling fans drive to a spectacle of fuel consumption staged amidst oil company logos.¹⁶¹ However, in 2014, in the wake of an Iraq War (part II) that now generated negative public memory, the corn

¹⁶⁰ For discussion of NASCAR militarization, see Newman and Giardina, *Sport, Spectacle, and NASCAR Nation*, Chapter 6, Part II: “Militarizing NASCAR Nation.” Communication scholar Michael Butterworth has written extensively on this phenomenon more broadly in sports culture, including: *Baseball and Rhetorics of Purity: The National Pastime and American Identity during the War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2010); “NFL Films and the Militarization of Professional Football,” in *Critical & Cultural Perspectives on the National Football League*, ed. Thomas Oates and Zack Furness (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 205-225; and “Public Memorializing in the Stadium: Mediated Sport, the Tenth Anniversary of 9/11, and the Illusion of Democracy,” *Communication & Sport* 2, no. 3 (September 2014): 203-224.

¹⁶¹ Newman and Giardina, *Sport, Spectacle, and NASCAR Nation*, Chapter 6, Part I: “NASCAR Nation As/In Petrol Empire.”

representative appealed to locality and regionalism in order to both promote fuel consumption and implicitly criticize the costs of the ongoing War on Terror.

During the race competition, I gained an understanding of both the appeal of, and my socialization into, the dirt-track version of racing. Early in the Kansas Speedway race (the “Hollywood Casino 400”), the forty-three drivers on the track began to separate from each other, soon spreading out evenly around the oval. From that point, there was little of the disruption, such as collisions and changes of order, that drew spectators to the dirt track; on pavement, where going “slideways” represented disaster and higher speeds rendered collisions catastrophic, competitors were disincentivized from aggressive, high-contact driving. I found this to be even more boring than the Knoxville Nationals A-Main, and now joined the other Kansas Speedway spectators in leaning back in the metal bleachers, talking casually and watching the race, while tiny cars (as viewed from this distance) sped down each curve and straightaway. Over the last few dozen laps, driver Joey Lagano maintained a steady lead of four to six car lengths before winning by that margin. I followed the masses exiting the Speedway, walking back to my car under the late afternoon sun. I then enjoyed the ease of navigating my car out of the Nebraska Furniture parking lot and through an effectively designed vehicle exit system that funneled drivers back onto the interstate. It was the final display of NASCAR neoliberalism, efficient and orderly, and lacking the general messiness of a community dirt track on a Saturday night. With familiarity came enjoyment of that messiness, and I found myself missing it on this Sunday afternoon.

Conclusion

I have argued throughout this text that dirt-track racing is the central activity around which a *community* is built and revolves. Beyond the actual “racing” exists a broad cultural field in which participants collectively attend races, prepare cars for races, perform paid work at races, and, of course, talk about races. Through focus on interpersonal exchange in the research for this chapter, I discovered that the Kansas racing community, at times segregated by track or car class, should also be viewed as a network of many small groups that may be connected to each other through alliance or conflict. It should be reiterated that there *does* exist a broad network, interlinked through shared participation in racing, yet a nuanced view also acknowledges the sub-networks that may be as small as a three-member racing crew.

Temporarily embedded in these small groups, I noted the many types of knowledges and practices being exchanged within them, with a particular focus on identity ideology. Though participants rarely discussed masculinity on an explicit level, outside of occasional comments on “real men” or one’s possession of “balls,” I read these male-dominant exchanges as inherently productive of masculinity ideology. Racing was reproduced patrilineally within each group I shadowed, boys typically joining (and perhaps inheriting) their male elders’ operations. Thus the male participants constructed a version of, to borrow from Pablo Schyfter, “locally hegemonic masculinity,” which he defines as “a spatio-temporally specific set of norms, ideals and symbols that privileges particular practices within” a particular group.¹⁶² In Kansas racing context, privileged

¹⁶² Pablo Schyfter, "Tackling The 'Body Inescapable' In Sport: Body-Artifact Kinesthetics, Embodied Skill And The Community Of Practice In Lacrosse Masculinity," *Body & Society* 14, no. 3 (2008): 82.

practices included mechanical and driving skills, both of which were exchanged between older and younger males. As I have framed these practices as *productive*, I would contend that racing operations also construct masculinity in relation to mechanical productivity. Men were additionally recognized “as men” for their ability to tolerate pain and engage in conflict; they spent extensive time discussing “fireworks,” engaging in dialectics of rationalism in which they typically reached a consensus on who was to blame for first violating particular rules, written or unwritten, and thus was at fault for the creation of conflict.

I did not merely witness these exchanges from afar; I was a (White male) participant who was occasionally drawn directly into them. As stated in this chapter’s opening, ethnography entails a human intimacy not found in other research forms, and any effort to remain a detached, “objective” observer, only seeing but not seen, is futile. I not only witnessed but shared the frustrations, joys, and other emotions produced by engagement with dirt-track racing. When Richard’s and Casey’s promising races ended in crashes, my heart sank; when Ryan earned a top-five finish in a Feature, I joyfully joined the Millers’ celebratory post-race meal. Thus my sensory experience reached beyond the sting of dirt or the roar of engines; I better understood the emotional sensations that accompany small-group racing membership.

Chapter Four

Racing Representation: Museum, Television and Fan-Archival Narrative

I was surprised to hear the Heartland Park Topeka announcer declare a “bonus class” over the loudspeakers on a warm Saturday night. This was the territory of Modifieds and Stocks, yet a group of unfamiliar cars emerged from the Pits and began to slowly navigate the dirt oval. I had seen no such designs before; they varied between trucks, “Sprint”-style cars, and other models, yet matched nothing to be found at contemporary Kansas tracks. Though their engines drowned out the announcer’s voice, I later discovered that these were the Midwest Outlaw Vintage Racers, a club headquartered in Erie, Kansas, whose members staged exhibitions with “vintage” cars dating back to the 1920s. At the end of the parade lap, the flag man hit the green light and the cars roared, accelerated, and slid their way around the track.

This nod to racing’s past brings to mind the centrality of memory and localism in the racing sphere. While the Vintage Racers enacted memory as performance, the present chapter is devoted primarily to archival forms of racing memory, specifically three types I examined in Kansas: auto racing museums, a television show, and memorial websites. These spaces and media, which were created for and by racing community members, extended the racing sphere beyond the central locations (race tracks) and times (Friday and Saturday nights). Primary creators were all Kansas-native former drivers in their sixties and seventies; in turn, collaborators, particularly contributors of artifacts and information, were fellow racing participants also rooted in the state. Thus a geographic localism, tied most intimately to Kansas but including the larger Heartland region, pervades both the creation and content of these public representational sites. In turn, they

deepen the sense of “community” emphasized in previous chapters. Replicating the social functions of the track or garage, public representations offer visitors the opportunity to connect to racing itself, in the form of cultural artifacts, as well as to other community members.

I will approach these forms as cultural *texts* in a nod to the textual analysis first popularized by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. My own “reading” is directed by a blended approach to text and context, though weighted more heavily toward the former.¹⁶³ In terms of contextual analysis, my interactions with the producers of the texts, as well as my general interactions with racing participants, shapes my own interpretation: I recognize the significance of producer intent and existent ideologies within the racing sphere, both of which influence the meanings that may be derived from these texts. My approach may then be recognized as a nod to the poststructuralist “rhizomatics” concept of Deleuze and Guattari, who argued that meanings emerge from a complex network of texts and contexts, the latter regarding location of production and reception.¹⁶⁴ I focus on a particular context and audience, the Kansas racing sphere and its direct participants, as I believe that they constitute the primary viewers of (and in some cases contributors to) the racing texts that I approach here. Thus while my own analysis is inherently contextual and subjective, I will attempt

¹⁶³ Over the past half-century, cultural studies (defined here as an analytical field) has consistently hosted debates over the proper amount of emphasis on “text” or “context,” in the wake of cultural studies scholars’ renewed interest in the latter in the 1960s. See: Urpo Kovala, “Cultural Studies and Cultural Text Analysis,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2002).

¹⁶⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1987). Cited in Kovala, “Cultural Studies and Cultural Text Analysis,” 3-4.

to situate these texts within the ideological and material structures that I found in other racing spaces.

The museums, television show and websites at the heart of this chapter feature primarily historical representation of racing past. The Birmingham school's Popular Memory Group has framed these types of texts as "public representations of history" that construct "dominant memory": "This term points to the dominant institutions and the part they play in winning consent and building alliances in the process of formal politics." However, the authors do also recognize that "dominant memory" remains contested, the result of "struggles" in which various parties compete to construct ascendant narratives.¹⁶⁵ This chapter entails a study of public "dominant memory," as contrasted with memory as constructed in my face-to-face interviews. When studying historical texts I maintain a contemporary contextual perspective; that is, I approach artifacts as a way to learn about present-day memory (as ideologically revealing) more so than as a way to access history itself.

While a small group of "producers" assembled representations of dominant memory, textual materials were frequently contributed by a much larger group in the racing sphere. Given such locally driven collaboration, I characterize public racing representations as derived from the "grassroots," a term directly invoked by the television show's title: *Grassroots Racing Show*. This concept has been discussed in previous chapters as connoting simplicity and working-class identity, particularly in reference to race tracks, and in doing so it carries a particular politics. In their 1998 text *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the soil of cultures*, Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash

¹⁶⁵ Popular Memory Group, "Popular Memory: Theory, politics, method," in *The Oral History Reader* (2nd ed.) (London: Routledge, 2006), 44.

shed light on the proliferation of “grassroots”-level, democratic movements of resistance against the modern imperative of capitalistic, “Monocultural” Modernism. They focus on Third-World contexts in which residents have advocated for local sovereignty in the face of global market influence. The authors argue that although “‘grassroots’ is an ambiguous word,” they choose it for its connotation of “‘initiatives and movements coming from ‘the people’: ordinary men and women, who autonomously organize themselves to cope with their predicaments.”¹⁶⁶

On one hand, those in the Kansas racing sphere existed outside of Third-World oppressed identity, though working-class people (regardless of geographic location) may experience a form of oppression (and certainly control) in relation to the capitalists down the street. On the other hand, the phrase “Grassroots Post-Modernism” is useful in analyzing Kansas racing culture. Participants were certainly locked into certain Modern imperatives, from their embrace of Christian and American identities to consumptive engagement with corporations in the fuel and food chain industries. However, the heightened emphasis on locality and collectivism, embodied in many participants’ preference for community racing to NASCAR (and its neoliberal imperative), indicated a kind of resistance, though perhaps not entirely consciously expressed, to global-corporate Modernism.¹⁶⁷ Thus while I found a generally low level of overt political expression by racing participants, the use of “grassroots” by Joe Alma and others to refer to track spaces marked by low capital, social or otherwise, indicated a connection between “grassroots”

¹⁶⁶ Gustavo Esteva, Madhu Suri Prakash, and Vandana Shiva, *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures* (London; New York: Zed Books), 3.

¹⁶⁷ My library catalog and Web searches on the word “grassroots” revealed its common use in political advocacy contexts, including among environmentalists and the movements discussed in *Grassroots Post-Modernism*.

and “ordinary”; thus an embrace of “grassroots” stood as an embrace of “ordinary” people and practices, a kind of resistance to perceived elitism. By Esteva’s and Prakash’s account, it also entails preservation of local community and culture, a central imperative behind the representational forms analyzed in this chapter.

Racing in the Museum

In the foreword to *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America’s Changing Communities*, David Kyvig notes that local museums tend to be overlooked (particularly by scholars and other commentators) in favor of larger, more famous museums in the U.S. However, he argues for the cultural significance of smaller institutions that “bring the museum-going experience within reach of a much larger public.”¹⁶⁸ The volume’s editor, Amy K. Levin, agrees, contending that while scholars have tended to gravitate towards larger, “national”-level museums, the “small, less famous institutions” are also influential and deserve attention.¹⁶⁹ In absorbing this perspective, I found that local museums, and the study of them, carry a direct parallel to my general project on dirt-track racing: the fragmentation of local racing into smaller events renders it less spectacular and transferable to mass-media and scholarly attention than such entities as NASCAR and Formula One. Likewise, the multiplicity of small local museums limits their cohesive interpretation relative to such larger, more “prestigious” institutions as the Smithsonian or New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. Thus in the larger interest of drawing attention to grassroots racing as

¹⁶⁸ David E. Kyvig, “Foreword,” in *Defining Memory: Local Museums and the Construction of History in America’s Changing Communities*, ed. Amy K. Levin (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁶⁹ Amy K. Levin, “Why Local Museums Matter,” in *Defining Memory*, 10-11.

culturally impactful and thus deserving of scholarly attention, I here point readers to its iteration in local museum form.

Museum studies also entails, in this case, an eye to material culture, which I broadly define as the material iteration of ideology. Henry Glassie has argued that all human-made objects may be defined as “art,” as they are material expressions of thought.¹⁷⁰ I will address racing-related cultural items as art, in regards to their (1) original construction as individual items and (2) arrangement in space by museum designers. Both processes (construction and arrangement) entail ideological expression by their practitioners, and may be thus read as “texts”. However, I am careful to avoid viewing such objects as *merely* symbolic texts, but also meaningful in their material form, which shapes one’s sensory interactions with them. I additionally acknowledge the importance, within material culture studies, of considering the production process, during which a producer “encodes” (to borrow from Stuart Hall) meanings into an artifact; this process takes place in an ideological context that inevitably shapes resultant cultural products.¹⁷¹ Given my limited knowledge as to the original construction of many items in these museums, I will primarily focus on the meanings that I read (or “decode”) when analyzing them, informed by the ideological analysis at the heart of this manuscript.

The Kansas Auto Racing Museum

¹⁷⁰ Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 41-42.

¹⁷¹ Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” 128-137.

I first visited the Kansas Auto Museum in 2012. I had exchanged emails with Roger Thompson, and on this day he warmly greeted and invited me in for a tour.¹⁷² Roger and his brother Doug, both attorneys in their 60s, ran a law office here in Chapman, a town of just over 1,000 residents that is tucked into the western base of the Flint Hills of north-central Kansas. The museum was actually an extension of their law office building, with the main lobby welcoming visitors to either operation.

Doug, who spearheaded the project, noted that he was first inspired to break ground after a trip to Charlotte, North Carolina, the hub of stock-car racing. He recalled telling his Pit crew, “We’re gonna do something different,” and added he had “prayed about it” before deciding to build a racing museum in his home state. Roger and Doug attested that the museum was largely funded by revenue from Kansas Racing Products, their engine block-driven business project. Doug had trained his legal assistants to welcome and help visitors to the museum, negating the need to hire additional staff; in addition, Doug, Roger, and volunteer helpers performed property maintenance, including mowing the many acres of grass, further limiting labor costs. Roger emphasized that they turned to local suppliers for the initial construction, and his use of the term “local” some half-dozen times during our first conversation reflected the importance of this element in the museum’s identity. That is, while it was built around Kansas-wide (state-level) racing, Roger framed the museum as a specifically local Chapman institution, concluding: “We are part of this community.”

Early in my work, I was particularly interested in visitors’ origins home locations, in order to gauge the geographic breadth of the museum’s appeal. Roger estimated that

¹⁷² Unlike the rest of the manuscript, I use subjects’ “real” names in this chapter, as it would be impossible to anonymize the creators of specific representations.

the museum received around six thousand visitors per year, noting that many arrived from Europe, as well as Australia, New Zealand, South America, and other parts of the world. He added that they were typically driving around the U.S. on vacation, and given Interstate 70 roadside signage indicating the museum's presence just a mile away, these travelers stumbled in without having planned to do so. I witnessed such an event during my research; as I worked on my laptop near the entrance, a thirty-something man walked in and remarked, "So this is your place, huh?" I laughed and replied in the negative; our conversation revealed he had just traveled from Los Angeles to St. Louis to pick up a vintage sports car, which he was now driving back to the west coast. The man said that his wife wanted "something goofy," and he felt that this was the place to find it. Despite his mild dismissal of the museum as a novelty shop, I redirected him to Roger, who enthusiastically walked outside to examine the newly purchased car.

However, Roger confirmed that the majority of his visitors hailed from Kansas; he noted that even in-state visitors were frequently "shocked" by the amount of racing history in the state, including the Kansas roots of both the first NASCAR race winner and the National Hot Rod Association. Roger asserted, "We're a hub for all types of racing," and when I asked if he felt that the Midwest was "underrated" in terms of racing history, he replied, "Yeah, I think so. I think the Midwest has been *completely*." He was clearly aware of the historicization by which American racing had been mythologically centered in the Southeast, and seemed to view the museum as a tool by which Kansas racing might gain its proper recognition within the racing "canon."

On my first arrival at the museum site, I found the Thompsons' buildings in the middle of a large grass lot. The main entrance offered a set of collapsed symbols

positioned at the top of an archway: a “Welcome” sign included checkered flags, the most common visual marker of racing, and was flanked by Christian crosses, which were in turn flanked by physical checkered flags posted on either side of the sign (Fig. 4.1).



Figure 4.1: The entrance to the Kansas Auto Racing Museum offers racing and Christianity in tandem

Doug had described the museum as “the Good Lord’s project,” and Christian identity was quite clearly attached to the space, reminding me of the prayers that typically marked the beginning of competition at Kansas tracks. Like these races, the museum marked its liminal, transitory space (in this case material rather than temporal) with religious symbology, indicating the significance of Christian ideology in structuring the events to follow. I thus encountered the cultural-symbolic welding together of Christianity and racing itself.

I continued through the archway and lobby, which included a gift shop featuring museum-themed shirts and miniature race cars, before stepping onto the black-and-white

checkered floor of the museum's access hall. Passing a series of photographs capturing the famous 1974 on-track fire at the Hutchinson Nationals, the images glowing with orange yellow intensity, I walked into the main exhibit space. It was rectangular, around 130 by 50 feet, and packed with a volume of items I simply didn't expect from a state-level racing museum. I walked past a sign reading "Welcome – God Loves You – Come Back Soon – Thank U" and spotted the small television studio space in which Doug and Roger filmed their weekly *Grassroots Racing Show*, addressed in the section below. Directly in front of the studio sat a table stacked high with colorful racing magazines, while to the right I found an exhibit for the film *Can We Talk?* Doug had written the script for this Christian-themed made-for-television film, which premiered on local television in 2013; the display featured film posters and a large cardboard check used on-set. Following this media theme, I moved on to a yellow tent titled "Media Center," under which I touched a scarred tire (used in competition), donned headphones to listen to the "Call of the Race" (a recorded conversation between a driver and crew chief), and watched "Crash Impact II," a montage of serious on-track collisions. I was beginning to sense the theme of virtual experience: museum visitors were offered the opportunity to access recreations of racing "action," whether in media or material forms.

I was about to experience a heightened version of this experience. A small movie theater at the back of the museum bore a marquee reading "Now Showing: Wild Wild West." Thinking back to Kansas newspapers' construction of early race car drivers in the model of the cowboy, I settled into one of the plush, cushioned seats and hit "Play."¹⁷³ The screen lit up with white text against a black background: "Now it's time to take a

¹⁷³ Marston, "Spectacles of Speed: Modernity, Masculinity, and Auto Racing in Kansas, 1909-1918," 205-206.

walk on the wild side!” Heavy rock music overlaid a quick-hitting video series of violent collisions on dirt tracks, as Sprint cars flipped, rolled, and caught on fire; in between, the movie featured short clips of female models in bikinis and high-heel shoes strutting down catwalks. Altogether, the film offered a spectacular gendered display of male drivers, who suffered collisions or basked in the glow of successful performance, and female models who were granted space on-screen through display of their commodified bodies. After ninety minutes of Sprint car crashes at dirt tracks from California to Pennsylvania, a message appeared: “WARNING: Press Stop Now: if there are minors present or if you object to female models performing in racing sponsored bikini contests.” With Billy Squier and Van Halen classic rock music playing, the next section featured a montage of women tearing off clothes to reveal swimsuits and bodies that were, in some cases, likely surgically “modified.” One woman moved down the catwalk in a bikini that featured the same black-and-white checkered pattern prevalent in this museum and so many other racing spaces, symbolically welding together racing and sex (Fig. 4.2).



Figure 4.2: Screenshot from the film *Raw! 2000: Raw! Thrills & Spills Volume 9*

I emerged from the theater to explore the rest of the museum, which was built around material displays of memory. The central space was largely occupied by three-sided display stands, each around eight feet tall, and most of which focused on twentieth-century events. Each stand carried a theme, ranging from particular race tracks to famous drivers, as well as “NASCAR,” “Drag Racing,” “Sprint Car Racing,” and the history of the Kansas Auto Racing Museum itself. The displays were predominantly covered with photographs and newspaper clippings; Roger informed me that many of these items were donated to the museum. Taken together, they comprised a collective “Image” of race cars and drivers, who were nearly entirely male and in some cases accompanied by “trophy girls” in posed photographs. Given the continued predominance of male drivers to this present, this pattern in the museum likely reflected racing’s gendered organization more so than curator gender bias; in any case, it reproduced the construction, as I had witnessed throughout the racing sphere, of the driver (and mechanic) as male. Hetero- and White normativity were also reflected by such imagery, a broad trend among local museums around the United States.¹⁷⁴

The rest of the museum space was occupied by material artifacts, including Modified, Stock, Sprint, Midget, and other “vintage” cars. Visitors were thus able to approach and touch the automobiles, enacting intimacy with the powerful commodities around which the racing sphere revolved. Material culture mash-up was most evident in the center space of the museum: a racing truck body was suspended above the floor, surrounded by an arrangement of helmets, trophies, and engine parts (Fig. 4.3).

¹⁷⁴ Levin, “Why Local Museums Matter,” 12.



Figure 4.3: An array of symbolic metal at the center of the Kansas Auto Racing Museum

The helmets were clearly used in competition, and signed by the drivers who wore them, including a badly burned helmet and set of gloves from the Hutchinson fire in the entrance photographs. The trophies represented both Feature (individual race) and season points championships victories, dozens of them won by the Thompson brothers. As I gazed at this display of shiny metal, I realized that it offered visitors a connection to history, in that these items represented lived and notable events in racing, but also offered a sense of connection to the material reality of racing itself. That is, the items were symbolic, but also significant in their materiality; by gazing upon and touching the hard, heavy surface of an engine or a shredded tire, one could gain a sense of the visceral and intense sensory experiences of racing. Henry Glassie has referred to cultural objects as “affecting presences” which act as “subjects” rather than “objects,” reflecting ideas and

material experiences.¹⁷⁵ As I gazed at the burned helmet and gloves, I sensed their affective presence through storytelling: in deep immersion with these subjective items, I could more easily imagine the moment of trauma they represented. However, I was also struck by the sharp contrast between this quiet atmosphere and that of the race track, marked by roaring engines, speed and dirt, in which these items were used and thus approved for inclusion in the museum.

Having received a larger dose of Kansas racing than I could have imagined, I proceeded back through the hall of fiery photographs to the lobby. I decided to purchase a small model car, designed after that of Doug Thompson, in the gift shop area near the exit. Stepping back outside into sunshine, I strolled under the archway, topped by an exit sign reading “Thanks for coming – God Loves you,” and climbed into my car to get back on the road.

The High Banks Hall of Fame National Midget Auto Racing Museum

From Chapman, one may drive forty-five minutes west on Highway 18, then another forty-five minutes north on Highway 81, to reach the small town of Belleville. In terms of racing history in Kansas, Belleville might boast the deepest version of it. First hosting car races as a fairgrounds track in 1911, the Belleville High Banks (whose “high banking” was added in the 1930s) has gained a reputation as “the world’s fastest half mile dirt track,” its self-anointed title.¹⁷⁶ For decades, Belleville has hosted the Midget

¹⁷⁵ Glassie, *Material Culture*, 42.

¹⁷⁶ Allan E. Brown, *The History of America’s Speedways Past & Present* (3rd ed.) (Comstock Park, MI: America’s Speedways, 2003), 318; 1911 opening confirmed by newspaper research on 1910s racing. “Fastest half mile” nickname was listed on the Belleville High Banks website as of December 2015.

Nationals, a prestigious event for drivers of the Midget (smaller than full-sized) race cars. With the oval's lowered inside edge and raised outside edge, comprising a twenty-degree slope from top to bottom, some Sprint cars have circled the track at 130 miles per hour.

I learned this information through Don McChesney, the director of the High Banks Hall of Fame National Midget Auto Racing Museum. When I pulled into the parking lot on a cool Monday morning, Don came outside to greet me, expressing enthusiasm for my academic attention to the institution he had spent a great deal of time to build and maintain. Don had initiated work on the High Banks Hall of Fame in the late 1990s, around the same time that the Thompsons were opening their museum. From the beginning, he had faced similar challenges in terms of funding: an architect had designed the building pro bono, with the glass, concrete and other materials donated by material providers. At that point Don received a Kansas state tourism grant, but was “still broke,” and received enough money from a foundation to finish construction. In the present, Don continued to rely entirely on donors to keep the building going, while still supporting himself through the farm he had owned since the 1980s (thus maintaining the museum as a time-intensive side project to his paid labor, much like the Thompsons). It seemed, then, that the directing of local auto racing museums paralleled racing itself: both required a passion that outweighed the financial disincentives for doing so, as well as a concurrent but separate source of income to be funneled into the racing enterprise.

Don gave me a tour of his collection, which reflected an even higher emphasis on material culture than the Kansas Auto Racing Museum: free of digital media items, the Belleville collection was composed of automobiles and parts, photographs, trophies, plaques honoring drivers, and other artifacts. After we strolled by two brightly painted

vintage Midget cars (from the 1950s and 1970s) positioned near the front door, Don remarked, “I gotta show you this while you’re here.” He led me to a glass encasement in which sat a replica car, around one foot long, designed after the “Belle of Belleville” that had been raced for nearly two decades during the mid-twentieth century (Fig. 4.4).



Figure 4.4: The limestone “Belle of Belleville” carving at the High Banks Hall of Fame

An accompanying placard noted that John Boyer (according to Don, “a local farmer”) had carved this out of a single piece of “Kansas limestone.” The piece, which was highly detailed and included an inscription, “Goodrich Mach Shop,” along the right side of the car’s body, connoted an emphasis on both racing and localism through its reference to a specific shop and use of limestone. In my time in Kansas I had come to understand the importance of limestone to Kansas identity, including through its inspiration (as a type of

“chalk rock”) for the long-standing University of Kansas chant, “Rock Chalk Jayhawk.”¹⁷⁷

Don then led me through “the old ticket booth that they were gonna haul off” from the Belleville High Banks track; “We took it and rebuilt it.” Just to the left of the small wooden booth, topped with a “Welcome” sign, I found an old, rusted roll cage and a piece of weathered rope. As I held the twine, Don explained that while Sprint Cars (which don’t have engine starters) are currently pushed to start up the engine, they were formerly pulled (“usually a high school kid” in a pickup truck), with the driver holding the rope and eventually releasing it when the car engine turned and started. These types of artifacts carried forward the “storytelling” function of the scarred pieces at the Kansas Auto Racing museum, all delivering local history through materials that could be viewed and (unlike most art museums) touched. Both the Thompsons and Don had opened their museums at the dawn of the Internet age, which signaled heightened user engagement with digital (non-material or “virtual”) imagery. In turn, material artifacts offer visitors the opportunity to connect their bodies, especially their hands, to objects that can push back. My fieldwork had revealed that racing participants were certainly linked into the digital realm, from widely-owned smart phones to the use of video to review driving performances, yet racing (as practice) was primarily centered around interactions with metal and rubber. In turn, I presumed that museum visitors, most of whom necessarily held some pre-existing interest in racing, experienced pleasure in material-item engagement.

¹⁷⁷ University of Kansas website: “The Chant”:
<http://www.ku.edu/about/traditions/chant/>.

Continuing our tour, Don led me through the restored ticket booth and into a sea of artifacts. Around a dozen race cars, mostly of the “Midget” variety, occupied the main museum space (Fig. 4.5); Don touched on the technical aspects that distinguished one from the other.



Figure 4.5: The High Banks Hall of Fame’s main automobile display

I was reminded of my own technical ignorance, at times struggling to follow Don’s comments on timing gear specifications, the importance of bearings quantity, and shock systems that were guided by “a series of cones.” He also told a story that, like others from Kansas racers, reflected a pride inflected with working-class identity. His collection included a 1940s race car that he once brought to a show, titled “Art of the Car,” held at an art institute in Kansas City. Don noted that he felt “way out of place” among the “Bentleys, and Rolls Royces, and Aston Martins and Ferraris”; however, much to his surprise, “this ol’ 1946 V-8 Curtis Craft had more people around it all day than all the others.” In addition to the class component of this recollection, Don joined others in the

Kansas racing community through his celebration of the local (a Kansas collection car) generating attention and significance at a larger level, in this case a major-city car show.

His localistic pride carried over into the Jim Roper display. Roper was a Kansas native who, as I also learned at the Kansas Auto Racing Museum, had won the inaugural NASCAR race in 1949. Don attested that Jim drove the actual race car (rather than hauling it in a trailer) from Kansas to North Carolina, won the race in Charlotte, and then drove it right back to Kansas. The museum's display included a photograph and description of the now-deceased Roper, as well as the original trophy, bronze-colored and a little over a foot tall, that he was awarded sixty-five years earlier (Fig. 4.6).



Figure 4.6: The first NASCAR victory trophy lies in residence in Belleville, Kansas

Don recalled that when Roper visited Belleville in the late 1990s, during the early stages of museum construction, he told Don, “All my stuff is comin’ to your place.” As we gazed at the trophy, Don pledged that it *would* indeed stay here, and nobody (including curators for the NASCAR Hall of Fame in Charlotte) would so much as borrow it. It was a clear rebuke to Southern racing mythology, in this case the South-centric national

league's effort to claim a piece of the Roper narrative. As Don remarked, "It's not goin' to North Carolina, or we'll never see it again."

Don had also distributed photographs throughout the museum. The "Winner's Pictures" section honored drivers who had won major Features at Belleville High Banks, and Don focused on the eventual NASCAR drivers (such as Jeff Gordon) among this group. The "official" Hall of Fame area was made up of a few dozen plaques, each honoring a particular driver through his name, image, and short paragraph with a description of accomplishments (Fig. 4.7).



Figure 4.7: Dirt-track heroes are mythologized at the museum

Like the National Sprint Car Hall of Fame and Museum in Knoxville, Iowa, this exhibition venerated victorious drivers, elevating the social status of both racing and those that performed well within it. Driver excellence was also symbolized by the victory trophy, a "text" which offers both linguistic and non-linguistic expressions of honorific recognition. The wall of plaques provided, perhaps, the most "official"

construction of heroic mythology, as inclusion in the Hall of Fame was predicated on the approval of a voting group.

Both museums also collectively elevated the commodity. Consumer culture, well-embedded in American context by the twenty-first century, has been defined by Eric Arnold and Craig Thompson as “a social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, are mediated through markets.”¹⁷⁸ In racing museums, the vast majority of items were commodities that had traveled through markets en route to their donation to curators. The route itself (consumption and use) of each commodity, from producer to museum, was supremely important, and largely determined its inclusion in a racing collection. This was a reflection of the historical context in which the museums were built and maintained (“historical context” referring to the present-day period of hyperconsumption), yet also served to reproduce the normativity of commodities as pervasive in American life. At the same time, while globalized consumer culture entails the physical separation between consumption and production processes, Don’s tour carried an emphasis on production process and functions, thus partially reducing my own sense of separation. It was significant, however, that he had highlighted (“everybody’s gotta see this”) an artifact, the limestone automobile carving, that was locally produced with local materials, and had not traveled through global market circuits prior to installation at the museum. For Don, this seemed to separate the item from the others, and perhaps its local route rendered it a bit more “sacred” than the commodities that filled much of the room. While I have echoed Henry

¹⁷⁸ Eric J. Arnould and Craig J. Thompson, “Consumer Culture Theory (CCT),” *The Journal of Consumer Research* 31, no. 4 (2005): 869.

Glassie's argument that all human creations may be considered "art," I sensed a certain elevating artistic purity in an object delivered a short distance from maker to museum. Most important, however, was that these artifacts carried *stories*, representative of experience. And from a corner of the Kansas Auto Racing Museum, the Thompsons delivered such stories on a weekly basis.

Racing on Video

As argued in this chapter's introduction, "grassroots" processes are central to each form of public racing representation. Roger and Doug Thompson tapped into this aesthetic through the title of their weekly television program, the *Grassroots Racing Show*. While referencing the racing itself, "grassroots" may certainly be applied to the production of the show as well: the Thompsons recorded it inside the Kansas Auto Racing Museum, assisted by their legal assistants (one of whom, Glenda, edited video). It was broadcast by Eagle Communications and Cox, the latter provider reaching most of Kansas and part of Nebraska; the Thompson brothers had been unsuccessful (as of 2014) in gaining broadcast access to Kansas City. Episodes could also be viewed through the show's Youtube channel, expanding its potential reach outside of television broadcast limits.¹⁷⁹

In contrast with this "grassroots" iteration, a major producer had actually attempted to bring Kansas dirt-track racing to a national audience. In 2010, the Discovery Channel broadcast *Heartland Thunder*, a "reality show" filmed at Lakeside Speedway. The show's preview advertisement focuses on four particular drivers

¹⁷⁹ "GrassrootsRacingShow" channel link (Accessed December 17, 2015): <https://www.youtube.com/user/GrassrootsRacingShow>.

described as “blue-collar family men who become local legends on race night.” While I was unable to access episodes of *Heartland Thunder*, which was cancelled during its first season, its website videos reflect the twenty-first century reality-show formula through an emphasis on conflict (“bad blood”), in this case rooted in the drivers’ class differences.¹⁸⁰ A writer for *Examiner.com* noted that it was a “major television production,” as Lakeside hosted a large number of cameras, “big, blinding lights,” and helicopters recording aerial video from overhead; this level of production is evident in the online video clips.¹⁸¹

The low-budget *Grassroots Racing Show*, which ran outside of the pressures of a global mass media company, was in its fourth season in 2014. A basic format connects all twenty-eight episodes, which are each just over twenty minutes long without advertisements.¹⁸² A typical show begins with a heavy, guitar-driven rock song playing over an animated spinning satellite dish, overlaid by the *GRS* logo. This is followed by the display (and announcer mentioning) of a few sponsors, all automobile-related businesses in north-central Kansas. Doug and Roger then appear on screen, standing in their corner studio in the museum, with Doug as the lead host and Roger the “co-host” (Fig. 4.8).

¹⁸⁰ “Heartland Thunder,” Discovery Channel website (Accessed December 17, 2015): <http://www.discovery.com/tv-shows/other-shows/videos/other-shows-heartland-thunder-videos/>

¹⁸¹ Craig Hover, “Race fans: Heartland Thunder on the Discovery Channel from Lakeside Speedway debuts tonight,” *examiner.com*, June 21, 2010 (Accessed December 17, 2015): <http://www.examiner.com/article/race-fans-heartland-thunder-on-the-discovery-channel-from-lakeside-speedway-debuts-tonight>

¹⁸² I adopt the present tense when describing the show, as well as websites, because I analyze them primarily as infinitely existent cultural texts (much like one would examine a book or film).

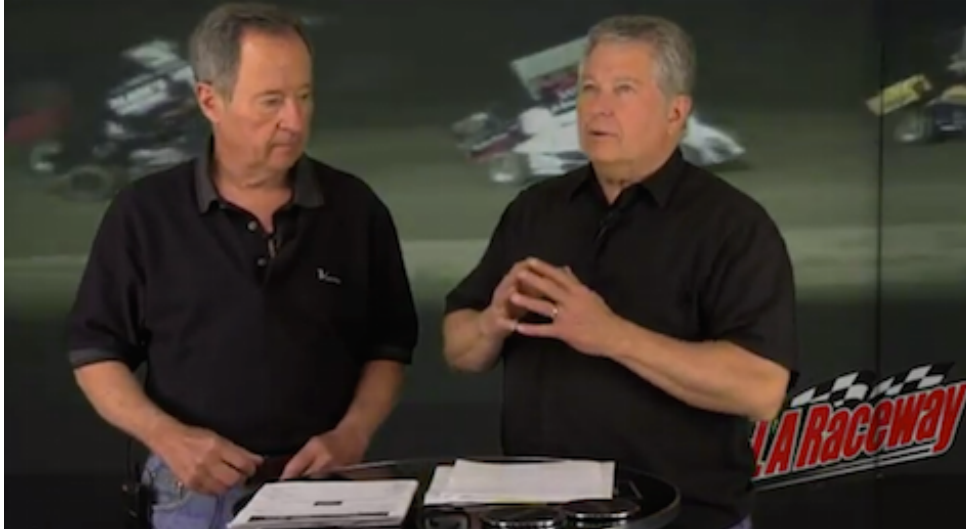


Figure 4.8: Roger (left) and Doug Thompson speak to their fellow dirt-track devotees on the *Grassroots Racing Show*

Doug “plays it straight,” in terms of taking up a straight-ahead, descriptive and analytical role on that episode’s content. By contrast, Roger typically serves in comic relief, at times making comments so random that I presumed them to be rooted in “inside” jokes. After this introduction, lasting a few minutes, Doug signals a transition to video of that week’s featured content, usually footage of one to three Feature races, which occupy most of the show before concluding remarks from the Thompsons in their studio space.

Taking the season’s worth of episodes together, the most pervasive connective element may be the *positivity* that marks the program. In framing the subsequent race footage, always captured by their friend and videographer Mike Kraft at various tracks, Doug and Roger frequently use the words “fantastic,” “great,” “excellent,” and other such terms to describe both the race “action” as well as the tracks themselves. As Doug once says of Springfield Raceway in Missouri, “*Always a good race track ‘n good racing.*”¹⁸³ These compliments are also applied to Mike, as the Thompsons regularly express their

¹⁸³ “10 JohnKuntzPart1 051014 no commercials,” *Grassroots Racing Show* Youtube channel, June 24, 2014 (Accessed December 5, 2015): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o48tIK_k6JM&feature=youtu.be.

fondness and admiration for him and his videos. At one point, Roger (in his usual dry panned humor) declares that Mike is “not human,” touching on his great interview skills, “always upbeat” demeanor, skillful installation of in-car cameras, and prediction of race winners: “He goes out there and interviews the winners before the race ever *starts!*” At one point, during an episode filmed during my research at their museum, the Thompsons even single me out for such praise. I couldn’t help but feel grateful for the “exposure” of my project as I watched Roger discuss it: “Steve’s invested three years in this, and he’s gonna do a book besides, but a bright kid, and very thorough, and I just enjoy being around him all the time. [...] Been on it for three years, I mean he’s, he’ll be in tomorrow and he was here for three days last week, and he says he isn’t ten percent through the Museum, so, we’ll get there.”¹⁸⁴

This type of social positivity, extended to those within the racing sphere, projects the sense of community that I was also witnessing in-person among participants. The Thompsons not only report on but *support* the racing community through promotion of its participants from track owners to drivers. This support also takes the form of financial investment, such as when Doug mentions on-air that the *Grassroots Racing Show* has sponsored Trevor Hunt, a fifteen-year-old driver who experienced success in Modified races around the region. Capital support and promotion was commonly traded between the show and others, including the various local businesses (such as Belleville Motor Sports and Advanced Engine & Machines of Salina) who purchased advertising time in each episode. The Thompsons also used the show as a platform to promote their *own*

¹⁸⁴ “16 Lakeside051014 pt2momDay,” *Grassroots Racing Show* Youtube channel, August 11, 2014 (Accessed December 5, 2015): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxdFO_7yXL8&feature=youtu.be.

endeavors, including the Kansas Racing Products company that was, according to Doug, largely funding the show itself. Furthermore, Doug frequently mentions on-air the museum in which he is standing, inviting viewers to come visit. And while most of the Feature races on video were actually captured outside of Kansas (particularly in Missouri), the Thompsons regularly note how Kansas drivers have fared in such races. Through this localistic emphasis, I sensed that I was witnessing a form of resistance (again, not necessarily on a conscious level) to the global-capital structures that marked the present day. The *Grassroots Racing Show* featured drivers, businesses and tracks in and around Kansas, acting as a nexus point for the racing community and facilitating a “grassroots”-level emphasis on local networks, including the intra-sphere circulation of capital.

However, also reflective of my participant-observation findings, such positivity is tempered (or at least complicated) by the frequent expressions of nostalgic memory, sometimes venturing into declinism, on the show. The Thompsons, who both raced cars for over a half-century, are sometimes joined on *Grassroots Racing* by other men of a similar age, and they all fondly reflect on racing times past. For example, during an episode featuring video from Salina Speedway, Doug comments, “I raced there a lot, never did win a points title there, but I did win a lot of Features.” He adds, “I have a lot of fond memories there,” and notes the “tough competition, good racing” at Salina.¹⁸⁵ Nostalgia is also evident when the brothers describe the former half-mile track in Topeka at the fairgrounds, with Roger quipping, “You could almost throw a rock from the

¹⁸⁵ “17 SalinaPT1ModLite HobbyStock,” *Grassroots Racing Show* Youtube channel, August 12, 2014 (Accessed December 5, 2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ub4bts-gJ0#t=388>.

fairgrounds to the Capitol building [downtown].”¹⁸⁶ This represents a distinct era from the twenty-first century, in which tracks are generally built on the outskirts, if not miles away from, residential areas, thus no longer part of the geographic focal point of communities (in some ways mirroring the larger transition from town-center businesses to perimeter corporate box stores).

The desire for a racing past is particularly evident during a two-part episode broadcast early in the season. Kevin Prinskie, appearing to be in his sixties, interviews “dirt legends” Bob Trostle (engine builder) and drivers Shane Carson, Ramo Stott, Chris Collier, and Freddy Fryar.¹⁸⁷ Each conversation reflects comfort between interviewer and interviewee, as they exchange smiles and laughs along with stories. In a few cases, Prinskie steers the conversation toward criticism of contemporary conditions, at one point asking, “What do you think of the state of affairs of racing right now? Too much politics in it now? Too much big corporation?” Stott responds in the affirmative: “We didn’t have no crew chiefs back in the seventies,” but with the expansion of crew chiefs and specialization, “you had to be an engineer to get the chassis better so you could be more competitive. That increased the amount of money you had to spend to go to a race, the same way with the tires.” In another interview, Collier calculates that Modifieds (including the engine) cost \$40,000-\$50,000, and this expense “keeps the guys that’s got

¹⁸⁶ “27C Lakeside StockCars nocommercials 100414USRA,” *Grassroots Racing Show* Youtube channel, November 24, 2014 (Accessed December 5, 2015):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d3yoGxgR6Js>.

¹⁸⁷ “MidWestDirtLegendsPART1nocommercials” (Apr.),” *Grassroots Racing Show* Youtube channel, April 24, 2014 (Accessed December 5, 2015):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8VNQZAdNjY>;

“MidWestDirtLegendsPART2nocommercials,” *Grassroots Racing Show* Youtube channel, April 21, 2014 (Accessed December 5, 2015):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ckdh2fQHdA>.

the talent – like my grandsons for instance, I’m wanting to put ‘em in something, but where do you start ‘em at, when it comes to this, you know? The expense has really ate it up, I think.” Both Stott and Collier seem to lament not only the costs themselves, but particularly the fact that, in their view, the ability to *pay* for racing has dwarfed the ability to *drive*, in terms of who ends up on the track. As they see it, talent-based meritocracy is in decline. It is a narrative that I had witnessed in exchange among my participants, but seemed to take on more credibility and power when expressed by such “legends” on a television show.

Regarding the expressed purpose of the show, Doug emphasizes that he and Roger are providing viewers with the opportunity to connect to racing from the comfort of their home. At one point, Doug declares from the studio, with a tone of purpose, “If you like short-track racing, dirt-track racing, then the *Grassroots Racing Show* is the show you need to watch, because it’s just like bein’ there [...] when we’re filming this, it’s just like you’re a spectator up there in the stands.”¹⁸⁸ Late in the season, Doug offers a monologue in which he articulates the purpose and strengths of the show:

You know that Speedvision [the racing-themed cable television channel] is now no longer in existence, and your *Grassroots Racing Show* is about as authentic as you can possibly get, and it is! [...] You put in-car cameras, uh we’re shooting in – Mike’s converted over – we’re shooting in HD for ya so that ya get the best of color. The, uh, announcers that we’ve used at the race tracks when we tap into their sound system – they realize, of course, that this is gonna be on television and they’ve done a *really* good job of bringing home that grassroots racing program. And

¹⁸⁸ “16 Lakeside051014 pt2momDay,” *Grassroots Racing Show* Youtube channel, August 11, 2014 (Accessed December 5, 2015): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxdFO_7yXL8&feature=youtu.be.

that's the whole name of the show, of course, is "grassroots racing," because that's what we *want* it to be. Is just exactly what you would see at the race track, because not everybody can make those trips, especially with the economy the way that it is, and fuel prices. So we're glad to be able to have the opportunity to bring the racing action into your living room, and we appreciate it.¹⁸⁹

While I have defined "grassroots" through an emphasis on diffused power and collaboration, Doug here connects "grassroots" to the "authentic," in arguing that his show is delivering a version of racing that closely replicates the experience of in-person spectatorship. He also notes the end of the Speedvision channel, which had joined *Heartland Thunder* as extinct large-budget efforts to mediate dirt-track racing; once the dust on these projects cleared, only the *Grassroots Racing Show* remained to deliver community track action through the small screen. On the subject of corporate failure, Doug also subtly references the economic recession dating back to the 2000s (in many ways a product of global-corporate capitalism), and thus extends his show as an opportunity for capital-strapped viewers to maintain contact with the local "grassroots" by tuning into the show. In the world of Heartland dirt-track racing, the "grassroots" held together the various "above ground" expressive iterations, from the track to the screen, of this cultural field.

¹⁸⁹ "27 BmodifiedsLakeside100414," *Grassroots Racing Show* Youtube channel, November 20, 2014 (Accessed December 5, 2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rurIDvMUKII>.

Racing on the Web

In the early stages of this project, my Web searches for “Kansas auto racing” unearthed an array of contemporary racing-related websites. RacingIn, RacinBoys, and Racindirt focused on contemporary news, joined by historical archive sites from “Racing In Kansas” (part of the larger Kansas Heritage Group project) to individually maintained troves of dirt-track artifacts. In seeking Kansas-specific representations of racing history, I chose two such fan-archive sites that represented the richest collections of digital materials: Bob Lawrence’s Vintage Auto Racing Web Ring For Kansas Racing History, maintained by Lawrence out of Wichita, and Racing From the Past, maintained by Warren Vincent out of McPherson.¹⁹⁰ I approached these websites as present-day narratives of the past, rather than unearthing and reorganizing them to offer a historical narrative of my own. This method mirrors my analysis of the racing museums, as well as pieces of the *Grassroots Racing Show*, in which I have sought patterns in how curators of the 2010s represented the previous century of life on and around the track.

Though my contemporary focus has been accompanied by a material-culture emphasis, it is impossible to ignore the digital realm in the wake of the Web’s rise and social integration into American life since the 1990s. Gary Osmond and Murray G. Phillips have examined the role of the Web as a sport-history tool, at one point echoing Sherman Dorn’s argument that archival websites do not offer “a ‘polished argument about the past’ as is typical in non-digital histories, but instead deliberately reveal the complex range of possible arguments and/or invite audiences to engage with the evidence provided.” The authors add that “active engagement” between websites and viewers is

¹⁹⁰ Bob Lawrence’s Vintage Auto Racing Web Ring For Kansas Racing History: <http://kansaracinghistory.com/>. Racing From The Past: <http://racingfromthepast.com/>.

central to digital history; while they focus on outreach efforts (that is, in the direction of website host to audience), I found that racing websites featured “engagement” through collective contribution of materials to these archives.¹⁹¹ Within the same edited volume, Synthia Sydnor contends that, like sport itself, the Web has not fundamentally altered human existence, but rather exists within a long list of proxies by which humans may communicate and understand the larger world around them.¹⁹² In dirt-track racing context, I found that these archival websites largely replicate the general functioning of racing itself, offering a space in which participants may gather and connect through shared interests. Web-based representations of Kansas racing combine the functions of the museum and television show: like the museum, they offer a trove of artifacts (contributed by a host of volunteers) that may be perused at visitors’ discretion, while like the television show (which also exists in Web form), websites are transportable to visitors in their chosen space. Thus I would argue that, of all forms, these “unofficial” (non-institution based) websites are most open-ended in terms of viewer use and interpretation. This point mirrors Osmond’s and Phillips’s assertion that while the “digitized official archive” reflects an organization that follows “professional, agreed-upon protocols,” the digital archive is “outside the control of any one professional body or practice and is amorphous, unregulated, and dynamic.”¹⁹³ In that sense, the customization, collaboration and variety so fundamental to racing is replicated in its digital iterations.

¹⁹¹ Gary Osmond and Murray G. Phillips, “Introduction: The Bones of Digital History,” in *Sport History in the Digital Era*, ed. Gary Osmond and Murray G. Phillips (Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 5.

¹⁹² Synthia Sydnor, “On the Nature of Sport: A Treatise in Light of Universality and Digital Culture,” in *Sport History in the Digital Era*, 203-226.

¹⁹³ Osmond and Phillips, “Introduction: The Bones of Digital History,” 18.

The Web Ring for Kansas Racing History

Bob Lawrence, a Kansas native approaching seventy, touched on these elements as we chatted at a Chinese restaurant in Wichita. He had been engaged in genealogy for decades, eventually combining archival research with his longtime interest in Wichita racing history (he had driven on local tracks in early adulthood). Bob began to build his Web Ring For Kansas Racing History in the early 2000s, compiling materials from the Kansas State Archives, local newspapers, and an acquaintance from Idaho who had accumulated a vast collection of racing materials (primarily books and photographs) from around the country. At the time of our interview in 2014, more than a decade after first uploading racing photos to a Geocities page, Bob remarked that he continued to add materials to his website each day. Many of these items were given by viewers who found the site and wished to contribute their own artifacts, particularly racing photographs from family collections.



Figure 4.9: Bob Lawrence, surrounded by memorabilia, in the space from which he has built a vast Web-based racing archive

As a “web ring,” the site is designed for users to navigate one page at a time, clicking on a link at the bottom to proceed to the following page. Its design is certainly what I would consider “grassroots,” in the sense of austere simplicity: it lacks such features as drop-down menus and embedded content that are common in the professionalized 2010s Web, instead reflecting the aesthetic of turn-of-the-century user-generated websites. However, despite its lack of modern sophistication, Bob’s online archive is remarkable for the sheer quantity of materials he has accumulated and organized. I began my research with the intention of combing through all of his individual web pages; this plan was abandoned when I realized that he had built thousands of them, each featuring a particular race track, driver, guest-submitted photograph collection, and scanned newspaper records of specific events, complete with race results.¹⁹⁴ When studying newspaper coverage of early Kansas racing, I consistently confirmed Bob’s findings through my own microfilm research, indicating the care he had taken in compiling his artifacts.

As an example of his formatting and organization, the first page in the ring is titled “The History of Automobile Racing on the Historic Half-Mile Dirt Racetrack at the Cowley County Fairgrounds, Winfield, Kansas” (Fig. 4.10).¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁴ On a personal level, I was most intrigued by a page that stood out from the rest: “Moto Polo at Cejay Stadium in Wichita, Kansas” (Accessed December 28, 2015): <http://kansaracinghistory.com/Edwards/polo/autopolo.htm>. According to this page, which features nine photographs, “moto polo” drivers maneuvered cars that had been stripped down, then wrapped up in a metal cage, in order to knock a gigantic, leather-bound inflatable ball towards the other team’s goal line; games were held at Cejay Stadium in the late 1940s.

¹⁹⁵ Link (Accessed January 12, 2016): <http://kansaracinghistory.com/Cowley/start.htm>.



Figure 4.10: Screenshot from the Web Ring for Kansas Racing History

A couple dozen photographs of drivers and their cars line each side of the page, and these act as links; the user clicks on each to access a new page with more information on the driver, whether drawn from historical newspapers or personal stories that are credited to the drivers' descendants. Furthermore, there are links to over thirty specific race events between 1909 and 1956, each page offering microfilm newspaper scans and Bob's added captions. In some cases, Bob has added a note requesting that website visitors send him additional information, such as driver names, if they happen to have it.

Occupying a large section of the website are driver-devoted pages, such as the feature on "Another Racing Legend" Jay Woodside that includes photographs, race results and on-track anecdotes. Woodside's biography, contributed by Rich Boteler (his relationship to Woodside is unspecified), is lengthy and personalized; it includes the story that as an overweight teenager, Woodside first witnessed a car race during a school marching band field trip, after which he "did lose a lot of weight and pursued his racing career." Drivers' family members are frequently credited for contributing photographs

and text to the biography pages; thus this section of the website functions as a public memorial site, extending beyond racing to a humanistic focus.

Taken generally, the website's thousands of photographs consistently feature men and cars in tandem, visually constructing masculinity and technology in the same space; while likely representing the "real-life" gender dynamics at play, this is yet another semiotic welding together of such entities. The Web Ring does include a "Women Drivers in Kansas Auto Racing Prior to 1960" page, with scores of female drivers' names, photographs and brief descriptions laid over a pink background. The introductory text notes that women were not allowed to compete in Feature races prior to World War II, before race promoters recognized the drawing power of female drivers and allowed them to compete against men in the post-war period. The otherwise near-absence of women from the website reflects the general normativity of male identity in centralized racing positions (driving, maintenance, officiating), while also mirroring the embeddedness of Whiteness in practice and representation. This hegemony may be accentuated by the website's focus on the pre-1960 period; it captures U.S. cultural life prior to the upheavals of the past half-century, from identity-based counterpolitics to industrial destabilization, and thus offers a nostalgic portrayal of racing's "golden age" for which many of my older informants pined.

While Bob had facilitated a collaborative atmosphere through his incorporation of contributors' artifacts, a sense of community was most evident in the Guest Book area of the website.¹⁹⁶ Hundreds of people had "signed" the Guest Book, posting a message and usually including his or her name. As with the *Grassroots Racing Show*, I was struck by

¹⁹⁶ I recorded many of the Guest Book entries in 2014; however, by late 2015, the Guest Book link (<http://winfield.50megs.com/Cowley/geobook.html>) was no longer operational.

the positivity of this space, with nearly every poster directly thanking Bob for his efforts in compiling the materials. Most writers also identified their direct connection to racing in Kansas, whether as a driver, spectator, or relative of someone featured on the site. Others specified that they were checking in from other parts of the country or even outside of it. Many of these messages also reflected working-class language in regards to syntax and spelling, largely matching the style I'd witnessed among dirt-track participants in spoken word:

I am Bill Bookout's Sister and was so happy to see this. It sure brings back memories. I grew up at 81 Speedway watching my three brothers racing and even tried it myself. Thanks Glenda Kelly

Bob...what a great site. Wish more people would do something like this to keep the racing history (especially from our old fairgrounds tracks) alive for the next generation...they may not appreciate it now...but down the road they will. Jim C.

Great site Bob. Thanks so much for including my dad, Pete Jacobs. I downloaded some of the pics today and took them over to Forrest Coleman. He really enjoyed them.

howdy, great site!! i'm just a dirt tracker up here in pa.the racecar's you ran are just like the one's i started in, i just can't seem to get it out of my system, were going racing again after a 18 yr layoff, kid's are grown, now it's pop's turn to TRY a d do it again! thank's jeff

I would have to agree with one of the other guestbook visitors, the stories of your Dad and of your Postal Career are very well done. The entire site has been put together very well Bob, and I can tell that you have spent untold hours working on this. I plan on spending more time here.

Great site. I lived in Hutchinson from 1970-1979, and was a crew member on the #77 stock car that Jack Petty drove. I would like to see more history from the 70s.

FANTASTIC!!! I am a CHEVROLET PRE-1955 (esp. 1914-36) racing/speed enthusiast, and this site is GOLD!! THANK YOU. Colin,Sydney AUSTRALIA

Taken as a whole, respondents (given the opportunity to “talk back” to the website) emphasized their positionality in the racing sphere, particularly through their relationship to racing (including familial relationships) and geography. The sense of connection was deepened by viewers’ expressed enjoyment of linking to the past, whether in the form of specific family members, machines, or racing in general. Thus as the Web operates generally as a global network, Bob had created a Kansas-centered sub-network space that functioned similarly as the track, garage, restaurant, or other material spaces in which participants discursively constructed the racing cultural field.

Racing From the Past

The “Racing From the Past” website, while not quite as expansive in terms of archival materials, offers a similar type of space for its users. Site host Warren Vincent had probably stopped editing the site in the early 2010s, as evidenced by the lingering “Ron Paul 2012” link on the home page in late 2015 (Fig. 4.11).



Figure 4.11: The Racing from the Past home page

Multiple Guest Books are also included, in which hundreds of visitors have offered sentiments of gratitude and nostalgia much like those expressed on the Lawrence's Web Ring.

However, Racing From the Past also features a link to "Oval Track Racing Forums," which facilitates discourse that is more conversational (enabling responses to one another) than the single-post Guest Book. I was astounded to find over two thousand discussion threads, some of which contained dozens of entries, dating back to 2009; the conversational format clearly appealed to users. Once again facing an enormous volume of material, I scanned some of the most-commented threads in order to assess the Racing Forum's emergent function. As with other public memorial sites, many threads focus on well-known drivers, on which users might trade dozens of stories and observations. Others are focused on the race cars themselves, some of which were being sold as "vintage" cars through the message board, converting it into an online marketplace. The single thread that has generated the most comments, nearly two thousand by late 2015, is titled "Whatever happened to?"¹⁹⁷ User "jdsprint71" opened the conversation by offering a list of eleven questions, including:

What happened to the stickers like NCRA use to give out when you raced at a series race, those round stickers with gold and black with the United States and NCRA in the middle of it and what race/town it was from. Showed everyone all the wars you had been to that season and you displayed them with pride.

What happened to day races and I mean where they start at 1 pm and race in the afternoon, guess with EPA and all there regulations that you have to deal with makes it not a viable thing to do anymore, but sure do miss them.

¹⁹⁷ "Whatever Happened To?," Racing From the Past website (Accessed February 6, 2016): <http://www.hoseheadforums.com/forum.cfm?ThreadID=21640>.

Whatever happened to officials who wore a complete officials uniform Pants and a Officials shirt, guess the economy made it to expensive for tracks to afford a complete uniform.

Whatever happened to the pit pass tag that you use to hang on your belt loop, now it is a wrist band and I would think that the tag is another victim of cost these days but you can't collect wrist bands like you could those pit pass tags.

Whatever happened to 50 lap A mains.

While lamenting various factors, from environmental regulations to rising costs of operations, that (s)he perceived as erasing familiar elements, “jdsprint71” offered a sweeping, nostalgic indictment of racing’s present-day existence. I scanned the first few dozen responses to this post, and others overwhelmingly agreed with this sentiment, offering *new* lists of lost pieces from “Heroes that stood ten feet tall” to “the days when you knew more about the NCRA drivers then you did about politics or your own family issues.” Respondents particularly emphasized the loss of such “heroes,” implying that youths were no longer able to find proper idols on their local tracks. And once again, I found that within the contemporary racing sphere, some participants (particularly those in their later years) forged a sense of community by collectively lamenting the *loss* of the community nexus, racing itself, as it had once existed. As Alessandro Portelli once remarked that the “remembered event is infinite,” these community members were turning to collective memory to mourn the loss of the “finite,” the “experienced,” and temporarily recapture the feeling it once offered.

Memory is represented in various forms elsewhere in the website. The home page includes links to Youtube videos of Mohawk Speedway in Hutchinson, Kansas, the

grainy 1950s footage overlaid with soft synth-pop music.¹⁹⁸ There is also a “Memorial Pages” section, featuring photos and descriptions of dozens of drivers and other racing participants; I was struck by the fact that, according to the listed birth and death years, a small minority of these men made it to their sixtieth birthday, falling victim to racing collisions and other health complications. The first “Memorial Page” is headlined by a poem credited to Martha Suggs, listed as a driver’s wife:

You ask me why I do this, I can not tell you why. It sends my blood singing thru my veins and shoots my heart like a rocket across the sky. Its like an uncontrollable fire, breathing out love, hate and fear, exalting me to the heights of glory, throwing me to the depths of despair.

You ask me why I do this, put my life out on the line, because I know come what may, I'll not go until its time. I've hung it out on the ragged edge and at times looked into a chasm of fear, I've lost dear friends and fellow drivers, but when the green flag falls, I know I'll be there.

You ask me why I do this, this crazy thing of mine-I only know I can not quit, can not quit until its time. It gets into your blood so bad, its like a fever, and if you step one foot across my line, you won't be able to shake it either.

I've had my highs and lows and many times wanted to throw it all away, but I know come tomorrow, whenever this dream leads me, I'll be on my way.¹⁹⁹

The driver is offered as the tragic hero who seeks the rush and glory of racing despite its inherent dangers, risking his body for the thrill of the crowd. The tragedy is deepened by the sense of addiction, even disease (“It gets into your blood so bad, its like a fever”) that

¹⁹⁸ “Mohawk Speedway 57-58 Memories Part 1,” Youtube.com, November 22, 2010 (Accessed December 20, 2015): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUeXw7zSC6M>; “Mohawk Speedway and Hutchinson Racing Memories Part 2,” Youtube.com, November 28, 2010: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRYnL2Dwu8c>.

¹⁹⁹ “Memorial Pages,” Racing From the Past website (Accessed December 19, 2015): <http://www.racingfromthepast.com/memorialpagesa-elap1index2.html>.

I had encountered from century-old newspaper accounts to present-day drivers. If automobiles and metal parts may be considered works of art, this piece converts racing itself into poetry.

Conclusion

While differing in production and format, three types of racing “texts” – museum, television show, and digital archive – offer a host of overlapping themes as public representations of racing. In constructing public “dominant” memory, primary curators worked with materials that were predominantly provided by others in the racing sphere, employing a “grassroots” strategy by turning to a local coalition for this production process. As there were no national- or corporate-level interests involved in such representation, longtime Kansas racing participants created these spaces through their own initiatives; they now repositioned themselves as arbiters of knowledge who connected viewers to the past and present, perhaps also contributing to a racing future.

All examined representations are designed for reception away from the race track; however, all attempt to produce an imaginary by which viewers are delivered to track space. Whether I viewed race collision videos and touched cars and trophies at the museums, watched Heartland-region Feature races through the *Grassroots Racing Show*, or visited racing’s past through website photograph galleries and message boards, I continually felt a sense of transportation to another place, specifically the dirt oval itself. My fieldwork directly with racing participants revealed that many viewed the racing sphere as a utopian space in which they found escape from the less desirable pieces of

everyday life. These representational forms thus allowed for an imaginary return to the dirt and roar of a familiar place.

Postscript

In late 2015, while perusing the Racing From The Past discussion board, I found a recent post attached to a familiar name: Bob Lawrence. During my visits with Bob, he had mentioned that southeast Wichita was host to a little-known historical racing marker at the former location of the Cejay Stadium race track. The facility was closed in the late 1950s, eventually replaced by a baseball field complex, but one of the cement retaining walls was deemed immovable and still stood behind a field's home plate. We visited the space together, and I was struck by the experience of touching the scarred wall, which contained so much history unknown to the spectators who sat upon it to watch baseball action. For over a decade, racing action took place on the same earth, and Bob wanted to teach others about this literal piece of history. On the Racing From The Past discussion board, Bob requested donations for a plaque to be installed on the wall; in September 2015, Bob confirmed that there would soon be a public unveiling, and a few weeks later, he posted a short message: "It is finished. We got'er done." He included a link to his own website, on to which he had uploaded a photograph of the new memorial (Fig. 4.12).²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ The link to this Forum thread (Accessed December 19, 2015): <http://www.hoseheadforums.com/forum.cfm?ThreadID=91672>. The coordinates of the wall location (searchable in online maps) are 37.642952, -97.276573.

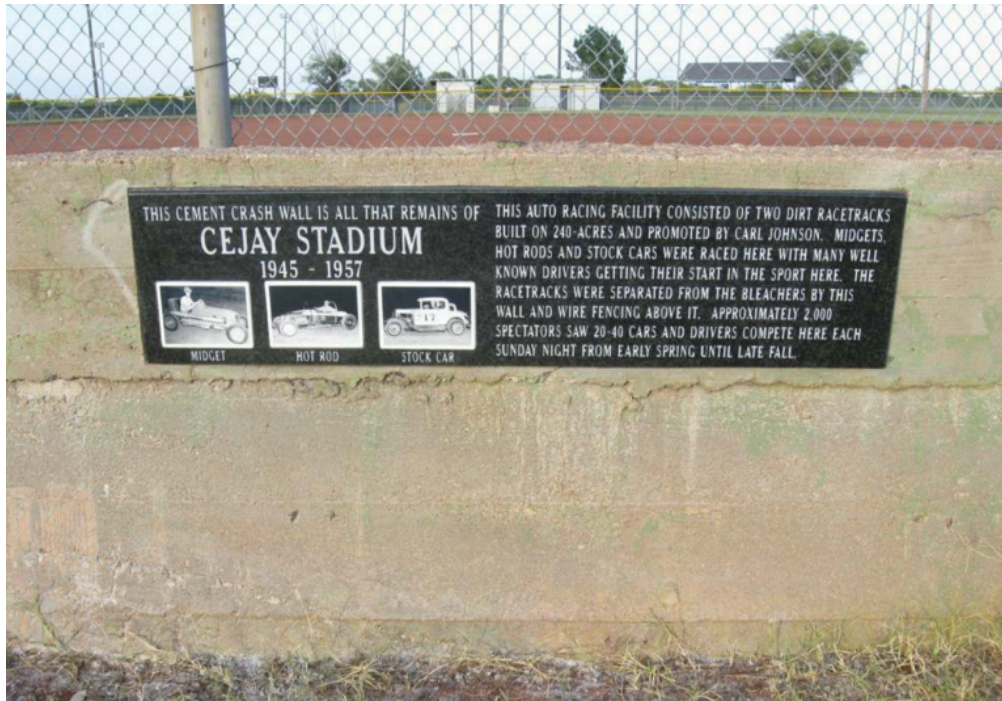


Figure 4.12: A newly installed plaque historicizes an otherwise unassuming piece of concrete (Source: Bob Lawrence's Vintage Auto Racing Web Ring for Kansas Racing History: <http://kansaracinghistory.com/Cejay/The-Plaque.jpg>)

Though understated, I sensed Bob's pride in carrying his work from the digital realm to the very space in which he had sat in the bleachers, as a small child, to watch the cars as they made their revolutions. The plaque was an immortalization of both racing and his experience of it.

Conclusion

Reflections on a Lap Through Grassroots Auto Racing Culture

Dirt-track racing may appear, from the outside, to be a cultural practice rife with contradiction and even dysfunction. The driver directs an automobile, for a century the dominant mode of transportation in the U.S., back to an original starting point without stopping in between; “Point A to Point B” logic has been converted into the circular “Point A to Point A, repeatedly.” This practice takes place on dirt, the surface long ago replaced by asphalt and concrete as the dominant material with which American roads, particularly those most taken, are constructed. The dirt’s lower traction contributes to near-constant collisions between drivers, some resulting in repair costs that reach into the thousands of dollars, far outweighing potential winnings. Meanwhile, hundreds of spectators pile into the stands to witness this high-speed, circular display, rewarded for their admission payment with an onslaught of roaring engines and dust clouds.

Yet thousands of Kansans continue to congregate at dirt race tracks during each warm season. Rather than presume this behavior to be a product of collective irrationality, I spent three years facing the same roar and dust in order to uncover why people have been drawn to the track for so many decades. In a broad view, I found that dirt-track racing participation was driven by the offer of “grassroots” localism in the face of broad, destabilizing cultural shifts. In the twenty-first century, life in Kansas has not been exempt from larger processes of globalization and corporatization, as reflected by, for example, the interlinked structures of immigration and corporatized agriculture. Such shifts directly challenge the pastoralist understandings of the state that have existed from without and within. In turn, dirt-track racing functions as a recuperation of the pastoral ideal: a small community, typically numbering in the hundreds, gathers to practice and

witness a metaphorical reenactment of mythologized Heartland-regional, White masculinity, which may also be characterized as a symbolic performance of individualist, small-scale agricultural labor.

Localism and variety are at the heart of this sphere. Racing attendees, ranging from spectators to drivers, predominantly lived within an easy drive of the track; even the larger events, such as the USRA Nationals, featured drivers that nearly all hailed from the Heartland region. Furthermore, my fieldwork indicated that most spectators were personally connected to at least one competitor on the track. Small support groups formed around many of the drivers, indicating even more intimate sub-networks that existed and intersected at each venue. Furthermore, variety and customization was prevalent, which I found striking in the context of the standardized, mass-culture context of the past century. This is not to dismiss the presence of mass-culture consumption, from the familiar Coca-Colas and Budweisers in spectators' hands to the occasional national-brand billboards at Kansas race tracks. However, the tracks themselves varied greatly, in regards to oval length and shape, Pits layout, and concessions and other amenities. The cars, particularly Stocks, reflected structural variety, while even the more standardized classes (Modifieds, Late Models and Stocks) were customized by their users through distinct numbers, printed slogans, and mechanical setups. One also cannot ignore the ubiquitous dirt. Described by one spectator as a "living object," its character differed depending on its home track, from the drying dust of many Kansas ovals to the ever-moist soil at Knoxville Raceway in Iowa. It was also strongly shaped by weather conditions, perhaps "tacky" one weekend and then "dry-slick" the next, all at the same site. Thus drivers needed to "read" the track each night, anticipating a new set of

conditions; many embraced the resultant challenge and variety, reflecting a de-standardizing ethos though the voluntary turn away from predictable uniformity.

All cultural paradigms are constructed against others, the “is” against the “is not”; as a form of auto racing, the dirt-track sphere was constructed by participants as “is not” NASCAR. The highest-profile racing association in the U.S. has been marked in recent decades, much like Kansas, by such trends as internationalization and corporatization. Drivers have begun to trickle into NASCAR from outside the U.S., while satellite races have been staged in Mexico, Canada, and locations around Europe.²⁰¹ Automobiles have also become standardized, essentially structurally identical; some of my interviewees lamented that NASCAR cars and drivers seemed both homogenous and distant, a product of the injections of corporate money and raised financial stakes that have resulted in a turn to “safe” (widely marketable) drivers and precisely designed vehicles. Furthermore, asphalt-track racing disincentivizes contact, particularly given potential repair costs, resulting in a lack of the “disruption” (collisions, changes of order, etc.) so common at dirt tracks. Having been socialized into the latter form by late 2014, I simply found a NASCAR race to be boring, a sentiment shared by many of my dirt-racing informants.

Participants thus constructed a sense of authenticity, built around the notion of the “real,” that they instead found in dirt-track racing. In his historical text *Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France*, Dan Pierce locates “real” NASCAR in its early decades of existence, prior to the rise of corporate sponsorship and geographic

²⁰¹ Ehren Helmut Pflugfelder, “‘Running with the Big Dogs’: The Rhetoric of Fan Identity in a Postmodern NASCAR,” in *Motorsports and American Culture: From Demolition Derbies to NASCAR*, ed. Mark D. Howell and John D. Miller (City: Press, 2014), 88-90; Godwin Kelly, “NASCAR flexes global muscles with 9 races in 4 countries,” *The Daytona Beach News-Journal*, June 13, 2014 (Accessed April 11, 2016): <http://www.news-journalonline.com/article/20140613/SPORTS/140619734>.

expansion that began in the 1970s. He frames such moves as departing from the league's original, "real" version, resulting in a loss of identity. Pierce notes that this de-authenticating process included the elimination of major NASCAR dirt-track races after the 1960s, tying his notion of the "real" to the dirt on which early races were held.²⁰² As Pierce frames racing authenticity around regionalism, non-corporate funding structures, and the dirt itself, it can be argued that Kansas community racing represents a recuperation of not only pastoralism, but of the "real" racing whose roots go back over a century. Furthermore, in contrast with the distance that some participants perceived in large-scale racing (particularly between spectator and spectacle), *material connection* was a pervasive and defining element of the Kansas racing sphere. In an increasingly digitized, virtual-reality world, racing offered connection to both "real," familiar people, as well as "real" objects made of metal and earth. Even the *Grassroots Racing Show*, itself a digitized representation, was presented as an access point to "real" racing. In describing the show as "about as authentic as you can possibly get," Doug Thompson argued that it delivered a highly detailed, intimate portrayal of racing, a close recreation of the materially "real" thing.

In considering the social function of this local and "real" version of racing, I characterize the dirt track as a "mediating structure." This term, applied to such institutions as individual churches and schools, points to small-scale associations in which citizens converge and create a sense of community and collective empowerment. Robert Wuthnow has argued for the longtime centrality of mediating structures to Kansas

²⁰² Dan Pierce, *Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), Chapter 9: "The Dirt Tracks Are Rapidly Becoming a Thing of the Past: The End of the Beginning, 1968-1972."

residents, positing a “faith in associational grassroots democracy” in which intimate, interpersonal networks are emphasized.²⁰³ I perceive dirt race tracks as mediating structures in Kansas “associational grassroots democracy,” in turn representing, in the words of Esteva, Prakash and Shiva, “grassroots post-modernism.” Auto racing originally emerged from the Modernist moment of the early twentieth century in which automobiles and various other new technologies were “interfaced” with culture, a shift interlinked with mass movement of people to cities. While contemporary Kansas racing continues to function as a Modernist spectacle in which the combustible-engine automobile is featured in a display of competitive, “rugged” masculinity, it also reflects a localistic emphasis and location within both geographic and cultural “country.” Such localism indicates why this sphere is both ignored from the outside and yet a crucial cultural nexus in Kansas, as well as any other areas in which a dirt-racing network exists. Its participants, particularly drivers (and at times their friends and relatives), are deeply engaged in the racing sphere well beyond the Friday or Saturday night spectacle. Thus their role within racing, negotiated through the exchange of practices and ideologies, is highly influential in regards to participants’ general self-identity construction.

Identity ideology itself, particularly in terms of gender, race, and class, was a primary focus of this project. While I judged race tracks to be largely working-class spaces, I found a surprising amount of class diversity (as measured by income, occupation, formal education levels, and other criteria) among drivers and their crews. In general, “class” emerged as a somewhat messy construct in which participants discussed

²⁰³ Wuthnow, *Red State Religion*, 286, 365. Peter L. Berger presented the concept of “mediating structures” through “In Praise of Particularity: The Concept of Mediating Structures,” *The Review of Politics* 38, no. 3 (July 1976): 399-410.

both structural criteria and ideas about “classiness,” an ethics-driven concept. On the other hand, I found clearer organizational dynamics in regards to gender and race: central competitive spaces were male-dominated, while participants as a whole were heavily White. Given that these dynamics appeared to stretch back for many decades, as indicated by archival materials, I turned to the processes by which identity organization in Kansas racing is largely reproduced. At a material level, I witnessed patrilineal socialization in which elder men taught young boys about racing, both driving and the mechanical work. At times I did learn of girls who were engaged in racing at a young age, but did not continue into adulthood, even if encouraged to do so. Thus even without the explicit barriers of the past (such as bans on mixed-gender races), a gendered social script, enacted through the public spectacle of racing and private rituals of learning, seemed to help reproduce a system in which men race while women (and other men) watch. Though I did not witness forms of open resistance to the entrance of female drivers, this possibility is acknowledged as well. It will likely take an established network of racing women to collectively challenge the predominance of men on the track, and thus reconstruct the gender ideology currently in place. Though I do so with trepidation, I can only conjecture that a similar process guides the reproduction of Whiteness; as a White-raced sphere with few people of color, dirt-track racing does not offer the latter a space in which they can find established representation. Particularly given the large influx of Latino immigrants and communities in Kansas, I expected to discover a sub-network of Latino drivers and fans; if existent, this group is still minimally visible on local tracks, and only time will tell if they do emerge.

Returning to gender, the centrality of men was accompanied by a construction of “locally hegemonic masculinity” through performances of competitive driving and mechanical work. Such practices incentivized industrial-technological competence, composed of a particular set of knowledges in relation to operation of the race car. When applied in practice, these men enacted productive work through their successful manipulation and operation of the machine; in turn, the driver performed competitive conflict, his or her group’s productivity measured against others. As a whole, I contend that dirt-track racing performance is a small-scale industrial iteration of rural masculinity. In their introduction to *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*, the editors argue for the symbolic power of “country” masculinity:

...masculinity is, in considerable measure, constructed out of rural masculinity. The “real man” of many currently hegemonic forms of masculinity is, as we noted, a rural man. Although we are used to seeing the rural as the weaker partner in the rural/urban dichotomy, the studies presented here together suggest that rural masculinity is central to the power of masculinities in rural and urban places alike—to its symbolic representations and thus to its practices, and back to its symbolic representations again.

Though my own informants did not predominantly work in the agricultural industry, through racing they replicated small-scale agriculture. Each driver and his group manipulated machinery and navigated changing climate and soil conditions, circling a plot of land (the oval track) much like the farmers piloting corn harvesters around nearby fields. Wuthnow has argued for an individualistic self-reliance long embedded in the Heartland; while corporate agriculture has largely replaced the small-farm expression of such self-reliance, and while my subjects were largely employed and supervised (in

various occupations) by others, dirt-track racing offered an opportunity for performed self-reliance and productivity.²⁰⁴ However, even this atavistic symbolic performance was tenuous. Older participants, in particular, perceived a decline in racing over the past half-century, as indicated by shrinking winnings, rising maintenance costs, and declining attendance.

Such gender and race structures (as well as the public ubiquity of Christianity, heteronormativity, and other identities) was both clearly present yet outwardly unacknowledged by my informants. That is, these identity organizations seemed to be pervasive to the point of invisibility, given the near absence of exceptions. When I asked, “What kind of people attend dirt-track races?” and “What kind of people drive?”, not a single interviewee discussed race or gender in their responses. In museums and archival websites I found brief references to women and/or drivers of color, but those called attention to absences not just of the past but the present as well. Through such acknowledgment of the achievements of underrepresented groups, the racing community was, to borrow from Roland Barthes, “inoculating” itself against charges of exclusivity or monoculturalism.²⁰⁵ On an interpersonal level, participants propagated the notion of a diverse racing sphere through attention to class: nearly every respondent discussed a class-diverse racing community, though many also posited a hierarchy within which they positioned themselves above specified others. As a whole, community members constructed a narrative of inclusivity, productivity and localism in the racing sphere, in the process constructing themselves as populist supporters of these values.

²⁰⁴ Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland*, 88.

²⁰⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: The Noonday Press, 1972), 151-152.

To close, I offer two brief points. First, the more basic: the Kansas racing sphere exists outside of the broad, mainstream cultural spotlight, including for those who live just miles from a track of which they have little to no awareness.²⁰⁶ This invisibility is symbolized by the dirt, that element upon which we rely and tread yet largely ignore in its disappearance below pavement and other products of contemporary consumption. Thus it may be easy to argue for dirt-track racing's marginal cultural significance: why should we lend our attention to a community that, in an increasingly interlinked world, still exerts little evident impact on those who aren't sitting in the bleachers or the car?

Which brings us to the second point: moreso than *breadth*, Kansas auto racing is significant due to its *cultural depth*. Despite limited outside awareness of their community, racing participants, particularly drivers, are deeply engaged in racing: "depth" may be measured in both time spent in racing-related activities as well as the extent to which a participant constructs his or her sense of self through identification with the racing sphere. Across the state, hundreds of drivers and thousands of others converge in racing spaces to mold personal and community identities, which inevitably drift into other places; whether or not the rest of the state's residents realize it, their own cultural context is affected by this intensely immersive sphere. In Kansas, auto racing is, like dirt, part of the air we all breathe.

²⁰⁶ In the somewhat separate sphere of Lawrence, I discussed my project with many residents who had no idea that a dirt-track racing culture existed in Kansas. For those who did express knowledge of local dirt-track racing, they were invariably directly involved as a competitor or spectator.

Epilogue

Despite this account's emphasis on continuity, I learned that the race tracks themselves were not permanent. Heartland Park Topeka, my primary fieldwork site introduced in the opening pages, was reflective of such instability. Amid complaints from its own drivers and spectators about poor track maintenance and inadequate local marketing efforts, the owner declared bankruptcy and closed the track after the 2014 season. In April 2015, I attended a public hearing at the Topeka public library; with the mayor and commissioners present, the city attorney informed an audience of a few dozen people about potential avenues for revival of the track property (in each case costing the taxpayers millions of dollars in debt repayment). During the following question-and-answer session, audience members expressed frustration with the local government's handling of this matter (blaming the "poor" deal made with the previous owner), as well as support for the track's reopening through reference to its economic impact as a facilitator of consumer activity. One speaker referred to Heartland Park as a "hidden gem" in the region; late in the hearing, Larry Lowrey, manager of the In The Pits dirt-racing news website, declared its facilities to be "second to none." The track's management remaining in limbo, Heartland Park hosted no races during the 2015 season.

In December of that year, two new owners announced that they had purchased the property; they named Larry Lowrey and his brother, John, the track's promoters.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Rick Peterson, "Chris Payne, Shelby LLC take over Heartland Park Topeka," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, December 17, 2015 (Accessed April 11, 2016): <http://cjonline.com/news/2015-12-17/chris-payne-shelby-llc-take-over-heartland-park-topeka>; "Lowrey brothers tapped to operate Heartland Park dirt track in 2016," *Topeka Capital-Journal*, January 28, 2016 (Accessed April 11, 2016): <http://cjonline.com/sports/auto-racing/2016-01-28/lowrey-brothers-tapped-operate-heartland-park-dirt-track-2016>.

Weekly dirt-track races, which I had attended on many Saturday nights at the “BriggsAuto.com Speedway,” were now staged on the same track as part of the “Big Time Bail Bonds Sunday Night Showdown” (the bail bonds company also being the new title sponsor of Thunder Hill Speedway, just north of Topeka, in 2016).²⁰⁸ In late April, Heartland Park hosted the first dirt-track race in Topeka in eighteen months. I arrived in a state of anticipation: how had the owners altered the site? Did they install new structures, add events between the races, or perhaps recruit new car classes such as Sprints? My anticipation was only heightened when I pulled into the parking lot to find many more passenger automobiles than were typically present two years earlier.

From a spectator’s perspective, change was blended with continuity that night. Several new sponsor billboards were in place, while many of the large boards behind the track remained blank, still to be purchased by interested businesses. Furthermore, the track owners had switched from “USRA” to “IMCA” sanction, necessitating different car setups to meet new standards; for this reason, some familiar driving groups, including the Millers, were no longer competing here. On the other hand, the structures remained the same: I sat in the familiar wooden green bleachers, visited the same concession stand, and walked along the same fencing to glance into the Pits area. The spectators projected the same identities, predominantly White and working-class, the “collar-free” ethos still in place. In a striking moment of legacy, the track continued to play a recording of the “Star-Spangled Banner” as sung by Kayla Lowrey. She was Larry’s daughter, and had died at twenty-two in an automobile crash in 2013; this musical ritual both memorialized

²⁰⁸ “Big Time Bail Bonds Joins the Ranks at Thunder Hill,” Thunder Hill Speedway website, March 11, 2016 (Accessed April 12, 2016): <http://racethunderhillsspeedway.com/big-time-bail-bonds-joins-the-ranks-at-thunder-hill/>.

and resurrected Kayla through her voice in the following year, and continued to do so now.

As a whole, the trip was a reminder of the inevitable flows of people in and out of racing, yet also the reproduction of familiar structures, rituals, affects, and identities that have long permeated dirt-track racing in Kansas. I had begun this project in the same bleachers four years earlier; I then completed a metaphorical lap around the racing sphere, four turns in four years, experiencing “collisions” in “rubbing” against dozens of participants along the way. On this cool spring night in 2016, I completed the lap by returning to the starting point. In doing so, I realized that oval-track racing, as a spectacle of circular driving, is somewhat symbolic of its surrounding cultural field. “Rubbing” against each other throughout, dirt-tracing participants had largely reproduced ideologies and practices through intimate interaction, in close proximity, as they moved together. It is a community defined by moments of disruption and confrontation, yet such collisions are oftentimes shared between familiar locals. In the dust and the roar, in alliance and animosity, they find each other.

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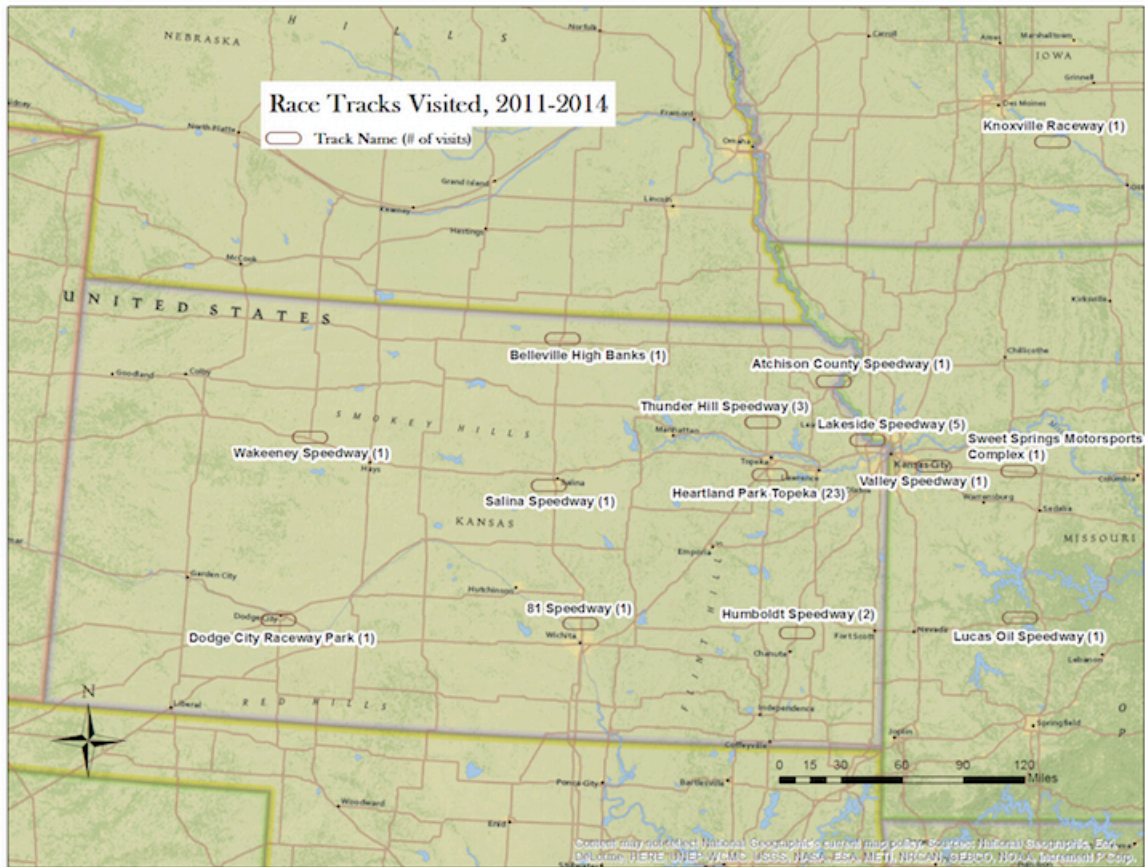
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Appendix A: Map of race tracks and number of research visits to each



Appendix B: Layouts and locations of race tracks visited

*Satellite imagery acquired through Google Maps and Google Earth; all are oriented with cardinal North direction pointing upward. These are not all to the same scale; I simply framed each photograph around the track facility.

81 Speedway (KS)

- Located on northern edge of Wichita metropolitan area
- Track length: 2/5 mile



Atchison County Raceway (KS)

- Located 2 miles north of Atchison
- Track length: 1/4 mile



Belleville High Banks (KS)

- Located on northeastern edge of Belleville
- Track length: 1/2 mile



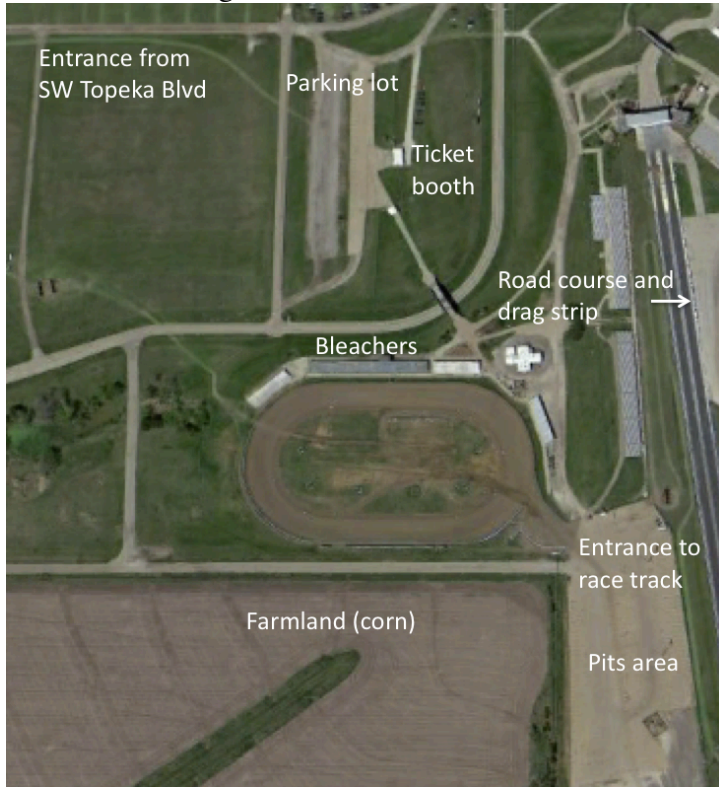
Dodge City Raceway Park (KS)

- Located on southern edge of Dodge City
- Track length: 2/5 mile



Heartland Park Topeka (KS)

- Located at southern edge of Topeka metropolitan area
- Track length: 3/8 mile



Humboldt Speedway (KS)

- Located 2 miles east of Humboldt
- Track length: 1/3 mile



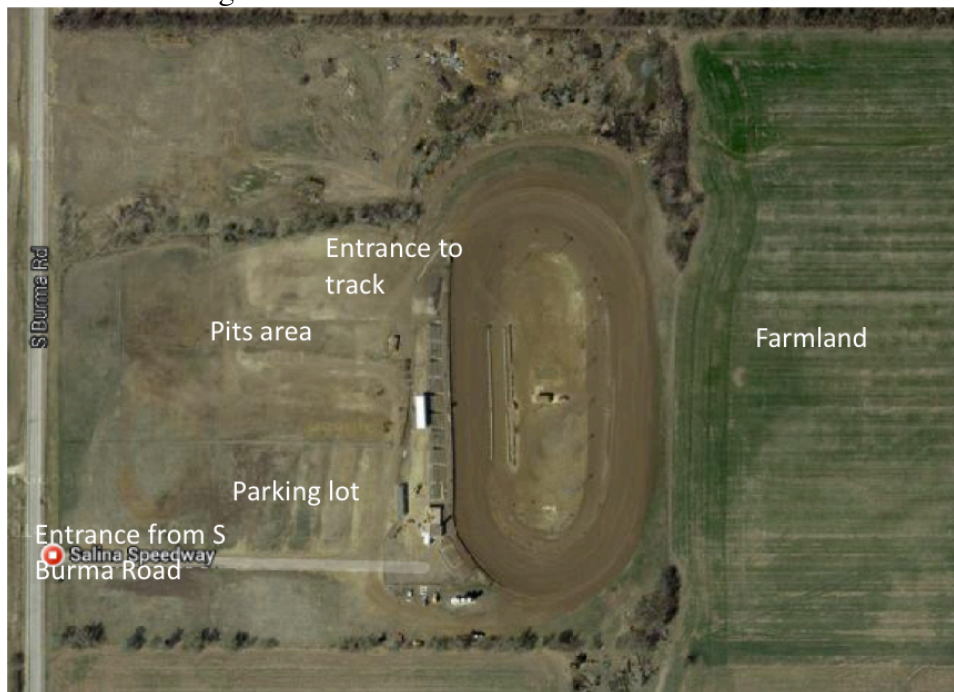
Lakeside Speedway (KS)

- Located on northwestern edge of Kansas City metropolitan area
- Track length: 1/2 mile



Salina Speedway (KS)

- Located 3 miles west of Salina
- Track length: 3/8 mile



Thunder Hill Speedway (KS)

- Located 3 miles southwest of Mayetta
- Track length: 2/5 mile



Wakeeney Speedway (KS)

- Located on eastern edge of Wakeeney
- Track length: 1/2 mile



Lucas Oil Speedway (MO)

- Track located on southeastern edge of Wheatland
- Track length: 2/5 mile



Sweet Springs Motorsports Complex (MO)

- Located on northern edge of Sweet Springs
- Track length: 1/4 mile



Valley Speedway (MO)

- Located on eastern edge of Grain Valley
- Track length: 1/3 mile



Knoxville Raceway (IA)

- Located on the northwestern edge of Knoxville
- Track length: 1/2 mile



Appendix C: Descriptions and photographs of common race car “classes” in Kansas²⁰⁹

STOCK

At the low end in terms of expense and performance capability, various types of “Stock” cars are common in Kansas, variously labeled “Stock Car,” “Pure Stock,” “Hobby Stock,” “Factory Stock,” and “Street Stock.” The term “stock” generally refers to a product as it was originally sold, and in the case of dirt-track racing, this class is most limited in terms of allowed modification to the original version of this car, including the car’s main frame (the primary steel and/or aluminum structure that supports the wheels, engine and other moving parts), shocks and springs, and other pieces. The primary changes allowed are to the motor and, as required, the addition of a roll cage, the steel-bar contraption built around the driver for protection in the instance of a collision. The benefit for Stock drivers is the ability to compete without the expense of “higher” classes, creating parallels that I would observe between car class and the socioeconomic class of those who drove them.



Stock car arriving by open trailer at Heartland Park Topeka.

²⁰⁹ My observations on each car class are informed by interviews with competitors, the rules manuals issued by race tracks, and my own observations of the cars up close and in action.

MODIFIED

Closely related to each other in terms of car setup are the “Modified” and “B-Modified” categories. Modified cars are, as the name indicates, more modified from original passenger models than Stocks: they carry more powerful engines, as well as more advanced suspension systems (the metal springs and shocks located near each wheel) to allow the car to lean to the right when making the usual left turn (as with NASCAR, dirt-track drivers move around the oval in a counter-clockwise, leftward direction). This shifts the weight of the car to the right, over the right-hand wheels, which (at first glance, paradoxically) results in more traction and allows the driver to more effectively turn the car to the left at high speed. Modified cars also bear less aesthetic similarity to the passenger cars on American roads, as the sides and top of the body are made up of flat aluminum panels, creating a straight-edged appearance that is largely absent from those vehicles on public roads. This design is advantageous to racing, as panels are easy to remove and replace following collisions. Finally, Modifieds feature a network of steel bars underneath the driver, as part of the chassis (the primary body of the car): some of these bars may be quickly moved, vertically or horizontally, to adjust the car’s handling. In general, Modified cars are built with “after-market” parts; these are not normally available from major car manufacturers such as Ford or Chevy, but are rather purchased from auto racing parts suppliers. “A-Mods,” which may also bear the name “Modifieds,” generally possess more powerful motors than “B-Mods,” as well some differences in the suspension system; the resultant lower cost of “B-Mods” has led to the growth of this car class in recent years. However, to the casual observer, these two classes would be indiscernible from one another.



Briggs-promotion Modified car at Heartland Park Topeka.

LATE MODEL

“Late Model” cars are a bit more advanced than Modifieds in terms of performance (speed around the track), due to more powerful motors, larger (especially wider) tires, and typically lighter overall weight. They also feature a wider car body and more curved appearance, particularly in the front half of the car. Furthermore, rather than the steel-bar front bumper that is common among Stocks and Modifieds, Late Model cars feature a front hood that covers the bar. In general, these models tend to resemble American “muscle cars,” wide and curvaceous, more than the others.



Late Model in the Salina Speedway Pits.

SPRINT

“Sprint” cars are, without challenge, the fastest cars on dirt oval tracks, such performance at its peak in the World of Outlaws traveling league. The cars feature powerful engines, light overall weight (at 1400 pounds, around 1000 pounds lighter than Modified cars), and are generally designed in a way to allow for rapid turns without losing traction on dirt. The fastest Sprint cars feature a “wing” on top, mounted directly above the driver; the top is sloped upward from the front to the back. Thus when the car is moving forward at high speed, the incoming air (experienced as wind) imparts downward force on the car, onto the track surface; this intensifies contact between tires and track and thus increases traction, allowing the car to turn more quickly without entering an out-of-control spin. Furthermore, when the driver turns the car sharply to the left, (s)he begins a slide, in the direction of the driver’s right side, around the left-hand turn. The vertical panels (marked in the image below with “11W”) create heavy wind resistance, causing the car to actually lean to the left, unlike non-winged cars that lean to the right under the force of inertia. Thus a Sprint car driver may enter a turn at high speed, maintain velocity (the panels increasing air resistance, thus guiding the car to the left), and meet the next straightaway with speed intact. The price of this high-performing, well-tuned technology is very high, thus restricting drivers’ access to Sprint Car racing (I witnessed few Sprint races in Kansas). However, “Micro Sprint” cars, which are smaller and employ less expensive (and lower-performing) technology, but feature a similar overall design, represent more accessible alternatives to full-sized Sprint cars.



Sprint car at a mid-summer racing party.