

# **Under the bonnet: car culture, technological dominance and young men of the working class**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Interviewer: What do you think about women and cars?

John (17 years old): I just think back seat!

The ground-breaking work of Cynthia Cockburn in examining the relations between gender and technology in the workplace served to demonstrate the manner in which men retain power and privilege through the control of technology (1983, 1985). Cockburn describes the process of excluding women from the domain of technology in fine detail as it was played out in a British print shop (1983). In a different setting but similar vein Broom, Byrne and Petkovic (1992) describe the intimidatory practices used by men to exclude women from demonstrating their technical skills by playing pool in an Australian university union bar. Based on an ethnographic study of young working-class men in Western Sydney this paper explores the discourses of car culture, the most pervasive of all forms of the historically entrenched domination by men of technology.

Yet the power and privilege which accrues to men through the control of technology, carries many penalties. Men have much higher rates of industrial fatalities and injuries (Connell et al. 1998) and in motor vehicle morbidity statistics young men between the ages of 16 and 25, suffer vastly disproportionate rates to young women. In Australia motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death of young men (Connell et al. 1997).

The fact that young men dominate motor vehicle fatality and injury statistics has long been recognised yet surprisingly gender has been largely ignored as a causal problem (Connell et al. 1997, 1). This research was funded in recognition of the need for new initiatives in dealing with the problem of gender in motor vehicle use. It has become increasingly clear that we can no longer take gender categories for granted, as fixed "natural" differences between males and females; or assign gendered behaviour to relatively superficial causes such as sex differences in "attitudes" (Connell et al. 1997, 2). The

fact is that motor vehicle use is a performance and demonstration, a process of *making* masculinity that causes young working-class men's higher incidence of death and injury on the road. It is not because of being born biologically male that causes the behaviour. Therefore, it follows that women and the feminine are key players, both symbolically and in the practices of constructing masculinities, for the latter are constructed in opposition to the feminine.

Yet the road safety literature, like much sociological research on masculinities, *theoretically*, leaves women out of focus. As I have argued elsewhere (Walker 1998) this is not only true of the sex role literature but of many subculture studies and a genre of writing in men's studies. Although these accounts demonstrate the making of masculinity as a collective practice, they still rely on a psychologically-based model of masculinity arising from the logic of the "male role." As has become evident especially in the road safety literature, this both limits the power of the analysis and the social usefulness of the work, for we are deprived of a means for changing behaviour. As Connell (1998, 7) has argued, "masculinities do not first exist and then come into contact with femininities; they are produced together, in the process that constitutes a gender order."

My research demonstrates the fundamental relational component of gender; a series of discursive practices which groups of young working-class men enact in order to ensure that women and other groups, for example, young middle-class men whom they label "Jocks," are excluded from their social space.

## ETHNOGRAPHY IN WESTERN SYDNEY

The research was targeted at young working-class men because of their high rates of traffic crashes (Connell et al. 1997; Shope, Waller and Lang 1996). Although further research is needed to produce conclusive evidence that car culture adherents have higher crash rates than other young working-class men, the findings to date suggest that it is a high probability that this is the case.

The fieldwork was done in Western Sydney between 1992 and 1994 by me and two research assistants, one of whom was a young woman who had gone to school with many of the participants in the study, and who shared their interest in motor vehicles. The other research assistant was a man, who like myself is mature in years. All of us partook in the ethnographic project of observations, informal discussions and semi-structured interviewing. The majority of formal interviews were recorded in the interviewees' homes.

The men ranged in age from 17 to 21 and are from Turkish, Greek, Lebanese, Italian, Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian, Cypriot, Vietnamese and Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. They share a common interest in motor vehicles to the extent that the meaning of their lives is framed by car culture. They form

their masculine identities through the collective practices generated by this all-consuming passion for automobiles. Two distinct groups were involved. The group that the young woman researcher knew, were all of non-English speaking background and they referred to themselves as "Wogs and Slopes" counterpoised to Anglo-Celtic "Skiippies," presumably named after the famous television series about a boy's love of a kangaroo, entitled *Skippy*. (I have discussed elsewhere [Walker n.d.] the racism prevalent in car culture.) Other interviews were carried out in a pilot study with young men in a juvenile detention centre who had been convicted of motor vehicle related offences (Walker 1998). I knew the Anglo-Celtic group through one of my students who was a car culture adherent at the University of Western Sydney, Macarthur, Bankstown Campus, and came to know the rest through a snow-ball effect. This group referred to themselves as "petrol heads" or "rev heads."

There were 18 young men in the Anglo-Celtic group and 22 in the NESB (non-English Speaking Background) group. Since the project contract specified that young men were the subjects of study all but two of the recorded interviews were with them. We tape-recorded twenty-five semi-structured interviews after we came to know them, but talked on a number of occasions to most of the others.

The research was sandwiched between teaching periods, and interviewing was done mostly in the evenings. On some weeknights and weekends we accompanied the participants, mostly in their cars, to their venues for drag-racing and showing off their cars to their friends, as well as "doing a runner" with them at the sight of approaching law-enforcement officers. Happily for the researchers the technical prowess of the participants in driving left us on these occasions physically, if not psychologically, unscathed!

Women were present on all occasions except while a number of men were fixing a friend's car in his garage. However, when there were no mates present, girlfriends were then invited to assist by fetching tools, food and drink. Their participation at venues was equally secondary. They were present as observers of the men's displays, as helpmates in buying takeaway food and drinks and as decorative objects leaning against car doors or sitting in the front passenger's seat. Most of the young men did not have "girlfriends" although a number of women accompanied the young men as friends.

The discussion here will be confined to the discourses and discursive practices of the micro-culture, which exclude women.<sup>1</sup> The degrees of involvement in car culture differed greatly among the young men and also took different orientations; some were very concerned with the visual beauty of the vehicles, some with the engineering and others with performance. However, there was one matter on which they all agreed, that is, that car culture belongs to men. The exclusion of women from car culture is perceived as essential because if women can do as they do then by definition they are not "manly."

Why young men with most of their lives ahead of them, living in a society

which provides a vast array of material and intellectual resources, should narrow their human needs to the fetishism of one commodity; find their manhood, soul and identity in an automobile, defies any simple answer. It requires an explanation that takes into account the social, cultural and historical contexts of their lives. The issues are vast and complex, for car culture permeates the fabric of Australian society, but it does not end at Australia's national boundaries.

Just as international capitalism has produced a world car, it has also generated a world-wide car culture. These young men identify with young men in other parts of the world; in particular they mention Europe, Britain, the U.S.A., New Zealand and Japan, this last country because of the popularity of the Mazda with rotary powered engine and the high profile of the Japanese companies in motor racing. Links are formed through viewing television—especially motor racing, car enthusiast magazines and music. They believe, correctly, that internationally there are large numbers of young men who think and feel just as they do. The local manifestations, however, are unique. The Ford/Holden division of car-lovers is specific to Australasia, having been generated by Ford and General Motors Holden through motor racing drivers who have become popular heroes, such as Australians, Dick Johnson for Ford, Peter Brock for Holden and Alan Moffat (a migrant from Canada) for the Ford and Mazda companies.

Before addressing the specific forms and processes of moulding masculinity through motor vehicle use it is necessary to situate motor vehicle culture in its wider context.

## **HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS**

The use of the private motor vehicle has changed the face of the economy and the landscape of modern Western societies in less than one hundred years. In Australia its influence has been profound (Spearritt 1987). Motor vehicle manufacturing became the largest growth industry in Australia in the post-World War II period, an era which saw an investment of global capital that gave rise to rapid industrialisation and the influx of a large number of migrants to satisfy the newly created demands of industry for labour. The convenience of individualised transport provided by the internal combustion engine automobile and cheap petrol, allowed for the expansion of the working class into what in the pre-war period was middle-class suburbia.

In the 1950s there were, for the first time, mass sales of cars to working-class Australians (Connell 1980, 215). Working-class people moved to the Western and Southern suburbs of Sydney where home ownership was cheaper than on the North Shore and in the Eastern suburbs. But public transport was poor then, and remains that way, despite the fact that the majority of Sydney's population resides in Western Sydney. Most other social amenities were also very scarce. Since the late 1940s and early 1950s, the private motor car has

become "a central feature of working-class life and culture, a basis of the economics of everyday life" (Connell and Irving 1986, 295). Of necessity, as well as desire, women too needed motor cars.

Although there is now recognition by manufacturers and advertisers of women's need for motor vehicles, historically it has been a secondary consideration. Cars for women are called "second cars." The first car, the powerful family car belongs to the "man of the house" so that he can commute to work each day. Framed within the 1950s and 60s discourse of the nuclear family and suburban housewife (Game and Pringle 1983), it was considered that women had little need for cars beyond shopping and day-time leisure pursuits. Nonetheless, the second car became part of the Australian dream during the economic boom of post-World War II. With a second car the working-class man could keep his wife in the style of the bourgeoisie and even the aristocracy before them. Indeed, such was the optimism of this era that one could even stop talking of social classes, or, at least state unequivocally that all Australians were "middle class."

Now although there was a willingness to eliminate social class as a pivotal axis of Australian society, no such egalitarian attitude existed for the place of women. Not only has the private motor car structured our geography, it has also structured our houses and the use of private space. Women may be allowed the dubious privilege of being queen of the domestic realm but the rest of the world belongs to men. A case from my fieldwork illustrates the point.

## CASE STUDY

John is 20 years old and lives in Birrong, near Bankstown in Western Sydney, in a house typical of the area, built on a standard quarter-acre block of land, constructed of timber with a tiled roof. The white paint-work is in good condition as John's father has recently painted the house. His father had been laid off from his job as a sheet metal worker six months prior to the interview. John is employed as a car detailer and his mother works part-time for a contract cleaning company. Inside the house it is dark and the rooms are small, but it is meticulously clean and tidy. John's mother does all the housework. The furniture is old and basic and it seems that the exteriors of the house are the focus of the family's interest. The back garden contains a Hills hoist,<sup>3</sup> a small vegetable patch and a mass of flowering annuals. It is primarily John's mother's domain and the front of the house is John's and his father's territory.

The front of the house is the important part of the property. A large concrete driveway leading to a two-car brick garage with roller doors facing the street dominates. The garage is out of keeping with the house but not so much with a number of other garages on the street similarly constructed although none is quite so "classy" looking. The family's Rottweiler barked loudly and bared its teeth as each person or car approached the property. It is

a source of pride to John that his Rottweiler is the first dog in the street to bark on the approach of a newcomer. The dog is thought to be a necessity for the protection of the motor vehicles.

John spends about 85 per cent of his income on his major love in life, his cars. The car in the garage, which belongs to John, is called "Roadrunner," a V8 Holden with which he is no longer happy. Soon "Roadrunner" will be sold if it is not stolen beforehand. Theft of cars is a major problem and the more beautiful and desirable the car, according to John, the more likely it is to be stolen. His last car, "The Beast," was stolen from a night-club, but this is as much a source of pride by now as of misery. However, he is unable to get insurance, as, according to John, no insurance company will take the risk on such a coveted vehicle.

John is not used to fixing Holdens and is finding it a problem to install a Nissan Pulsar Turbo charger with the aim of increasing the horsepower of the engine. He is of the opinion that although "it's good, the power's not there—turbos are bullshit because if it breaks down you can't work on them." John argues that on an old car one can easily fix the problem, but with modern cars one needs a workshop. This defeats the purpose of the car for John, as "Roadrunner" is the focus of attention for him and his group of men friends, who congregate around the car on weekends and many week nights. They rebuild engines, acquire, buy, swap and modify parts, attach accessories, paint and polish, grease and check and change the oil, listen to the stereos and discuss, argue, compare and admire the car as well as joyride and drag-race—often demonstrating their driving prowess by doing "fish-tails" and "donuts"—and generally compete for the admiration and attention of others.

The car for John is the site of male bonding. It is the physical manifestation of the fact of his existence and his place in the world. Under the bonnet a conspiracy takes place, an exclusive language emphasising a specialised knowledge shared only by those who are part of the group. Close body contact is allowed between those who possess the knowledge. The ritual is emotionally charged and laughter dominates as jokes and cigarettes are exchanged, more rarely marijuana and beer. Women are absent, confined to the domestic sphere, the interior of the house and backyard, although "Mum's car" may also be housed in the garage. The night I was present "Mum" arrived about 8 o'clock with coffee and sandwiches. She was subjected to playful banter by John's four friends until her son summarily dismissed her.

### WORKING-CLASS CAR CULTURE—THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

The different relationship to the labour market is the key to understanding what, to the outside observer, appears as a distorted masculinity produced by young working-class men's obsession with cars.

Numerous sociological studies of working-class life have described how masculinity was achieved in the first place through participation in the

workforce (Hoggart 1959; Komarovsky 1964; Blauner 1967; Rubin 1976; Sennett and Cobb 1977; Willis 1977; Seabrook 1982; Metcalfe 1987 and Donaldson 1991). At the workplace beginner workers would be inducted into male working-class culture by other workers through a series of initiation rituals, most designed to humiliate and many of them dangerous, designed to test the novice's manhood and to imbue a set of attitudes consonant with the micro-culture of the workplace. This micro-culture of male dominated industry invariably stresses the qualities of toughness, risk-taking, hardship and the equation of weakness with the homosexual and the feminine. Working men attempt to find psychological satisfaction in the workplace through performing hard physical labour, which they often describe as "real honest work" defensively compared to the "pen-pushing" of management and clerical workers. They take pride in doing "a man's job." There is satisfaction as well where the job requires a level of skill, autonomy and personal judgement. This kind of work includes trades such as mechanics and plumbing and occupations like truck-driving and construction work, the elite in blue-collar labour.

However, as Braverman (1974) notes, not only are there few jobs that allow this measure of worker satisfaction, but since the industrial revolution, particularly in the latter part of the twentieth century, work itself has been degraded through de-skilling. Since the early 1970s changes in economic forces away from national to international economies, new technologies, and new forms of communication have led to a fundamental restructuring of the labour market. This has resulted in decentralised wage-fixing, the casualisation and feminisation of the labour force, a diminution of union power and unprecedented high levels of unemployment. Restructuring has disproportionately affected working-class manufacturing and labouring jobs and consequently the lives of working-class men. In Australia since 1973 full-time jobs have declined from 80 per cent of the working-age male population to fewer than 60 per cent employed in 1996 (Fincher and Nieuwenhuysen 1998, 109–110).

Economic rationalist policies, and the associated deskilling have deprived a significant proportion of working-class youth of even more of their already limited resources for consumption and have devalued their labour power further. They have been disempowered in both the public and private spheres, because when a man cannot bring home an adequate wage his standing in the household is rapidly diminished (Komarovsky 1964; Chinoy 1968; Rubin 1976; Sennett and Cobb 1977; Donaldson 1991). Personal legitimacy must, therefore, be sought in the interstices of the social structures that deny direct access to social honour. The solution to the problems faced by the young men in the study is sought in the automobile. Car culture functions to satisfy a considerable measure of their perceived needs. It serves, above all, to restate their male honour.

In Australia and New Zealand the attractions of a separate male culture

that excludes women has its origins in the predominantly male society of the frontier and outback in the nineteenth century. This culture of mateship has been historically documented in the work of Anne Summers (1975) and Russel Ward (1958) in Australia and by Jock Phillips (1987) in New Zealand. It remains strong in both countries. Car culture, as an exclusively male preserve, is a contemporary manifestation. Advertisers systematically link motor vehicles with outback imagery especially to the qualities of Australian men that dominate popular ideology about the Anzac legend, a soldier who is tough, strong, courageous, loyal to his mates, insubordinate, egalitarian, individualist and hard-drinking (Kapferer 1988). These ideological motifs dominate popular culture and are exploited by the advertising industry.

As Kapferer (1988) observes, inequalities between human beings conceived of as being based in nature are acceptable: all others, such as social class, are cultural and, therefore, both artificial and associated with the homosexual and feminine. Consequently, they are unacceptable to Australian men. As an animal species, the symbolic virtues of Australian manhood represent the survival of the fittest men, in true Social Darwinian form. The expression of this world view is dangerously displayed on Australasian roads.

### **FOLLOWING IN DAD'S FOOTSTEPS**

The majority of the forty young men in the study was in the secondary labour market: these young men were only intermittently employed, often on a casual basis or for a limited period such as three weeks, in full-time work. Most had had a large number of different jobs for short periods of time. The work places they inhabited did not allow for the establishment of enduring friendships and relationships with other men and only one, unlike many of their fathers, had been an apprentice. Con, a member of the NESB group, was apprenticed as a mechanic but was laid off eighteen months prior to completion because of the bankruptcy of the business. All but three of the participants were employed in motor vehicle related occupations such as car detailing, panel beating, and labouring in car wreckers' yards, radiator shops and scrap metal yards. None was a tradesman but all of them were in another way following in their fathers' footsteps in working in the automobile industry. Their love of cars was in this sense inherited.

A number claimed that "cars are in my blood." Fathers teach their sons "car-culture" from a young age (see also Connell et al. 1997). Abdul is 19 years old. This is what he had to say:

Yes, a Ford man since I was knee high to a hub-cap I was with Fords. I was with Fords all the time. My neighbours used to own a tow truck business and they liked Fords and I was bought up with Fords. Dad had Fords—I'll stick to Fords. Hopefully my kids will be with Fords. There's nothing better, nothing better than a Ford. I've wanted a Ford V8 since I was four years old.



Paul is 16 years old:

Interviewer: Your dad, does he like cars?

Paul: Aw yeah! He's had all sorts of cars back in the 60s and 70s. He had FJ Holdens, the first model Holden FX, one-tonners. These days he's just got a VM Commodore, the latest model Commodore. That's it, he's a bit of a ham.

Interviewer: Yes, what do you mean?

Paul: Aw well, he's a bit of flatfoot, pedal to the metal.

Interviewer: Right! That's where you picked it up from?

Paul: Probably, it's in the blood, just like Holdens, they're in the blood—from Dad.

Mohamed is 19 years old:

Interviewer: And how old were you when he started working on cars and that?

Mohamed: About ten. Well! Dad for a way of making money, used to buy cars, fix them up and sell them and it's a good business. He made money out of it but I suppose when tax caught up it was different, and that's when they started getting heavy on the tax and he slowed down the business and just got out of it. He's good, a very good general knowledge about cars from—he worked as a mechanic and that—and when he came over here I suppose it was hard, not knowing the language, different cars and I suppose that made it harder for him and his licence. Getting his licence back in 1970—overseas licence doesn't mean much back in Australia—and then he was a labourer most of his life. Well, that's basically it, he was a country boy, coming to a big city. But he knew about cars, very good and he taught me.

There was a lot of conflicts between me and my dad, different ideas. I suppose growing up here with different cultural backgrounds, there was a lot of conflict with him because he grew up in the traditional way whereas it's not around any more. This is the 90s, the twentieth century, you live with the twentieth century not the eighteenth century. They can't accept the fact that was then, we're not there any more, we are a different society, we've got different backgrounds. Things are changing every day, and they can't understand that. They think, you know, when they grew up as a kid, this is what they did. How come we're not doing that? But with cars well, there's no conflict—no conflict between me and Dad.

Mikhail (23 years old) recalls: I don't remember learning to drive but I remember when I was only two years old—it's my only real memory of my mother—she passed away before I was 3. She was crying, screaming at Dad, that he shouldn't of left the keys in the truck. I drove it out of the garage and onto the road. It ran into the neighbour on the other side—his fence. I couldn't stay out of cars. Dad used to let me steer the car all the time. It's good because Dad and me we used to fight a lot but we both love cars and we got on through cars. I could sort of always drive. When I was about nine I used to get the car out of the

garage for Dad. He let me do that. But that was when I could control it—not run into the neighbours' fence [laughter].

For boys and young men car culture is a medium for emotional bonding between fathers and sons as well as for affective relations with other male relations. Our fieldwork provided many examples of affective relations with brothers, uncles, brothers-in-law and cousins that were mediated through motor vehicles.

In twenty-eight cases out of forty fathers helped their sons to buy their first car. They helped in the search for the vehicle and either assisted with finance or purchased the vehicle for them. In some cases fathers donated their own cars to their teenage sons:

Gerry (17 years old): Dad had this 351 Falcon in the garage. It was just sitting there for two months. He used to take Mum's car to the club, so I kept asking him and he said eventually like, "Yeah! You can have it." So I've done it up real nice like.

Interviewer: What did your Mum say?

Gerry: It was her fault all along. She'd nag at Dad; it's too powerful, he's too young, he'll kill himself, there'll be trouble with the police. She said I could have her car but Dad said "yes" so that's it! It's too late for him to change his mind!

However, in most cases mothers provided the bulk of the finance with fathers contributing a much lesser amount. But mothers had little say in the selection of the vehicle. These young men are hostile towards the involvement of their mothers in car culture, especially when they offer advice about road safety:

Interviewer: What about Mum, what did your Mum used to say? You shake your head. Does she give you lectures?

Paddy (20 years old): Yeah! Don't drive too fast, and don't do this and don't do that.

Interviewer: Do you ever take Mum's advice?

Paddy: Yeah, see you later, I just do what I want. She used to say, you'll kill yourself in the car, watch out for the police, if you're caught speeding, don't drink and drive, don't speed. But I do whatever I want. It's my life.

This attitude was pervasive among the young men. Fathers' advice on safety was given more credibility:

Con: Oh he loves them, the V8s, like he really likes them. He likes the power and he's still a rev head, you know! You don't find many 50-year-old men driving a V8 around. So when he tells me to back off on the speed he knows what he's talking about. But he can't say much 'cos he's a rev head too. I still do what I like.

A serious interest in cars is thought to be the exclusive domain of men and, as

the fieldwork revealed, an interest in cars and bikes is passed on from father to son, or, occasionally from another male relative to the young boy. The obtaining of a driver's license and the purchase of the first vehicle is a *rite de passage*, the most important step in the achievement of manhood and a gendered identity. Stoddart (1991), reporting on an American study suggests that learning to drive is a process. Boys learn their driving through watching their parents especially their fathers and the issue for boys is not learning to drive but, rather, it is obtaining their license, for they believe that they already possess the necessary skill. Boys' driving skill is considered to be a natural ability (1991, 167). Stoddart interviewed license examiners who claimed that they had been verbally abused and threatened with physical abuse by parents, especially fathers, when sons have failed the examination. Failure by daughters was quite acceptable (1991, 167). Clearly, failure is emasculating for both father and son. For the son, not to be considered a good driver is equivalent to not being a "real man" and, for the father, his son's failure reflects his own as progenitor.

## PEER EVALUATION

The camaraderie of the company of other men who share their interests is found at mostly informal public sites where young car enthusiasts meet, such as a street particularly suited to drag-racing, an open space near a garage that has a hot-dog and kebab stand, a McDonald's Restaurant car park or a street alongside a beach. But meetings first take place after school, in Year 11 or 12. Many boys drive their cars to school and younger boys provide an enthusiastic team of admirers (Walker, Butland and Connell, forthcoming).

Public sites, both official and unofficial, are the heart of car culture. But it is the informal sites that cause media-induced "moral panics" and public outrage against car enthusiasts and it is the informal sites which attract the attention of the police and unwittingly generate a great deal of excitement and pleasure for devotees. Bondi Beach in Sydney was especially popular for meetings and drag races.

Stuart (21 years old): Well you know what I remembered, a few years ago there was a big craze every Sunday night at Bondi Beach. All the rev heads used to go down there. You know you were a rev head too so you used to go down there and cause up a stink with the coppers. You know what happened? They'd meet there about 10.00/11.00 at night and everyone would be there with their V8's or their done-up cars.

Interviewer: Falcons, Fairmonts, what else?

Stuart: Commodores, Rotaries whatever and one day everyone—one night actually, everyone got carried away and they started doing demo's and brake jobs and—you see what happens. I don't know if you've noticed or not but someone's driving along, they stop at a set of traffic lights and they smoke up the tyres.

Well, the more you smoke up the tyres, or the more noise you make, or the longer you leave the tyre mark, the more adrenaline or the more rush you'll get so you want to do something bigger the next time. And like, you get more of a rush, but there's more danger involved in it. The longer you leave it the more dangerous it gets.

Like, there's a few words for those demos or brake jobs. They call them "brake jobs" because when you put your foot on the brake and accelerate at the same time the tyres start spinning, and it causes a lot of smoke and that's your brakes. Or "fishtails" is when the car's rear end slides in an S shape, looks like a fish tail, that's why they call it a fish tail, or a donut is when a car locks the steering and accelerates fully and the car just spins around and it leaves the shape of a donut. You can also do that on a motor bike but it's not as thrilling. Anyway, back to that night at Bondi .... Everyone got carried away and coppers came from left, right and centre. But before the coppers came, these guys in black—they were all dressed in black. They had black tracksuit pants, black jumpers, came with video cameras—they were undercover cops—and started taping everybody and all their cars and who the trouble makers were and so on and so forth, and then the coppers in uniform came down and started making arrests and everyone was running everywhere, almost doing demos, screaming and yelling.

But it was a real good night, and the next day it was all in the paper, we got a big head out of that and a week after that everybody went down again and this guy from Canberra who—this guy from Canberra, he races cars legally. He's an organiser and he was telling us how we shouldn't do things like that and making a nuisance of ourselves but he saw that he was wasting his time when everyone told him off and started to spit at him and I was getting really violent but it was great to see, and apart from that, what else?

The participants move from one site to another as the police move in on a favoured hot spot. But official sites and obeying the law are also enjoyed, especially the sense of belonging to a group. Rallies and travelling in convoy were pleasurable activities:

Oswald (20 years old): There's this clique, a large clique, not a closed clique, you know, very loosely formed one. We get a lot of admiration and I guess a lot of acceptance, you know, you belong to something. Like us guys we all go on rallies to Katoomba and back and so forth. It's just like a big group.

Interviewer: Do they speed when they go up there or just cruise?

Oswald: No! We go really slow. That's something we like to do, go really slow so that everybody can see us and particularly with the rotary—it sounds different and it's the most distinctive sound on the road. Everybody tends to like, boom, boom, boom, be really in tune. My brother, like, in addition to his engine he's got the world's biggest stereo, speakers everywhere, and so it's like this. I guess he's too young to have his own flat, his own home so he's got his personal space in his car, his whole lot of personal space. Yeah, yeah! I like rallies but I guess that the prime reason is to blow people off the road.

For all of the participants, including girlfriends, a priority was to possess a

car that their peers would admire. This could be achieved through a number of means; beautiful bodywork and interior, unusual colours, large and loud sound systems or a fine old original vehicle in original condition.

Craig (21 years old, lamenting a stolen vehicle): Well it was show, there was a lot of show in the car, I mean it was an eye catcher. It was able to turn people's head around, and have a second look at the car. It's hard to get people to do that. It's like seeing a pretty woman walk down the street, you know, you look at her once and you say, "holy shit," you know, you look at her a second time. There was something to it; it just caught everybody's eye as you drove by. It has speed on it, if you wanted speed, it had that speed as well.

For most, however, speed and performance is the most important element. "Grunt," "torque" and "quickness" were words commonly used in relation to performance. "Quickness" in particular was a dominant theme. Jonathan, 23 years old described it this way:

Interviewer: How did the Brock Commodore drive?

Jonathan: Well mine was worth probably ten grand and theirs [two competitors in a drag-race at Auburn] was worth about fifty or forty-five grand, forty grand up. I used to blow them away by about ten car laps [lengths?] any time I wanted. I had a big carburettor on my motor—they would have had a 600 Holly carburettor and I had a 780 double pumper Holly carburettor—fed fuel straight into the carbic. It was a 4-barrel carbic. Theirs was only a 2-barrel carbic, or it was just a shit bucket whatever. Mine was too quick, could even beat cop cars. A car's got to be quick. You get jocks in Porsches and Ferraris but they can't beat you at the lights. It's how quick you can get from 0 to 100 Ks. We know our cars, we built them, we know what's under the bonnet, the power under the bonnet and what she can do. They might of spent two hundred grand but we've got better cars and better reflexes. They're wimps, you know, haven't worked on their cars.

The making of masculinity is a collective endeavour between men who feel that they belong to a particular peer group. Class-consciousness is a key player in car culture:

James (18 years old): I mean the boys on the North Shore weave into the latest model RX7 or something and have to compete with the bigger boys with their Porsches and Ferraris. They don't really own it, the lease company owns it. Their attachment to it, even though it does everything that us guys in our GT Falcons can do, or even dream of doing and having, and yet it wouldn't have as much psychological significance and personal significance I would imagine. It's not their car because they don't work on it. For us, the point is to get as much as possible for the least amount of money.

Interviewer: I've noticed the emphasis is doing your own car up and with the least expense.

James: Yes, getting the most for least, and you see it around, you know. I was driving back tonight and I saw this crummy little Ford, but he had done it up and

you get respect, that sort of respect he has for his car, you have for your car. You admire it! The yuppie type person, we don't respect them. That's the difference between us Western suburbs boys and the North Shore yuppies, the car. *That* person can only fully express themselves when they are in their motor car.

## WOMEN'S PLACE

Women are also present at these sites but their role is strictly limited; primarily they are there to admire the men and their cars. However, occasionally women with fast cars do attend these meetings:

Peter: Another woman I saw once down at Bondi, which is another sort of hang-out, she had, her car was incredible. It was a Torana with some huge V8 in it. It looked incredible, immaculate and that was impressive. So, it was big for a woman.

Interviewer: Will that make her popular with the guys?

Peter: Might scare them off. She's got a quicker car than them.

Interviewer: Would they race her?

Peter: I wouldn't, hell no, she might beat you! You don't have balls if you get beaten by a woman. No man would race her! You wouldn't live it down. I think you normally don't think of women as liking and driving fast cars, and then if one comes along and beats you, well, it's not the normal thing, puts everything out of tilt.

Women do contest the arrogation of car culture to men and their claim to superior driving skills, thus their superior ability to control technology. Most, however, are not as courageous as the few women are who try to beat men at their own game of drag racing. Here is an extract of a conversation between a husband and wife.

Interviewer: What happened to your Cortina?

Husband: I had a smash when I was in it.

Wife: What do you mean a smash?

Husband: Don't you remember? You weren't concentrating. That was your fault.

Wife: Was not.

Husband: Yes it was.

Wife: Don't blame me, you're the bloody driver.

Husband: It was your fault, you should of warned me he was coming. *You* weren't concentrating and it was his fault anyway.

Wife: No, he [the other driver] was alright in driving the car. To impress me you were a show-off.

Husband: Look, how am I as a driver now?

Wife: Do you want the truth? [Pause] Shit!

Husband: Oh shut-up.

Wife: Do you know why? Because look how many defects you've copped on your cars. How many fines, how many times have you lost your licence? And all the crashes. Okay?

Husband: I'm asking you a question. Answer me the question. How good of a driver am I now?

Wife: Not bad, could be better, could be better. [Grinning and teasing]. Not as good as me!

Husband: Bullshit.

Wife: Look if I drive the way you drive, you'd tell me off.

Husband: How quick are my reflexes?

Wife: Quick, but nothing to brag about.

Husband: Bullshit. I've saved our lives a few times.

Wife: Sure man, sure. You've nearly ended our lives too. Remember the time we were going up through Nasho?<sup>5</sup>

Husband: Yes, nearly went off the cliff.

Wife: Yeah nearly, just went about 10 centimetres and we would've gone right over.

Husband: Yeah, but we didn't, so I'm a good driver.

His wife falls silent, very well aware that to tell him that he is not a good driver is to attempt to emasculate him and any further commentary would be likely to lead to real hostility. The car and the husband's driving skills are being used as a metaphor for the embodiment of the husband. His wife wishes to lay claim to some technological competence. The husband is maintaining male hegemony over 'his' technological domain.

In the case of the husband the car is used as a device to display his superior driving skills and technical ability to control the motor vehicle on the grounds of his excellent physical reflexes. The wife not to be outdone, teases the husband about his reflexes saying that they are "getting better" but still are not as good as hers implying that he has yet a lot to learn, explicitly about driving, implicitly about his sexual prowess. She supports her claims by bring-

ing into the debate an "illegitimate argument" for car-culture participants, that is, that previous driving history, no matter how poor in a conventional sense, has no bearing upon whether or not he is a good driver. Depending upon the context, a number of crashes may become badges of honour, demonstrating one's courage in risk-taking, the desire to win and to fight to overcome the odds, much like a soldier injured in battle, or an air ace whose plane gets hit with enemy fire—Tom Cruise in the film *Top Gun*.<sup>6</sup> Stoddart (1991:152) also makes this point, quoting a father, "he's had a few accidents but he's a good driver."

These young men systematically denigrated women's driving skills whilst at the same time boasting about their own. Ian is 22 years old:

Interviewer: What happens if a girlfriend wants to drive the car?

Ian: Never, never! You've got to be really trustworthy to put an inexperienced driver, if say they are a woman and they haven't been driving long. You don't put them behind the wheel, they would just lose it. They'd smash your car.

Interviewer: What if she was experienced?

Ian: You mean a woman racing driver or something? There's not too many of them. No! Women can't handle a powerful car; they have to have a small car! You'd have to be an idiot to let anyone drive your car that costs lots of money and you've put heaps into it. I've got the control. I've handled it at 210 [kilometres per hour]! You just have to have the power and the reflexes, be experienced.

Interviewer: Are many of the girls inexperienced drivers?

Ian: Yeah.

Interviewer: I mean, can they drive or not?

Ian: Girls have something with less power.

"His and Hers" technology is nowhere better illustrated than in the conceptualisation that there are cars for men and there are cars for the "lady," which, almost invariably, are smaller, less powerful and usually older. According to the young men in the study these are the kinds of cars most suited to women drivers. Volvos were the most despised of all cars. The following were typical comments: "women have to stick to safe cars like the Volvo—Volvos aren't really cars at all," "women just need a shopping trolley, Volvos are shopping trollies," "good cars are wasted on women." Middle-aged women Volvo drivers are the *bête noire* of car culture enthusiasts, thought to be incompetent slow drivers who cause accidents for young skilled drivers like themselves.

A variety of reasons are given for women's perceived inability to drive a powerful car: "women can't handle a powerful car, you just need the balls," "because your body isn't balanced properly," "women are panic drivers—in a big car they'd cause a lot of damage, havoc, chaos," "you need the second



gear stick, the one between your legs,” “you have to have that testosterone for control behind the wheel,” “they haven’t been brought up with cars, they’ve been brought up with dolls,” “how many women do you see under the bonnet of a car?—they don’t know the mechanics.” This list does not by any means exhaust the rationalisations, most of which were essentialist, sexist and emotive.

For many young men cars were desired in the first place to facilitate attracting young women for sex. The following is a conversation with Dinh:

Interviewer (woman): Do you think guys have these cars to pick them [girls] up?

Dinh: No! It just ends up that way. If you’ve got a nice car you can pick up a woman—probably just the look you know, the smell, the colour, the power.

Interviewer: Do you think women like going fast in a car?

Dinh: Oh yeah! It’s like an orgasm for them.

Interviewer: And it’s not for guys?

Dinh: Yeah! It depends, you know! It depends on the power. You feel good, you know, you feel great, go quick. I usually—I can’t remember who it was but I had a chick once in the back of the car she was screaming out “slow down, slow down,” you know! This other guy says to me, you know, “she’s getting off on it, go faster, go faster.” It’s scary, you know, I was a bit scared but what an adrenaline rush! She was scared but when I slowed down a bit she loved it.

Interviewer: But she was scared at that point?

Dinh: Yeah! But she loved it.

Interviewer: Do many girls have orgasms in fast cars?

Dinh: Yeah yeah! There’s heaps of them that do. They get off. Usually the car comes before the woman.

Interviewer: For a man?

Dinh: Yeah! Well I’m buying another car and there’s a lot of other things I need. The car comes first!

Although Dinh, on this occasion denies that he wanted the car for sex with girls, it appears that this denial may be a defence mechanism because of his disappointment in the sexual stakes. On other occasions he had told us that he wanted a car to escape the control of his parents, pick up girls and generally, to feel a sense of freedom. Craig, quoted above, was more direct:

Craig: As far as having a car, it was a passport to freedom. It was independence. It was a possibility especially because it was a station wagon that you could fold down the back seat and have a mattress in it and brag to your mates, [about] who you took out and fucked in the wagon.

Interviewer: So the girls liked the boys with the cars?

Craig: Well that was what the blokes thought, so that's why we went and got the car. But it didn't usually work out like that with me. I've never had sex in a motor car.

When young men realise that cars do not automatically provide them with a constant supply of willing sexual partners, they orient their emotions more directly to their love of cars. As with bosses, women are perceived as controlling agents in their lives, who do not always supply the desired sex. Certainly there is an element of revenge in Dinh's attitude.

Harry (19 years old): Women, they're just like the boss. When you work in a factory you are a slave to the boss, and have to do what he says. That type of control and the repression, which is a continuation for me of the family environment in a way, and a motor vehicle—when you're on the road, everyone has to obey the same rules. So to me I see it as an equaliser.

## CONCLUSION

It is here that Kapferer's analysis of Australian mateship strikes such a resounding chord. Kapferer argues that "Australian egalitarianism separates powerfully the imposed orders of state forms from those 'naturally' composed in civilian society" (1988, 237 n.6). Car culture is part of the egalitarian frame of reference, *communitas*, in Victor Turner's interpretation of rituals and their relationship to the socio-political order. It is a contested arena between the power of the state and the will of the people. Kapferer's argument that "[t]he social relations and the individual inequalities formed in the Australian sport world in many ways constitute an ideal social reality" (1988, 174–75), applies equally well to the domain of car culture. Within the egalitarian frame of reference, individual inequalities represent the superiority of the natural over the artificial, that is, the social. Driving prowess combines the physical (bodily power and fitness), intellectual (mental agility in seeing and predicting the combination of road, car and danger, i.e. other drivers or police, whilst driving at very high speeds), and psychological (the courage to take risks and the determination to win). Because women are perceived to lack these qualities they are naturally inferior and, insofar as they attempt to control and limit the expression of the natural talents of men, they belong to the artificial, that is, the hierarchical social order, along with men of the middle class and men who have sex with men.

Car culture is an attempt to overcome the injustices and indignities of a social structure that values mental over physical labour. The situation has been exacerbated by the massive decline in full-time male working-class jobs and has undermined the social dignity of working-class men even further through the obsolescence of their traditional hard, physical, manual labour power, through which they could at least produce a satisfying masculine iden-

tity. Car culture allows a reinstatement of male honour. It is often a highly creative culture where in the best traditions of a Levi-Straussian *bricoleur*, they use the materials of a throwaway society, parts and accessories that they can acquire cheaply from whatever source, to build an object of beauty and skill. These young men resist the new computerised technology, for it too threatens their way of life. Deprived of education, they lack the sophisticated technological skills necessary to work on computerised motor vehicles. Consequently, along with the threatened incursion of women into car culture they psychologically defend their territory and resist "white lab"<sup>7</sup> technology, for that too belongs to the artificial hierarchical order that places them at the bottom.

The essentialist myth of the technological superiority of the male over the female is nowhere more stridently asserted than in the domain of the car. The cultural masculinisation of the motor vehicle and road use in all areas, commencing with skateboard riding through to bicycles and the control of heavy vehicles such as road trains, is a major cause of the very high road toll in all Western societies and increasingly in many non-Western societies (OECD 1994). Until we eliminate men's hegemony in road use and car culture, the situation is unlikely to improve.

However, there are no simple answers. Elsewhere (Connell et al. 1997; Walker n.d.) we have made recommendations for the development of education curricula, outreach programmes aimed at parents and young people and advertising campaigns that if implemented will begin to address the issues. The above examples of contesting men's dominance in relation to cars and driving is typical of the reaction of many women in the study; wives, girlfriends, mothers and sisters. Motor vehicle culture must be de-masculinised. Women's resistances to the domination of men in technology, generally, and specifically in relation to motor vehicles, need to be encouraged and used strategically by road safety educators at all levels in order to intervene in the processes that are the underlying cause of much of the carnage on the roads.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Other reports and articles on this research are to be found in Walker 1998 and n.d.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jackson's (1992), Campbell's (1994) and Rolls et al.'s (1991) studies in the UK and Rothe's (1986) research in Canada.

<sup>3</sup> A circular, rotating clothesline invented in Australia.

<sup>4</sup> A handling action which produces these shapes on the road surface through the use

of excessive engine power causing the driving wheels to spin rather than to provide traction.

<sup>5</sup> The Royal National Park on the South coast of Sydney traversed by a steep and very winding road loved by car culture participants for testing their driving skills.

<sup>6</sup> In the film *Top Gun*, Tom Cruise plays the role of a young fighter pilot who performs feats of exceptional daring and amazing skill.

<sup>7</sup> This refers to middle-class men in white coats whom they identify as the creators of computerised cars.

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