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"Whose Pop Culture?" :

Reverse Appropriation and Agency in Popular Culture and Gay Identity

Introduction

The discourse of popular culture is an important one for numerous theoretical, academic, and concrete social reasons. Popular culture is a site of analysis which intersects sociology, cultural studies, history, and communication studies, just to mention a few. More importantly, the site of popular culture is a highly contested one which has multiple, real effects on the daily interactions of many people. While this results in a very important need to analyze the cultural phenomenon of "pop," it also leads to politically charged and frequently incomplete analyses.

The study of popular culture began within a mass media communications discourse and quickly dispersed into the many disciplines which it affects. Within most of these theoretical texts, popular culture is nothing more than a vacuous, oppressive structure which renders the populace apolitical. More recent research into the effects of popular cultural from a sociological standpoint blend the sociological foundations of George Herbert Mead with the classical communication theory of Marshall McLuhan in order to create a theory which attempts to unravel the social effects of pop. More common than not these modes of analysis are also plagued by troubling frameworks of

pop or by ignorant regard for the real lives of people who interact with popular culture on a daily basis. This facet of social analysis needs to continue to be explored in order to understand real social identities as related to popular culture.

It is no coincidence that the population I selected for my research into the relationship between popular culture and identity was gay males. Even setting aside my personal identities, which will be explored as relevant to my research, there is a surprising lack in a carefully constructed cultural sociology of gay male identity. Even outside of the relations of popular culture to gay male identity, true cultural analyses of gay males are frequently replaced with more abstract or divergent theories and articles. The shift created somewhat simultaneously by the gender studies niche of sociology and the increase in representation of gay people in the media resulted in a very particular and incomplete set of texts created around this relationship.

With my work, I sought out to unravel this hole in the literature and begin to reconstruct the framework for more effective use. For my research I conducted an extensive literature review and in-depth interview research in order to begin to unravel the relationship between gay men's identities and popular culture. I researched literature of the last half-century which related to popular culture analysis, mass media theory, identity construction, masculinity and gay men, gender theory and the relationship between gay men and the media. In order to effectively frame my own research within the wider body of texts, I constructed a short history of social media theory and reviewed the ways in which it could contribute to my analysis, but fell short of actually providing the tools necessary for such an analysis. I also conducted in-depth interview research with gay men over a period of two months in order to gain an honest and concrete insight

into their interactions with popular culture. I then begin to unravel the data I received from these men in order to better understand their relationships to popular culture, but also to provide a series of analytical recommendations for future research into popular culture and identity.

Literature Review

The vast academic literature that exists on popular culture involves a variety of disciplines and schools of thought, thus an extensive range of perspectives. The majority of historical (relatively recent considering the texts on modern popular culture arguably didn't exist prior to the 1960s) texts available on popular culture are by mass communication theorists and framed related to that discipline (for general historical mass communication theory see McLuhan 1964 or Innis 1951), particularly by the Frankfurt School. A cultural interpretation of Marxist theory, this perspective expanded Marxist economic theory to the "culture industry" and mass media. A highly cynical school concerned with the "fake" and mass produced nature of media culture and the ways in which it could repress the population at large, it was overly pessimistic, favored the abstract, and rarely looked at the concrete interactions involved in media absorption processes. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," (Horkheimer and Adorno 1998) a chapter from their 1947 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* anthology, epitomizes this abstract Marxist pessimism. The concept of "the culture industry" is unraveled through a densely written philosophical text in which profit is shown to be the sole motivation behind the production of culture, a fact confirmed by much of the media infrastructure today. While numerous points are made about the devastating effects this may have on absolutely

every aspect of modern life and culture, the key to the argument lies in the final passages. Beyond the removal of individual thought and the self-imposed ignorance this "culture industry" has created, the most important effect is that the only agency remaining is the "freedom to choose what is always the same" (167). This tongue-in-cheek assertion, which is common throughout the convoluted text, presumes that the culture of mass popular media has stripped social agents, and essentially everyone, of power by providing either no choice or an illusion of choice between objects which are essentially the same.

Beyond solely sociological viewpoints, there are about half a dozen basic, fundamental theories of media socialization that have come about over the last forty years (for a thorough examination of media theory see McQuail 2000). These six theories are not mutually exclusive nor a comprehensive list of media socialization theories. Instead, these are the theories which influence one another and for the most part led to paradigm shifts in the discourse around media absorption and effects of mass media. These theories also prove useful for an analysis of popular culture and identity as they begin to build a framework for understand real effects of cultural media on people. The more recent theories have not phased out the earlier ones, as scholars and academics in cultural studies, sociology, and communication studies disciplines all employ these theories differently at varying times in their analyses. Each theory also contains a body of texts and research studies and to be summarized in just a few sentences leaves the theory highly oversimplified, but appropriate for this context.

The dominant theoretical framework of mass media theory in the 1950s and 1960s was the limited effects paradigm frequently attributed to sociologist Paul

Lazarsfeld's research on the 1940 presidential campaign conducted in the mid-1940s (Lazarsfeld 1988). The limited effects paradigm posits that media socialization occurs in tandem with alternate forms of socialization, and thus individuals consider media images in light of their pre-existing knowledge. In this case, power is given to an active and conscious audience who can selectively fashion the media to their existing interests. Arguably the first theory to present a major shift in the discourse following the limited effects paradigm was the agenda setting hypothesis which began to relocate power and agency in media theory (McCombs and Shaw 1972). The agenda setting hypothesis proved a major shift away from audience agency, theorizing that the media controls public opinion by focusing on particular issues that then become the issues of public concern. Building on this idea of media hegemony is the hypodermic needle theory, also known as the magic bullet theory (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1964). The hypodermic needle theory locates all power in the mass media and theorizes that the media "injects" messages into the audience which contribute to the public's behavior, attitudes, and overall social interactions. Similarly, the spiral of silence theory considers the media to be powerful enough to change attitudes of the audience (Noelle-Neumann 1984). In this theory, the power of the media occurs because the audience wishes to conform to dominant ideas and is generally afraid to diverge from the perceived mainstream. The final "classical" theory which locates all power in the media as an institution of mental control is the cultivation theory (Gerbner 1969). Gerbner's cultivation theory considers audience exposure level as a factor, but only as contributing to the intensity which the media's reality is "cultivated" in the minds and real lives of the audience.

The usefulness of these theories as they exist remains limited by the problems inherent in such theories, especially for sociological analysis. Most are oversimplified, but the major problem arises from a notion of the subject as isolated from social networks (magic bullet theory), lacking pre-existing opinions (spiral of silence), or as disjointed individuals with a one-to-one relationship to the media (cultivation theory). In an attempt to reconcile these major problems and reposition the focus of such theory, what is known as "New Audience Research" was a recent major transition in mass communications discourse. New audience research, a postmodernist school of thought frequently rooted in scholars such as John Fiske (see Fiske 1992), locates power in the audience member who receives the media. Resistance occurs by inserting one's own meaning into the media that is being processed, turning the audience member into an active producer of socially constructed meaning.

Sociological discussions of popular culture, whether or not they are explicitly framed within these aforementioned theories, prove to be one of the more divisive social media theory areas. Frequently articles become so political in their intent that they are plagued by being too extreme. These tend to be overly pessimistic and attribute all the power to the media structure in a top down fashion or they ignore the social structures and render the media a blank chalkboard on which assumed to be "educated" and "informed" social actors can create what they desire. The first major obstacle for many analyses is an attempt to contextualize and define popular culture. Frequently, popular culture is positioned as the polar opposite of what is deemed "high culture" – that which is categorized as having inherent artistic value and appeal to upper class "taste" (Jenkins et all 2002 26). Popular culture is a struggle to define, even for a singular purpose –

problematically it is conflated with that which is mass produced, made to be a boundary marker for that which is lower class or or used synonymously with the commercial culture, for example the genre of music known as "pop." Once a definition specific for the context is laid out, the concept must remain consistent yet fluid enough to account for a balance of structure, agency, content, and power. Once defined, the political nature of the larger analysis frequently destabilizes the argument at hand, regardless of the notion of popular culture being used. The research and data employed by these sociological analyses move away from the comprehensive (albeit flawed) research studies of the media scholars and are frequently abstract theoretical data, archival research, and / or narrative data which neglect to include the daily lives of real social actors.

Todd Gitlin's *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (Gitlin 2001) illustrates how an overly cynical standpoint can render an argument ineffective. In the first chapter alone, titled "Superstauration, or, The Media Torrent and Disposable Feeling," Gitlin, a sociologist frequently referred to as a mass popular media academic expert, strips media audiences of all power and begins to employ a framework that is unworkable for a sociological analysis. While it remains important to any argument to consider the "supersaturation" of media in our culture, Gitlin renders audiences ignorant, mindless, and powerless against this "torrent," which neglects the agency and decision making process that occurs within individual social actors or networks. Coupled with this cynicism, Gitlin creates a binary frequently utilized in mass media analysis between what is "real" and what is "fake," typically defined by the author of the text instead of the people using these media. This analytical binary immediately places value on that which is "real" a problematic category in which

something is ambiguously deemed "authentic" (and thus "real") by the author. This is an entirely subjective labeling process which essentializes the argument and contradicts the possibility of social construction. Finally, the argument begins to de-emphasize content analysis in favor of a structural analysis. The theoretical favor of structure coupled with problematic analytical binaries results in a theory in which "fake" media structures impose images onto passive actors and the content is no longer relevant. This framework positions mass media as an inherently uncontrollable and capitalizing oppressive structure.

Illustrating another end of the spectrum (of which there are not simply two extremes), the anthology entitled *Hop On Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* (Jenkins et all 2002) attempts to critique the framework of popular culture as oppression in favor of an analytical position where an audience can create meaning from popular culture. A great deal of the material contained in the essays proves useful, especially considering that overly optimistic analyses are rarer within the discourse than overly cynical ones. And, while the agency is balanced between the consumer of the popular object and the content of the object itself in most of the essays, structural analyses which describe and discuss the inequality within consumer cultures as related to popular cultures are near absent from the discourse. The introduction, written by the anthology editors, provides a concise history of popular culture analysis, but falls short just before fulfilling its potential as ground-breaking. The majority (in fact fourteen of the fifteen pages) are dedicated to reviewing the historical moments in which the dominant discourse of popular culture has shifted. This historical analysis is integral to any sociological argument, but the final page which describes an attempt to create an

argument in which "popular culture is neither simply progressive nor regressive" (40) does little to even re-imagine how the discourse can be shifted. The argument is unable to explore how popular culture is not easily located on the binary of progressive (making it a media wonder of technology) or regressive (making it a mind-numbing and oppressive structure). The importance of providing agency to an audience that is frequently rendered powerless gives weight to much of the work involved, but the absence of a proper balance between structure and individual provides little to move forward with.

Stuart Hall's "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular'" (Hall 1981) begins to unravel the methodological problems with many theoretical frameworks in the study of popular culture. Hall breaks down the destabilizing tendencies of many highly oversimplified arguments. The text begins with the assertion that popular culture analysis must start with a consideration of the "double movement of *containment* and *resistance* which is always inevitable in it" (228, emphasis added). Popular culture becomes two-fold, allowing for the possibility of both oppression (containment) and subversion (resistance). This duality of popular culture, regardless of the context-specific definition being used at the time, is essential to a comprehensive analysis where the possibility of the audience member to be oppressed is considered alongside the potential to subvert. Hall's dense article goes on to deconstruct popular and culture as independent concepts, but brings it together to cite the problematic binaries which render an argument incomplete. Hall describes how popular culture must be examined as embedded in cultural relations, thus it is intricately linked to domination and subordination (233). The analytical inability to balance popular culture's location of power results in two polar concepts of popular culture – one of "pure autonomy," existing outside these power

relations or one of "total encapsulation" which subscribes "to the thesis of cultural incorporation" (233). Hall negates arguments which locate their analysis entirely in either of these poles, citing that

> …I don't think it is necessary or right to subscribe to either. Since ordinary people are not cultural dopes, they are perfectly capable of recognizing the way the realities of working-class life are reorganized, reconstructed and reshaped by the way they are represented… The cultural industries do have the power constantly to rework and reshape what they represent… (233)

Hall proceeds to deconstruct even more binaries, including the problematic polarization of "wholly corrupt" or "wholly authentic" (235). It is concluded that the study of popular culture is one of complex interrelations and tensions which is an ongoing contradictory process of cultural relativity (237). This postmodern call-to-arms concludes with the assertion that popular culture is a vital site for proper analysis because it is "the arena of consent and resistance" (240) where people and culture have a reciprocal relationship of constructing one another.

In order to consider this balanced examination of popular culture media's effects on audience through a sociological lens, examining the discourse of identities and identity construction is necessary to understand the socialization effects of pop culture. Identity development theory and analysis is a widespread foundation of sociological theory. With the relatively recent development of a gender studies niche in sociology, gender identity theory and identity analysis specific to gay men's identities have become increasingly more accessible, but arguably not yet comprehensive. Frequently analyses of gay male identity are limited to a focus on identity as linked to gender development or deconstruction (see Butler 1990) or identities of sexualities (see Nardi 2000 discussion below). While each of these analytical frameworks is an integral part of the discourse, a

cultural aspect of gay men's identities is regularly overlooked. At the risk of homogenizing gay men as a single social unit and rendering diverse identities invisible, investigation of cultural identities has been neglected for other modes of analysis.

The "masculinity studies" movement, which has followed from the deconstruction of identities set forth by the feminist academic movements, has been cited as being revolutionized by the in-depth work of gender theorist R. W. Connell. Connell's *Masculinities* (Connell 1995) proves a useful text, perhaps the most comprehensive introductory sociological study of masculinity. Following a review of scientific definitions of masculinity and the loopholes in much of the scientific "knowledge" on masculinity and men's bodies, Connell uses "life history" interview research with a small number of participants and a massive amount of data from them to produce his text. Instead of attempting to build, reconstruct, or reconfigure a theoretical framework for masculinity studies, Connell provides an in-depth analysis of these men's lives. Using this data, Connell goes into the process of re-imagining history through a masculinity studies lens and how masculinity politics need to be reconsidered. Connell's final chapter "Practice and Utopia" provides tools for social and academic action and activism. Connell provides the analysis required to reconceptualize masculinity as plural, highly complex and even contradictory through the creation of a number of analytical "masculinities." Connell provides the means for his analysis to be employed at the concrete, everyday level towards the goal of social justice reform. This text provides the analytical tools required to use the struggle of exploring and living masculinities and masculine identities to develop a discourse of masculinity studies.

Peter Nardi's anthology *Gay Masculinities* (Nardi 2000) collects a dozen articles from a range of analytical disciplines as part of a "research on men and masculinities" series of texts. The articles, while insightful and sociologically, psychologically and anthropologically useful are limited to discussions of religion, sexual relationships, friendships, female impersonators, working-class gay males, and domestic violence, providing few of the analytical tools required for examining gay masculinities and identities. The sole problem is not in the limited selection of subject matter, but rather the way in which the authors deal with their arguments. Matt Mutchler's "Seeking Sexual Lives: Gay Youth and Masculinity Tensions" (Mutchler 2000) makes an attempt to give voices to young gay men that are frequently left out of analysis. By focusing on qualitative data gathered about these men's sexual interactions, Mutchler attempts to unravel how sexual and cultural relationship scripts affect the identities of these men. Jane Ward's "Queer Sexism: Rethinking Gay Men and Masculinity" (Ward 2000) is an insightful tool for unraveling identity politics around queer and gay men's relations. By focusing on identity construction and interactions only through a theoretical lens, the reality of a cultural interaction is absent from the argument. These two articles attempt to understand identities of gay men; Mutchler's provides a needed insight into a younger group and the struggle between sexuality and identity while Ward provides a theoretical framework to begin to understand sexism within masculinity politics and identities. The lived cultural aspect of gay men has yet to be unraveled in a way which considers popular culture as an element and tool of social interaction.

David Altheide, scholar of mass media studies, attempted to forge a model for popular culture and identity, building on the work of George Herbert Mead and Herbert

Blumer, in his symbolic interactionist article "Identity and the Definition of the Situation in a Mass-Mediated Context" (Altheide 2000). Identity, he argues, has come to rely on popular culture as a "mass-mediated generalized other," resulting in a negotiated identity which shifts concurrently with popular culture (2). Popular culture transitioned into a generalized other for identity formation by defining the social world in terms of pop and entertainment culture. Altheide's historical notion of the definition of the situation is one in which "social stability and change are recognized, explained, and resisted through symbolic communication" (3). Power becomes the ability to define the situation for the self and for others. The text goes on to conclude that pop has replaced the definition of the situation and is permanently altering interaction by producing its own social scripts (14). Altheide asserts that popular culture is becoming an important generalized other and his nostalgia for something prior to this is clear, yet ignores what occurs if and when the generalized other is resisted. Popular culture represents a potentially destabilizing transformation when it becomes the biggest generalized other, yet resistance is not analyzed by Altheide. This argument neglects to examine why popular culture can't be used to define the situation itself as symbolic communication. Without explanation, popular culture possesses all of the power, rendering the social actors (assumed to be the ones who don't resist) once again without agency. This analysis is useful to consider the complicated relationship between identity and the definition of the situation, but popular culture needs to be considered a tool with which people can recognize, explain, and resist, not simply a structure which strips away this ability.

The texts available which blend gay identities and identity construction with social theory of mass media are few. Those which discuss popular culture media's

relationship to identity formation discuss it in a top-down fashion where identities are invisible because actors are powerless. The rarely presented possibility of semi-empowered actors is that of a fractured identity resulting out of the desire to become the media image. Even authors who take on a more optimistic view of the power of the audience member typically analyze popular culture from the top down – meaning from the structure to the individual. Although these analyses are useful, they are nonetheless an incomplete model for examining popular culture and identity formation.

Susan Bordo's cultural analysis of male images in popular culture examines the ways men's bodies are constructed in the media and is an insightful and accessible book (Bordo 1999). While the text is able to unravel some very rarely discussed and socially destructive images of men, it does so strictly from a content analysis, examining how popular culture's depictions could psychologically or socially be negative, but without including research into audience reactions. Moving from Bordo's content analysis which considers partial effects on individual social actors, two essays from a vital anthology to media studies exemplify the shortcomings of attempts to discuss popular culture and gay men's identities in any way beyond that of oppression and appropriation. *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text-Reader* (Dines and Humez 2003) is a comprehensive resource with seventy essays covering a wide range of media topics from a social theory standpoint. Two of these essays which deal with gay identities and the media represent the limitations of the existing discourse on the relationship between media and identity. Diane Raymond's "Popular Culture and Queer Representation: A Critical Perspective" (Raymond 2003) attempts to examine television media representations of "queer" relationships. Raymond utilizes "queer" as that which is unable to be defined and a fluid

category for non-normative sexualities and relationships. In this examination, Raymond is able to create a concise overview of representation and the "queering of television" as it relates to queer theory (101). In her dividing and labeling the representations on television, Raymond remains abstract and does not bring her content description down to any level closer to that of the individual audience members who are being represented or who are viewing the programs. Kylo-Patrick Hart's "Representing Gay Men on American Television" (Hart 2003) provides a similar lineage for media representations of gay males in television programming. This essay, originally published in the *Journal of Men's Studies*, provides no analysis which moves beyond the cataloguing of gay men on the Fox network, and the television programs Beverly Hills 90210, Melrose Place, and Party of Five. The most analytical sentence in the piece lies in the conclusion when Hart describes how these "…examples in this [chapter] reveal not only how much progress has been made…but also how much progress has yet to be made" (Hart 606). The focus on representation coupled with the prevailing theme of appropriation as tied to oppression has not progressed far from the early theories of media subjugation. Entire books which purport to analyze gender and media, even some which dedicate themselves to gay men and lesbians in the media follow suit with cataloguing and surface analysis of media representation as seen by the authors, moving nowhere past discussions of describing shifts in visibility and marketing to gays (see Gauntlett 2002 and Gross 2001).

While these analytical limitations are prevalent in popular culture discourse, Tony Lack proves the possibility of analysis with agency for "marginalized" people through cultural practice in his essay "Consumer Society and Authenticity: The (Il)logic of Punk Practices" (Lack 1995). Lack's intent is to analyze the subculture of punk's complicated

relationship to consumer-ism and commodity. Lack's article has its own shortcomings, including his intense elitism in which only "die-hard" punks can be subversive whereas the "part-time" punks cannot (10). Beyond these limitations, Lack goes on to describe how the subversive or revolutionary can undergo "aestheticization, integration, and partial normalization," a transition for punk which he finds "lamentable" (10). But what of the aestheticized, integrated, or normalized being used for subversive purposes? Examinations of popular culture rarely work from the inside out and instead examine how popular culture simply absorbs, commodifies, and sells. For Lack, only the original product of punk, not any of its influence in popular culture, can provide those subversive outlets, proving the largest weakness in his argument – the unquestioned use of a polarized notion of authenticity. Lack thus completely negates the ability of popular culture to prove subversive, tying together the common limitations of popular culture and identity analysis.

Data and Methodology

The research conducted for this analysis was through the use of in-depth interviews. The final data set for the study consisted of twenty-two in-depth interviews with self-identified gay men from the New York City metropolitan area and over twenty hours of interview transcripts. Sampling was conducted primarily through snowball sampling, with contacts made via other contacts. Eighteen of the participants were gathered through snowball sampling and the remaining four responded to email solicitation. Email flyers were sent to online list groups catering to gay communities at both the local level (New York University) and a larger target audience (New York City metropolitan area). The sample derived from four primary social networks. These four

social networks included students at New York University, staff at New York University, twenty-something males living in New York City for at least a year, and research professionals living and working in New York City. Screening for sexual identity consisted solely of a request that respondents self-identify as gay. The only other stipulation stated in recruitment flyers and consent documentation was that respondents be over the age of 18. There was no formal procedure conducted beyond the self-screening that occurred with each participant insuring that they were over this age.

Strict confidentiality was maintained throughout the research, and in some cases participants were anonymous. Of the twenty-two participants, eight cases were anonymous and the remaining fourteen were held strictly confidential. The eight which maintained anonymity never provided me with anything beyond a first name they wished to be referred to as. The most identifying data received from the participants was their email address to schedule an appointment. Once the interview session was scheduled, the email address was deleted from all records and purged from the email account. The fourteen confidential cases are participants whom I was privy to more identifying information – in some cases it was a first and last name, in others I was somehow acquainted with the individual. In these cases all notes and documents relating to the interview session contained only the name chosen by the participant. All records of emails setting up the appointment have also been purged from the email account.

The interview schedule was developed and re-drafted a number of times after peer review and two pre-test interview sessions. The schedule (see Appendix A) consisted of eighty questions divided into informal subsections based on media type. The subsections used were questions relating to musical interests, movie and film interests, television

programming interests, book and publication interests, club and public social spaces, and a miscellaneous section. Each media type section contained about fifteen questions, with adjustments made for media specific appropriate questions. The final miscellaneous section included six general popular culture questions and a final opportunity for the participant to include anything we had not already discussed. The structure of the schedule was intended to allow participants the first eighty percent of the interview session to reflect on their cultural interests and activities without being led by any knowledge of the popular culture interests of the research study. This was controlled by informing participants of the general intent based on cultural activities but not discussing particular research questions beforehand. The final section of questioning began to target specific elements of popular culture and the respondent's relation to it.

The schedule did not allow for thorough investigation into the demographic characteristics of the participants. Based on the sampling method and phenotype of the participants I am able to extrapolate some demographic data for the sample. All twenty-two respondents were self-identified gay men. The range of ages was very widespread with the majority of participants being located on the younger end. The youngest two participants were 18 years old. Following this there were five 20 year olds, two 21 year olds, and eight 22 year olds for a total of fifteen participants aged 20 to 22. The remaining participants ranged between 27 years old and 53 years old, with two in the 27-30 range, one in the 30-40 range, and two in the 50-60 range. The race of the participants can only be based on the physical phenotype observations made during each session and the participants occasional mention of their ethnicity in passing. The results did not appear to be correlated to race, but demographically it appeared that there were sixteen

respondents who were white - which included Italian, Irish, French and Eastern European descents. Two of the respondents discussed identifying as Hispanic while the four remaining respondents appeared to be of East Asian descent, with one of those four mentioning their Philippine background.

Each interview session was transcribed in real-time directly into a computer document. No audio recording was necessary as 95% of the session was transcribed verbatim with the remaining fraction paraphrased as appropriate. The participants were asked if they would be distracted by the typing during the sessions and once they consented to the process the session began. The lengths of the interview sessions ranged from 45 minute sessions to 120 minute (2 hour) sessions with the majority being slightly greater than 60 minutes (1 hour). Four sessions were in the shortest time frame of 45 to 60 minutes, fourteen cases ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and the remaining four lasted 90 to 120 minutes. Two interview sessions had entire portions of the schedule eliminated due to the respondent not feeling that they engaged with several types of media. One of these partial interview sessions had the question set on books skipped over, while the other did not watch movies enough to answer the questions. For the most part the interview sessions followed the formal schedule, though many had minor divergences as they arose. Of these tangents the relevant data appears within my analysis and no divergence lasted for more than five minutes. Some answers received while conducting the interviews prompted me to ask follow-up questions.

In order to gauge the non-verbal responses of the participants during the sessions, I followed up each session with note-taking in which I described the encounters in detail. Eighteen of the twenty two respondents provided positive feedback on the session

without my requesting any such comments. Of the total sessions, twenty of them ran smoothly, with participants either directly or indirectly expressing enthusiasm about the questions being asked. Four of those participants asked me to continue asking them questions once the session was complete, while six others commented on the pleasant experience they had discussing these topics. The remaining two sessions, which did not run relatively as smooth, were still extremely positive sessions. These two participants were extremely straight forward and short-winded, and while no negative feedback was received, the session followed the interview schedule strictly and contained no clear expressions of positive interaction.

In order to conduct my analysis of the data I made thorough notations on the printed transcripts of all twenty-two interview sessions. I conducted a qualitative analysis by reading the transcriptions alongside the research questions I set out earlier in the research process. These questions related to two general topics. One set was related to the identities of gay men and the use of popular culture in identity construction – do gay men relate to popular culture in a particular way? How does popular culture function within these identities? How does this "use" of popular culture affect and / or engage with gay identity? The second set related to popular culture and agency – what elements of popular culture are appropriated into identities? How is popular culture perceived and related to? What sort of affect on identities does popular culture have? Examining the data framed within these questions, yet allowing for the data to speak for itself, resulted in a thorough analysis of the relation between gay men's identities and popular culture activities and interests.

Analysis / Interpretations

Leveling the Playing Field

Throughout my research, I have realized the value of standpoint theory and the effect that my own identities and social positioning have on my research. Dorothy Smith's attempt to reimagine a feminist standpoint sociology led her to conclude that what must occur is "placing the sociologist where she is actually situated…making her direct experience of the everyday world the primary ground of her knowledge" (Smith 1987 91). Therefore, my own social identities have spawned and influenced my own research, the way I conducted it, the data I received, and the conclusions I came to. My relevant identities include the fact that I am a gay man and would describe my exposure to popular culture as slightly above average. The relationship between these two identities within my own life led to my research interests in the interaction between gay male identity and popular culture. These positions clearly affected my interview research differently than had I not been able to identify on either of these two levels. I conducted the interviews as a researcher, not discussing either of these related identities with participants. My own presentation, while attempting to remain that of a researcher, was able to be identified as that of a gay man. My relation to popular culture was rarely identified and only became apparent if a respondent asked for recognition and I was familiar with what they were discussing. I don't believe the effect skewed the results, in fact I believe it made the participants more comfortable during the data collection, leading to more open and honest information. Participants frequently said "you know?" after a statement, hoping to sense some kind of relativity and resulting comfort. This led many participants to depict situations which could have been more difficult to describe had I not been able to provide this degree of familiarity. Participants freely conveyed

their “coming out stories” as well as described their identities and experiences as gay men in a comfortable and honest disclosure, allowing me to gather results which provided a real insight into the relationship between their identities and their cultural exposure.

For the purpose of my analysis I used specific definitions while I conducted my research. I worked within a postmodernist context in which I realized the relative and plural nature of theoretical concepts and how definitions can shift temporally, spatially, and situationally. The identity of a “gay man” was used to limit my research sample to men whom identified as such, although I chose not to further limit the identity of “gay” beyond self-identification. The identity of gay may have been used by respondents to mean they have dated other men, they have had sex with other men, they have an attraction to other men, they are someone who simply associates with the identity of “gay,” or something else all together. Regardless of the personal definitions used by participants in the research, I am using the identity of gay as a cultural category which all of these men are linked to by self-identifying as gay. I am examining the relationship between gay identified men and popular culture in such a way that the reasons for identifying as such are less important than the identification itself.

The analytical struggles to define and examine popular culture have both limited and complicated the theoretical concept of pop. More important than my definition of popular culture are the definitions established by the research participants, for these are the definitions which operate within the daily behavior of these gay men. For this reason I conducted my research utilizing a thoroughly postmodern definition of pop culture. I allowed pop culture to be defined through the data I gathered, imposing no limitations on

what popular culture could or could not include within its boundaries. For my research I conceived of pop culture as a genre – literally a type of culture. Based on my classification of popular culture, I worked with terminology such as "cultural objects," by which I refer to any object which one classifies as a part of that culture. An object in this case is the social object – it can include physical objects like books and magazines, less tangible objects like films or musical artists, or types of objects like fashion. I conducted research about an identity (gay) and a segment of culture (pop) - the details of what that identity and culture meant were left up to the social actors with whom I spoke.

Rendering Pop

The men I spoke with had closely interrelated core definitions of popular culture, with some important variations which contributed to what pop should and should not encompass and represent. There were four overriding elements which ran through multiple discussions of popular culture with respondents. The first of these elements described popular culture as something that Jay summarized as "I'm not the only one that knows about it." A number of participants cited a key element to popular culture as the *popular* aspect, or the appeal to wide audiences. This integral part of the concept included that which the majority of people are aware of and has a "wide fan base," as described by Jerry. The second aspect of popular culture mentioned by multiple respondents involved the age of the audience which are the primary "fan base" or consumers of the cultural objects. Everyone who mentioned age as an element cited an age range that consists predominantly (if not entirely) of individuals 13 through 26 years old. The third element of pop culture that was mentioned by more than a few respondents was geography. Popular culture was described as something that occurred in metropolitan

areas – Caniche mentioned New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Los Angeles as the primary sites of popular culture construction. The fourth predominantly discussed feature of popular culture relates to its definition as a symbolic culture, specifically a culture made up of objects and social symbols. “It’s a way of understanding culture and the people around you,” described Alphonse, relating a notion also expressed as a “collective identity of a society” (Scott), pop as “universally accepted media forms” (Nick) which consist of “cultural reference points” (Alex). These descriptions of popular culture define it as a series of reference points for people to use to relate to one another through. Alphonse and James also offered two additional elements of popular culture – power and a different aspect of universality. Alphonse described how popular culture “is power and it’s the need for it.” He and James both described how “high culture is popular culture too,” (Alphonse) disabling the binary between that which is “high culture” and that which is “pop.” Popular culture is thus defined not as opposition to high culture, but as a universal mode of communication and identification that is linked to relations of power and typically reaches a large quantity of people, the majority of which may be in a younger demographic and / or in a bi-coastal American metropolitan area.

Specific examples of what popular culture represents are easy to imagine within this broad definition. The majority of men I spoke with classified their music, film, book, and television tastes as popular culture. The taste-oriented objects, by which I mean musical interests or film interests, for example, were very different on a case by case basis and there were not more than 5 of the 22 cases which were over 90% similar. This makes it clear that popular culture is very personal for people and represents something quite different to everyone – and that people are open to a broader definition of the

concept as well. It also indicates an open definition of popular culture in which these very different cultural objects can each represent a facet of what popular culture is to these men. There were also a number of less commonly referred to examples that serve to represent the extensive reach of pop in these men's lives. Fashion seemed to be the most popular suggestion beyond the objects we discussed in each session based on the interview schedule, followed, in order of frequency of mention by magazines, the internet, advertising, the news, theater, sports, radio, shopping centers / malls, technology, and art.

Pulling Out The Gay Card

In a further attempt to describe what other cultural objects could be conceived of as elements of popular culture, Caniche cited sexuality. He went on to explain that sexuality can be popular culture in that "any kind of sexual deviance can become pop culture because it's like take anything unique, defy the norm, create something new, and you're fucking popular." Popular culture has a unique relationship to sexuality, one in which sexualities that are revolutionary can be popular. While the commodification of and capitalizing on bodies and sexualities is referenced in numerous media and social analyses, a new relationship between the two begins to be exposed through the lived experiences of these men. While the objectification which occurs in all types of media, not just popular culture, is important to consider, the interaction between pop and sexuality which affects these men's lives on a daily basis is one consisting of a slightly different relationship.

The numerous stories that these men have lived and retold are directly connected to the idea that sexuality is an intricately linked element of popular culture. Experience

after experience was shared during the sessions in which the relationship between sexualities, identities, and popular culture was a key moment for many of these men. Of the total respondents (22), 18 explicitly linked some aspect of popular culture to their sexual identities as gay men. These linkages occurred in somewhat separate ways, yet all clearly defined a particular relationship between these men's identities and popular culture. Quantitatively, the results were the most intriguing. Of the 18 respondents who explicitly linked popular culture to sexuality, 6 did so while discussing television, 4 while discussing music, 2 while discussing social spaces (primarily clubs), 2 while discussing movies, 1 while discussing books, and 3 discussed sexuality at every interval of the interview session.

The discussions of popular culture as linked to sexuality constructed the same overarching relationship, but differed in ways which depended on the media type being discussed. The men who discussed sexuality as related to the television programs they watch each discussed how the world depicted in the programs provided a space for them to learn and examine their identities. Trent described the moment in which he began watching Six Feet Under and Queer as Folk, both television shows with gay male characters featured, as being when "I came out, or I was just coming out, so I guess that's how I connected with the shows – Queer as Folk is self explanatory and Six Feet Under had a gay relationship on it." Tyler was drawn to Will & Grace, a sitcom featuring gay male characters, because "I was gay but in the closet, but it was this great portrayal of what could be." In discussing how he related to the popular culture objects he interacted with, Dimitri stated "…obviously I'm gay, if I watch a show with a gay person in it I kind of identify with it." Jerry, who linked his identity to the movies he chooses to watch,

saw a connection between his increased socialization (and thus increased movie outings) around the age of 17 and his increased involvement in his "gay lifestyle." Alex linked the social spaces he chose to go, also at about the age of 17, with his sexual identity. "I was becoming gay and exercising this newfound gaydom (*sic*)," described Alex, "We were having outings across Manhattan with other homos." In describing the type of fiction books he selects, in accordance with a number of other respondents, Hayden described how he likes "gay fiction" and books which he could "see a part of my own gay self in there." The final type of media which came up most frequently linked to sexuality was music. The majority of links between music and sexuality were in terms of describing their own musical tastes. For example, Christian stated that he was going to "pull the gay card" before describing his musical tastes, indicating that he felt his tastes in music were what one might stereotypically associate with a gay man. Similarly, Nick called himself "such a gay man" while describing some of his tastes. Scott cited Cher as one of his favorite musicians, but says "I didn't start listening to Cher until I went to her concert, which is weird for a gay man to say."

These links between sexuality and popular culture provide insight into a number of ways which popular culture can help construct, define, or reinforce these men's sexual and cultural identities. It is important to realize that this data appeared in multiple ways across the respondent's interview sessions and some respondents indicated several different connections between pop and sexuality, none mutually exclusive. The first relationship is one in which popular culture provides a space for identity to become constructed or to be reinforced, exemplified by the comments relating to television and books. For Trent the images of gay men and gay relationships on the programs he

watched provided a sense of security while he was "coming out." For Tyler these same images provided more than just security. The images which Tyler described as showing him "what could be" were useful in helping to construct and / or define an identity. Tyler mentioned that he was still "in the closet" and not yet entirely comfortable and "out" with regards to his gay identity. So while Tyler later describes television as the space he uses to "disengage," television programs he chooses to watch became both an outlet and an empowerment for coming to terms with, and relating to, his gay identity. The second relationship is one in which popular culture is affected by identity, as exemplified through the comments about film. With this connection, gay identity and culture develop before popular culture comes into the picture. As Jerry describes, once he became comfortable with his identity and "got more involved" with gay culture, he "talked to more people" and began to frequent the movies with more people, a contrast to his former "shy kid" self. As comfort with identity increases, so too does exposure to gay culture, and with an increase to engagement with gay culture there is increased exposure and access to popular culture. The third relationship filters popular culture through a gay community so that pop enables the construction of that community and cultural expression within it. The "gaydom" which Alex was "exercising" at the specific clubs he frequented across Manhattan appeared across the interviews. While explicit connections were not drawn by other respondents, six additional respondents had listed some of the same social spaces which Alex included in his list. These social spaces, primarily clubs and bar/club venues were defined as popular culture by a number of the participants. Alex described how the music was what was commonly considered "popular music," the people were frequently wearing what was "in fashion," and the entire "feel of the place

was all sorts of pop-ish." These spaces allowed for the expression of "gaydom," or a gay identity which could be expressed within a common space, resulting in a space which Ryan described as "this like gay mini-community where even if it's for a night you get to know people and get to relate and just really be with other people like you." The fourth and final relationship which appeared in the men's linkages between pop and sexuality was an explicit discussion of that which is "gay culture." While discussing musical tastes the men frequently made clear if they considered themselves to be labeled as part of gay culture or not. Referring to themselves as "such a gay man" (Nick) or as pulling "the gay card" (Christian) the men labeled their musical tastes as stereotypically gay and representative of a gay culture. Surprisingly the results differed, and while each musician the men listed may be considered as primarily "pop music," the lists were different sets of artists which led these men to think themselves "gay." Scott defined his tastes prior to the last two years by those which were not "gay," describing himself as "weird" for not liking Cher, an act listed as a "gay diva" by Alex. Scott was born and raised on country music and didn't feel his tastes prior to Cher, Madonna, and Celine Dion could be described as "gay." In this final relationship, popular culture becomes a barometer for participation in gay culture. With neither end of the scale more favorable than the other, these gay men are able to describe their tastes as either gay or not gay by using common popular culture reference points, icons, and stereotypes.

When asked what popular culture is, Caniche quickly responded with laughter and "homosexuals," making light of the extremely important and complicated relationship between pop and sexuality. While highlighting each of the four relationships between pop and sexuality, Caniche, Orlando, and Travis went a step further in their

sessions and provided entire dialogues on sexuality and pop. Instead of a few explicit references to sexuality, these sessions contained clearly thought out links between popular culture and sexuality, bringing the conversation around to these links with almost every question. Each type of media included discussions of those aspects which are gay and those aspects which are not gay, and even sometimes the more polarized "straight." Caniche described the element of music he liked as a "very gay house beat," indicating that the culture of gay can also provide reference points for popular culture, not only the reverse. Caniche goes on to describe the elements of music he does not like, which he classifies as "uber straight lack of true musical qualities – anything that's really straight and disrespectful to all forms of humanity." By polarizing internal notions of gay and straight, straight becomes that which is undesirable as compared to the more acceptable gay. In the case of music, Caniche utilizes the aspect of "straight" to indicate both poorly produced and offensive music. Orlando's discussion of films includes a dislike for that which is "cliché straight cinema" defined later as something where "normative heterosexuality is all there is…if it was homosexuality I would watch it." This type of film, "straight rhetoric" as referred to by Caniche, is one which normalizes heterosexuality at the expense of homosexuality, providing a part of popular culture which conflicts with these men's gay culture. Television is desirable to Caniche if it has a "gay thematic…or sexually subversive thematic of any sense." Though at this point in the interview Caniche describes a fear of being "uber gay, that's so not my style," he goes on to describe how television which is "cliché straight culture" and is "something completely one sided and heterosexual" again presents a conflict of identities. In these cases, the identity of gay man trumps popular culture and while power is derived from

the popular culture (Caniche also describes how television helped him come out), there are clear limits on what is considered acceptable. A similar situation occurs with Travis' discussion of books, but Travis then goes on to describe aspects of social spaces which expose this conflict for him. Places where he is the most uncomfortable are places where "no matter how cultured or exposed [men] may be, they have some very intrinsic quality of homophobia... [they] go out to show and judge those who show." This further complicates the relationship between popular culture and sexuality. It is clear that popular culture can provide the cultural and social tools to construct and reify a gay cultural identity. While the two are intricately linked, this relationship is complicated by the fact that gay culture also provides for these men a barometer with which to gauge the acceptability, desirability, and tolerance of popular culture objects.

Reverse Appropriating

While David Altheide theorizes that popular culture is replacing the definition of the situation, it appears from these men's ideas about popular culture that it has far more subversive potential than that of an imposing structural influence (Altheide 2000). Where Altheide locates subversive potential in symbolic communication, which he does not cite popular culture as being a possibility, it is clear from these definitions that popular culture can itself represent symbolic communication. As a form of symbolic communication, popular culture can thus lead to a space where "social stability and change are recognized, explained, and resisted" through the agency of the consumers and users of popular culture (3). Beyond the primary features of popular culture, a unique insight into the constituency of popular culture was brought up during some of the interviews that illuminates where this potential can appear. Tyler immediately responded

to the question of what pop culture is with the question "whose pop culture?" He went on to describe the transient nature of popular culture and concluded that pop was something "people take up and they try it...try to work it into your life in a way…it's like how can I work these things into who I am?" Popular culture is not conceived as a structure which imposes itself onto these men. It is a segment of culture which allows these men to relate to others in particular ways – and allows them at least partial control of the operation of this relation. But beyond providing the tools for cultural interaction and symbolic communication, Tyler finds that "since this is a part of the culture of the moment, it's a part of me." Through his own selection and mastering of the cultural objects available, popular culture becomes a part of his identity.

The individual expression of ownership of popular culture pervades the majority of the interviews. All 22 interview participants were asked to assess the amount of choice they had, if any, in their own exposure to popular culture. All 22 respondents, in one way or another, assessed at least a portion of their own cultural interests and activities as popular culture. The answers to the question of object selection are clear and explicit indicators of the agency which is present in these men's engagement with popular culture. The responses to this question fell into four distinct categories of assessment, with all 22 indicating there was a presence of choice and 18 of those 22 indicating that the majority of their exposure was by choice. The first group of four respondents believed that less than half of their exposure to popular culture was by choice. Jay explained how "a lot of it is by choice and a lot is not, but more of it is not by choice." In order to explain this assessment further, Jay explained that he chooses what books, movies, television, and music he interacts with but "being in stores with music playing

and billboards and advertisements are not really by choice but become part of [pop]." Alphonse, on the other hand, assessed that just 20% of his exposure was by choice, but indicated that the remaining 80% was not imposed on him, but instead was simply not what he would classify as popular culture. Alphonse also mentioned that exposure is not always by choice and "most of it is just around and in advertising and people telling you about it and showing it to you." The remaining 18 participants fall into three categories. Each of these categories places the majority of the popular culture they are exposed to as an active choice they make, but frames the discussion in particular ways. Trent forms the second category by himself, with an answer somewhere in between the extremes of the first and final two categories. Trent indicates that 60% of his exposure to popular culture is by choice. He came to this assessment because "I am more selective and seek out things…I actively seek out certain aspects of pop." Trent continues to describe how "you can't help be consumed by whatever is dominating the airwaves," indicating that there are certain media (in this case television and radio) which have an uncontrolled flow of popular culture. The majority of respondents constitute the third category, in which 13 participants consider their exposure to popular culture to be almost entirely by choice, but also all make a clear distinction between objects one is exposed to and objects one is engaged with. All of these participants described how exposure, by which they referred to as the simple act of seeing, hearing, or observing popular culture objects even from a distance, is somewhat inevitable. The majority cited examples similar to Alphonse and Jay's, which included advertisements, shopping experiences, and conversations as all uncontrollable modes of exposure. These respondents also made clear that while they could not control their exposure, they could control exactly which objects of popular

culture they wished to engage with, take interest in, or simply increase the exposure of. Similar to the way Tyler fashioned particular objects into his own identity, these respondents built their own sense of popular culture to fit their own needs. Dimitri described how while "initially we are bombarded with it… you realize what you do and don't like and that you can and can't do it, and the majority is personal choice." Caniche responded that the question itself didn't work because "encountering the world on the street is popular culture…but choosing to act upon it is my choice," making it clear that while there is a saturation of pop culture objects in daily life, there is an ability to filter and select what becomes more than just a passing image. The final group represents one step further beyond the majority. These four participants believe that 100% of their exposure to popular culture is by choice. While none of the responses drew the same conclusions that the previous group did, Alex did describe that "all of it is my choice, and maybe on some level it is intrinsic, but I like it I do it, I don't I don't, and that's that."

Even beyond the self-assessment of choice these men feel they have in the construction of their own popular culture, their ability to choose remains clear for the entirety of the session. Throughout the indirect cues the respondents gave or their composure during each interview session I was able to evaluate the agency and choice these men seemed to have in their engagement with popular culture. Based on this data, their self-assessments appeared to be directly in line with the fact of the matter. The most striking pieces of data are the extremely varied lists of cultural objects which the respondents called popular culture. Lists of books and films had hardly any overlap with only a total of one film being repeated on three lists and zero books being repeated. The music and television lists had a bit more overlap but the total lists provided by 22

respondents listed approximately 132 musicians and 128 television shows with an approximate overlap of just 16 musicians and 21 programs. The average number of musicians listed by each participant was 7 and the average number of television shows was 6. These differentiated responses explicate what Tyler explained as the way in which "I work these things into who I am…it's a part of me." By owning these cultural objects they serve to create aspects of an individual identity.

Based on my notes of the observed data from each session (i.e. mannerisms, composure, tone and attitude) some possible indication of further agency can be illuminated. Almost all of the sessions (19 of the 22) were marked by enthusiasm on the part of the respondent. All of these 19 respondents were extremely positive and excited about the things they were discussing, and the remaining 3 were not unexcited, they simply weren't as notable. Caniche concluded the session with extremely positive comments about how much he enjoyed it, and even asked me to continue with more questions. Additionally, many of the respondents were highly tangential and while discussing their cultural interests they would go into long discussions of particular objects. Whether it was a television show which they found highly entertaining, music which they valued, films they highly recommended, books they couldn't put down, or places they went regularly, each participant had at least one moment in which they went deep into their interest in a particular object. Once again this data, combined with the fact that the majority of participants described their own cultural interests as popular culture, proves the enthusiasm, control, and desire these men feel about these cultural objects, contrary to the theoretical positioning of oppression and force. Beyond this excitement, some respondents cited a sense of empowerment by the popular culture they chose to

engage with, negating the theoretical "dumbing" effect many attribute to popular culture. Alex and Trent both cited their own activism as a part of popular culture. Trent described how he is "more critical of what's out there and what's begging for consumption," and thus fashions his own popular culture around what empowers him to act. Alex described this fashioning as "reverse appropriation," a term he used to describe how "even though pop kind of takes up identities and sells them I can take what I want and use it to my advantages and for my life, which really involves a lot of global activism at this point." Alex described how certain popular culture music can "contain all these themes for social justice, films can like expose inequalities, and books empower people through education, even though they are part of this popular culture." This reverse appropriation process allows these men the ability to fashion popular culture as they choose and literally appropriate the aspects which construct and empower their own identities.

Reconceptualizing Popular Cultures

The research I have conducted certainly has its limitations, but can offer a new way of thinking about theoretical discussions of popular culture in general, popular culture and identities, and popular culture as specifically related to gay men's identities. In terms of the sample itself, the smaller size is an obvious limitation which could be expanded exponentially to provide a broader insight. The increased sample size can also increase the age distribution, which can help to begin to understand how different generations interact with popular culture differently. Also, while my own links to the communities I researched provided clear advantages, the researcher bias could play a role which would be alleviated through multiple researchers or a larger, more anonymous sample. Additionally, my sample was geographically limited to men in New York City,

which is just one small piece of the world. The sample could be expanded to include men from different regions of the United States, and more importantly the globe, in order to truly understand a global sense of popular culture. The interview schedule itself is limited in the amount of questions asked of the participants. More detailed questions could provide a greater insight into numerous media types or cultural activities which would expand the research in ways beyond that which is typically conceived of as popular culture.

Moving beyond my own research limitations, the data I have presented can clearly indicate the need for many shifts to occur within the framework of popular culture. The first recommendation is for researchers to reconceive of popular culture as plural and highly complex, similar to Connell's reconfiguration of masculinity into masculinities (Connell 1995). The variable definitions of popular culture conceived of by the men I interviewed are not in conflict with one another, but rather are in conjunction. Each of these men categorizes and catalogued different objects as popular culture, expanding the broad sense of popular culture as culture. Beyond the cultural objects labeled as pop, these men each fashioned, owned, and utilized their own popular culture in careful and organized ways. The multiple levels and intricacies these men attributed to the construction of popular culture create a need for researchers to begin to unfold the complex concept of popular **cultures**.

The second recommendation for general theory production derives from the shortcomings of popular culture discourse in light of my research. Dorothy Smith's reworking of feminist sociology provides the theoretical transformations that must also occur in the discourse of popular culture (Smith 1987). Smith discounts traditional

sociology and what she calls “female” sociology for their theoretical limitations and attempts to create an alternative sociological process which prevents bias, oppression, and alienation. This new process must begin in the concrete, where the researcher uses his or her own location as a starting point. The theory then moves into the abstract where the critical lens is applied. Finally, the theory must return to the concrete for “emancipation,” in which the theory is used for social action and justice. This is the clear alternative sociological process which needs to occur within popular culture discourse. The theories that dominate the discourse bypass the concrete starting off point and favor the abstract over the concrete, rendering the real people involved invisible. The research I conducted clearly indicates that the theories set forth do not speak for what occurs in the real daily lives of these men. Therefore, it is clear that any comprehensive popular culture analysis must begin in the concrete with the social position of the researcher and with the real and lived daily social interactions of people. Once that has been established, the research can move into the abstract and begin to problematize the concrete data to formulate theory. And finally, the research must attempt to return to the concrete and analyze how the real use of popular culture as seen through the abstract theory can produce social action.

This social action is what is frequently ill-defined or entirely absent from analyses of popular culture and / or gay men’s identities. The third recommendation attempts to reimagine how social action and popular culture are described in relation to one another. The two are most commonly not discussed in relation and are frequently seen as mutually exclusive. Analyses which call for the subversion of social elements to undermine oppressive structures, as Tony Lack calls for punk to do, ignore the possibility of popular

culture providing this same social empowerment (Lack 1995). In my research, social action and awareness are clearly filtered through the popular cultures which these men have constructed for themselves. These men have selected the elements of popular culture which they consent to or refuse, enabling them to empower their identities through popular culture objects. These men spoke of clear possibilities for social action, ranging from Alex and Trent's global social activist involvement to the community these men built and related to through pop. The structural social inequality of consumer-ism in the United States is what frequently plagues arguments from moving beyond the abstract and into the concrete. Based on these lived experiences, an argument which attributes subversion only to those cultures which move from the outside, or margin, into the mainstream is incomplete. An analysis must begin to conceive of subversion as being possible from the "inside out," meaning that subversion can occur with particular uses of the mainstream by the marginalized.

It is clear from these men's experiences that an argument which would move from the top to the bottom, or from structure to individual, would eliminate the social agency which is present in these men's intricate relationship to popular culture. The fourth recommendation is for a bottom-top analysis which begins to understand how social actors and individuals utilize the structure of culture, as opposed to how culture subsumes and appropriates these identities. Analysis must allow the social actors the opportunity to exhibit their own agency in reverse appropriating elements from popular culture. Therefore, popular culture analysis must begin with a plural definition of popular cultures and then use the concrete at the start and at the finish of analysis in order to effectively convey the real lives of the social actors involved. The abstract theory

formulated must be able to allow for a bottom-top or inside-out analysis in which subversion and individual agency can occur from positions not previously considered. Only when the theory is comprehensive, complicated and derived from the concrete can it successfully produce a framework that will resonate throughout a community and be able to create social action within that community as needed.

Conclusion

The research I have conducted begins to complicate pre-existing notions of popular culture as framed by gay male identities. This research began to deconstruct the limitations of prior analyses and rebuild notions of popular culture and its relation to gay male identities. By revealing the empowerment and agency the men felt at a real, concrete, social level I was able to formulate a series of hypotheses about how popular culture operates in conjunction with, not in lieu of, these identities. While maintaining the flexibility to allow the data to speak for itself, I was able to reformulate a framework and provide theoretical suggestions which need to contemplate the new notion of popular cultures. For this effective analysis, it will need to incorporate the surprising findings of my research which can be easily reproduced, in addition to considering the existing ideas about structural inequalities and structural forces which remain present in the relationship to popular culture.

This new framework literally constructed itself as the men began to describe their own experiences with popular culture. By adopting an unbiased and postmodern research stance I was able to create an analysis in which the men I spoke to truly determined the results I concluded. The men I spoke to were able to both explicitly and implicitly detail their unique relationships with popular culture, allowing me to extract the concrete

interactions which occur into a series of theoretical hypotheses. Not only did this data begin to open up the possibilities for reconfiguring the theoretical framework, but it began to depict a way in which these men could take popular culture, own it, and even begin to use it to fight for the social justice so many believe popular culture works against. In passing, during the questions on music, Alex recited a lyric by Ani DiFranco, a folk artist Ryan called "very borderline pop because shes's so damn popular but so fucking bold," who appeared in three other lists as a favorite artist. "You're only as loud as the noises you make," he recited to me as he began to glow at the recollection of an Ani DiFranco concert he went to (DiFranco 1993). Beyond the academic research possibilities these men began to reveal, they also indicated that underneath this ability to own their popular cultures, there was a potential for great social action. The noises they make are created through the communities which pop helps these men build. The increased volume DiFranco refers to is in the context of effecting change. This volume steadily swells as people like Alex, Trent, and Ryan bond to work for global activism of any variety. While I don't ignorantly believe popular culture is the sole motivating or empowering force behind these men's activist efforts, there is no doubt that the "loud noises" help these men to fight for social justice and equality.

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Appendix 1

Interview schedule used for all 22 conducted sessions:

(Music)

Do you listen to music?
What genre of music do you listen to?
How often do you listen to it?
When do you listen to it?
Do you listen to music with others?
Do you discuss music with others? How?
Where do you listen to music?
Do you listen to the lyrics in the music you listen to?
Can you describe a typical situation in which you listen to music by yourself?
Can you describe a typical situation in which you listen to music with others?
Can you describe a typical situation in which you discuss music with others?
When did you start listening to this type of music?
When you started, what else was going on in your life that you can remember?
What music did you listen to beforehand?
Who are your favorite musicians?
What makes music more desirable to you? Less desirable?

(Film)

Do you see movies (not strictly in the theater)?
What types of movies do you see?
How often do you see movies?
Do you see movies with others?
Who do you see movies with?
Do you discuss movies with your friends? How?
Where do you see movies?
When did you start seeing these kinds of movies?
When you started, what else was going on in your life that you can remember?
What movies had you seen beforehand?
What are your favorite movies?
What elements of film make them more desirable to you? Less desirable?

(Television)

Do you watch television?
What types of programs do you watch?
How often do you watch these programs?
When do you watch these programs?
Do you watch television with others?
Where do you watch television?
When did you start watching these types of programs on television?
When you started, what else was going on in your life that you can remember?
What types of programs did you watch beforehand?
What are your favorite programs?
What elements of television make it more desirable to you? Less desirable?

(Books)

Do you read books?
What types of books do you read?
How do you choose what books to read?
How often do you read books?
When do you read books?
Where do you read books?
Do you discuss books with others? How?
When did you start reading these types of books?
When you started, what else was going on in your life that you can remember?
What books did you read beforehand?
What are your favorite books?
What elements of books make them more desirable to you? Less desirable?

(Clubs / Social Spaces)

Do you go out to clubs or similar social spaces?
What types of clubs / venues do you visit?
How often do you visit these places?
Do you go with others?
With whom do you visit these places with?
When do you visit these places?
When did you start visiting these types of places?
When you started, what else was going on in your life that you can remember?
Where did you visit beforehand?
What are your favorite clubs / social spaces?
How did you find out about these places?
What elements do you like about these places? Dislike?

(Misc.)

Which of these objects that you have mentioned (books, clubs, television, film, music) do you consider to be pop culture?
How do you think of or define pop culture?
Are there other "expressions" of pop culture that you use that we haven't discussed?
How much of your exposure to pop culture is by choice?
Are the people you mentioned that you communicate with for each area discussed the same or different groups of people for each type of media?
Over time how has your exposure to pop culture changed? Has it increased? Decreased?
Are you exposed to images of more women or men in the realm of pop culture? How so?
Can you identify on some level with what you observe / hear / read / see? How?
Any other comments?