MASTERS OF CRAFT

Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy

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3 | WORKING ON MEN

presentable: adj.: clean, well-dressed, or decent enough to be seen in public.

—*From a chalkboard in Freemans Sporting Club*

The barbers have been busy all day, and the client list has been long. All five chairs are filled and six clients are waiting their turn. Two sit reading—one a magazine and the other something on his phone—while the other four alternate between staring around the room and at the floor and following the group conversation. Throughout the day the barbers keep the atmosphere lively with a constant stream of chatter. They start swapping marijuana stories about themselves and people they know. Ruben talks about how he doesn't smoke anymore because he gets too paranoid. He explains how one time he woke up and was holding a knife, and how twice he fell asleep while holding a knife. His stories lead Miles to pose a hypothetical question to the group.

"Would you ever stab somebody?" Miles asks the shop.

"I couldn't do it, that's personal," says Joey.

"You're screaming at the top of your lungs—Ahh!" exclaims Miles, excitedly.

"That's fucked up," says Ruben.

"What do you mean?" says Miles.

Ruben pauses slightly. "I've thought about this a thousand times . . ."

"So you're waiting for it to happen!" interrupts Miles.

". . . a thousand times I've thought about what it would really be like. It would suck balls after, but if the guy is walking into my house through my window at night, guess what, it's pretty personal."

"You can't plan anything out, dude," says Miles.

"What's this guy look like?" asks Joey, to laughter from the barbers and some snickers from clients.

"Let me ask you a question," says Miles above the din, "this guy's in your house—you've been in fights, right? Be honest, do you hit people as hard as you can?"

"Umm, no," says Ruben.

"Yep, then you can't stab somebody."

"Yeah, but, this is . . . dude . . . I don't feel like, as much danger from you, as if you were . . . dude . . . first of all, I never had this happen where somebody actually walked in through my fucking window. But if you did, I think I'd be pretty fucking angry, dude. I'd be way angrier than I've ever been before."

"I know I could stab somebody."

"You're Puerto Rican, that shit's in your blood," says Ruben, to laughter from all the barbers and most of the clients.

Hypothetical questions, challenges, teases, calling people out, showing bravado. Such exchanges are typical at Freemans Sporting Club, an upscale men's barbershop on the Lower East Side. A client walking into Freemans for the first time may have his images of what a barbershop should be like—a place where "men can be men"—confirmed. Group banter fulfills the ideal promise of the men's barbershop as a place for fraternity. But if a new client paid attention, he would notice something missing: barbers talk, clients remain silent. The banter is an unplanned performance, based on the idea of the ideal barbershop, for the benefit of clients, who consume this masculine, typically working-class, culture. Barbers do not deliberately exclude them from their group conversations. The social dynamics of the shop, and the societal conditions under which these new upscale shops have opened, influence how the banter plays out.

Manhood, or what it means to be a man, is in a state of crisis today. It always is. Men are always worried if they are acting as a man should, whether in their family, romantic, or work lives, or in relationships with other men. The reason is society's expectations of proper male behavior constantly change and present men with challenges and mixed signals about how to act. Men are often looking to past times, of their youth or fabled ones told to them by their elders or shown in popular culture, when men were somehow better—stronger, tougher, more responsible—than they are now, for guidance. "How should I be acting right now? What are others doing? How did

men used to act?" they ask themselves. If the enduring ideal masculine image in the United States is of the "self-made man," or the man who earns his living independently and is in control of his own life, then being a man means constantly struggling to live up to it. The question is not whether men feel like manhood is in crisis, but what the crisis looks like in any given era, what is causing men to feel like it is, and how they respond to it.[1]

In the face of such crises, men have historically retreated to homosocial environments, or places where people from the same gender interact, such as social clubs and bars, to achieve masculinity.[2] These places have always been important because men primarily seek to show their masculinity in front of other men, who they feel are the best judges of their own manhood.[3] They are where men go to be and become men, or to "do masculinity."[4] And the masculinity men feel pressure to do, or perform, often represents a "hegemonic," or dominant, ideal form.[5] In other words, while it seems natural and normal, gender doesn't just happen. People make it happen through behavior. They try to act as women and as men according to societal expectations of how women and how men *should* act. And such factors as race, ethnicity, religion, social class, and sexuality all shape how people determine what this performance looks like. The work of "doing gender" is never done; it is an ongoing process. People constantly try to "accomplish" or "achieve" a successful gender performance in their everyday lives.

If gender is something people always "do," barbershops are homosocial environments where men go as part of this continuous quest to be "like men." Not only are they where men go to have their bodies (specifically the hair on their head and face) changed to accomplish this goal and look how they think they should, they are also where men have gone for centuries to be around other men and put their masculine performance on display. But the barbershop has changed as the expectations of how men *should* be, the settings where they can behave like men, and the societal conditions surrounding them have shifted, creating an array of threats.[6]

Style without the Fuss

For millennia people across the world often considered barbers to be spiritual leaders, playing valuable roles in religious rituals. In the Middle Ages they were skilled tradesmen and craftsmen, forming guilds under an appren-

ticeship system. At this time barbers were called "barber-surgeons" because medical and dental care (for example, bloodletting, herbal treatments for cuts, tooth extractions) were part of their work along with cutting hair.[7] As medical knowledge and skills became specialized and physicians and dentists emerged as professions of their own, barbers gradually came to focus solely on hair. While they retained some of their medical roles at the start of European colonization, by the 1700s barbers in the United States were seen as a working-class occupation, akin to servants. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American barbers began professionalizing, such as by adopting work standards, forming unions, and creating licensing and educational requirements, while barbershops fell under more and more government regulations for cleanliness and disease prevention.[8]

The golden age of the American barbershop lasted from around the Civil War until World War I.[9] Much of the imagery of the barbershop as a place for fraternity and relaxation comes from this time. Aligning roughly with the Victorian era, well-to-do men in cities and towns sought to maintain a clean, prim, and proper look, with short and well-kept hairstyles and either clean-shaven faces or well-groomed facial hair. Men would go to barbershops regularly, and those who couldn't be bothered shaving themselves with a straight razor went several times a week to maintain their appearance. Styling products, like pomades and tonics, and shaving soaps and lotions, proliferated. Barbershops became all-service establishments, where men could not only get a shave and a haircut but also get their shoes shined, mustaches waxed, hair perfumed, and clothes ironed (some also offered beer and cigars) while hearing about politics, business, and local gossip.

A few events led to the gradual decline of barbers and men's barbershops during the twentieth century. First came the widespread use of the safety razor. While versions were around in the nineteenth century, the safety razor took off when King Gillette, a salesman, made a disposable razor (the common double-edged razor blade) in 1903. The blades were easy to mass produce, provided as close a shave as a straight razor, and unlike straight razors required no upkeep, since they were discarded, and did not require as much skill to use. Sensing a potential backlash from men who would link shaving themselves at home with feminine beauty rituals, Gillette's ads equated self-shaving with masculinity, a symbol of rugged individuality as well as convenience. Sales grew, and then, during World War I, the United States equipped soldiers with Gillette razors, giving the company sales of 3.5 million safety

razors and over 36 million blades, plus remarkable publicity at home and abroad. Daily (or at least regular) shaving at home in Western countries has been a norm ever since. But shaving at home meant men no longer had to go to barbershops as often. Meanwhile, the Great Depression caused many barbershops to close. With unemployment at 25 percent, fewer men had the income to get regular haircuts.

Short, conservative haircuts and such fancy styles as the pompadour and wave kept barbershops popular during the 1940s and 1950s. Returning soldiers from World War II popularized certain short styles like crew cuts and flattops, which require regular upkeep. But the 1960s really signaled the decline of professional and public men's grooming. Wearing shaggy mops, the Beatles appeared on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964, sparking a youth revolution in popular culture. Long hair became trendy for members of the counterculture and staid professionals alike. A visit to the barbershop went from a biweekly ritual to a rarity. Barbershops closed, and thousands of barbers lost their jobs. Some of them left the industry, while others took up hairstyling and cutting women's hair.* Women's and unisex salons expanded, and many long-haired men began going to them.

The coming of the postindustrial era has marked a change in men's grooming. Like in the industrial era, achieving manhood today (specifically among white-collar men) means conforming to certain looks and styles. Today, however, they have more options (that is, a wide array of styles) and less guidance (that is, fewer dress codes and more nontraditional ideas of what is masculine).[10] Professional men in the new economy feel pressure to "look good" at work and consider their appearance an important part of their career success.[11] Sales of men's beauty products, which companies and consumers refer to more gender-neutrally as "grooming products," have grown in recent years, with nonshaving toiletries recently surpassing shaving items (which have also experienced growth) in sales for the first time in 2013.[12]

* The difference between a barber and a hairstylist is not just that the former works on men's hair and the latter works on women's hair, although that is usually the case. (And for this reason, barbers are often more comfortable working on short hair and using clippers, while hairstylists are often more comfortable working on long hair.) They also require different licenses, and licensing guidelines, such as how many hours of instruction are required (usually completed in a school), the nature of the exam, and the services each can provide, vary by state. Barbers, for instance, usually do not learn how to give manicures and pedicures or apply wax in school, are not tested on these skills in their exam, and are not legally allowed to provide these services. Hairstylists with a cosmetology license can provide these and other services, but usually cannot legally remove hair with a razor. Again, the precise differences vary by state.

Perhaps no other term captures the phenomena of straight men who are concerned with their appearance than "metrosexual," which refers to men who groom and treat their bodies like beauty projects.[13] Since the care and obsessiveness over one's body are often seen as feminine acts or aspects of gay culture, people and the media often use the term humorously or derogatorily against straight men.[14] It's funny, or wrong, because "real" men shouldn't be fussing over themselves. (Gillette addressed this dilemma by promoting shaving as a manly act.) The acts of too much personal grooming, concern for clothing, and worry about hair (on one's head or body—the removal of which is sometimes called "manscaping," with equal parts humor and scorn) take away from the "normal" and dominant forms of masculinity a man "should" be trying to achieve in everyday life.[15] They threaten "doing masculinity" right.

At first barbershops did not change to meet the styling needs of urban professional men. In response to the pressure to "look good," many white, professional men go to women's hair salons. Hairdressers at salons offer the quality and style they need, which the ordinary barbershop, with its imagery of an out-of-touch old man with shaky hands, lacks. But salons present their own problems for these men. Most obviously, they are feminine spaces, places for women. They are where beauty work gets done, where women gossip about anything and everything and express their insecurities for their hair, bodies, and lives (as the stereotypes have it). A man's manhood is at risk in the salon, surrounded by women, and his masculinity is under threat when he gets beauty and bodywork done. These men use a number of strategies to maintain their masculinity to counter the threat. They specifically frame the work stylists do on their bodies as something other than feminine beauty work. They're not gay for going to a salon, but have normal heterosexual interactions with a straight woman. They don't pay some stranger for beauty work, which would be turning their bodies into beauty projects, but have a personal, friendly relationship with a women stylist. The work is incidental. Finally, they're not indulging themselves, but actually *need* to look "stylish" as part of their professional identity. They can't achieve the manly look they *must* have to be successful in the masculine and homosocial but unstylish barbershop with poor service. In other words, they receive pleasure out of a genuine relationship with a woman and also get to "look good" and help advance their careers.[16] They thus control the threat, disavow the metrosexual claim, and preserve their sense of manhood.

New upscale men's barbershops like Freemans are direct responses to the threats and pressures of today's crisis of masculinity. Owners deliberately

open them as alternatives to the high-quality but feminine salon and the masculine but low-quality barbershop. These shops seek to combine the skill, style, and service of women's hair salons and the homosocial, highly masculine environment of traditional men's barbershops.[17] Clients get the style they need in their professional and personal lives without the fuss of having to go to a women's space. They are a remedy for an era when men feel pressure to look good.

Van was the first barber hired by Sam, the owner of Freemans Sporting Club, who is not a barber. Now in his mid-thirties, he had been working at a high-end women's salon for eight years, and he worked at other neighborhood barbershops in the years before working there. Van met Sam through a mutual friend and loved his barbershop idea. He became the head barber when Freemans opened, in 2006. Van describes the shop's philosophy: "That's our ethos, that's what we stand on: you get the skill of a hairstylist matched with the sensibility of a barber. Like a hairdresser's going to charge you, and I used to charge $75 for men's haircuts, I would stand here and act like [starts making deliberate gestures with a serious look on his face], put on the act that all this shit's going on to justify that I'm doing a $48 haircut for $75. But you feel confident going to a hair salon that you're going to get a consultation, you're not going to be rushed in and out, and you feel like you're getting a higher skill set, which you are in some cases, but not in all cases. But you don't want to be in a fucking hair salon. You want to be around guys, not all the women, the shitty techno music, all the hoo-ha, the inter-fighting, the two women hating on a third for some reason—you know what I mean? This is, what we're working on, is the in-between: you get the attention and the detail and all the time you want, like a hair salon. If [a client] tells me, when I'm done with this [haircut], that [he] wants it shorter, cool. I got no complaints, you got it, [I'll] do whatever you want. It kind of fits into our price point. But, again, we're barbers, we're just guys."

In line with Van's comments, barbers at upscale shops feel men should not have to deal with the threats of a salon, or spend a lot of money for a quality, stylish haircut. These shops thereby target young, appearance-conscious men who need and/or want style in a safe place, without compromising their manhood or straining their performance of masculinity. Upscale men's barbershops explicitly attempt to reclaim hegemonic masculinity for men, and implicitly for professional men. As clients these men get to consume a working-class masculinity found in traditional barbershops, as well as the communality found in the much-researched African American or ethnic barbershop.[18]

Their business models, décor, and themes, which provide a heterosexually coded backdrop for the work and interactions inside, help them achieve these goals.[19]

Freemans is part of a mini-empire for a hip downtown urban lifestyle. Along with the Lower East Side shop on Rivington Street, the ownership group also owns another barbershop in the city, in the West Village, as well as one in San Francisco, two high-end men's clothing stores, a bar, and two restaurants.[20] (The restaurant, clothing store, and barbershop are all called Freemans Sporting Club.) Rivington Street, between Chrystie Street and Bowery, is the heart of the empire. One of the clothing stores is in the middle of the block, at a "corner" created by Freeman Alley, which gives the businesses their name.[21] The barbershop is through the clothing store, with windows facing out onto the alley. An old-fashioned wooden barber pole and sign tell passersby it's there, but otherwise people need to know about it. Clients pass the pricey clothes and arrive at the reception desk next to the entrance to the barbershop. A glass window and door separate the two shops. At the end of the alley, past some art galleries, is the restaurant, with administrative offices and fitting and tailoring rooms upstairs. With locally hand-tailored men's clothes in the store, rustic Americana cuisine in the restaurant, a classic barbershop, and hunting lodge motifs of wood interiors and taxidermy adornment in each, the businesses aim to revive a lost sense of craftsmanship and manliness and promote a masculinized sense of cool.

Like other new upscale shops, Freemans adheres to the style of the traditional barbershop, with vintage barber chairs and stations, classic mirrors, and sepia-toned photographs on the wall (one is of a bareknuckle boxing match, another a bicycle race on a beach). The shop has eight wooden seats, four side-by-side on either wall upon entry, and two leather-padded chairs against the glass window in a small waiting area for clients. Right next to them are five barber chairs, two each on the left and right walls upon entry, with one in the back corner. Pieces of taxidermy (fish and some antlers) and a lodge-like motif of distressed wood explicitly call to mind such manly pursuits as hunting and fishing. The genres in the magazine rack appeal to the young, hip, and culturally conscious urbanite. They range from men's lifestyle (*GQ*, *Esquire*), cool downtown culture (*Vice*, *Edible Manhattan*), and the high-minded (*New Yorker*, *Wired*). While Freemans does not, some of these new shops also combine the traditional masculine space of the barbershop with that of the bar by offering complimentary alcoholic beverages with haircuts. (While they usually offer beer, one shop, the Blind Barber, is attached to a

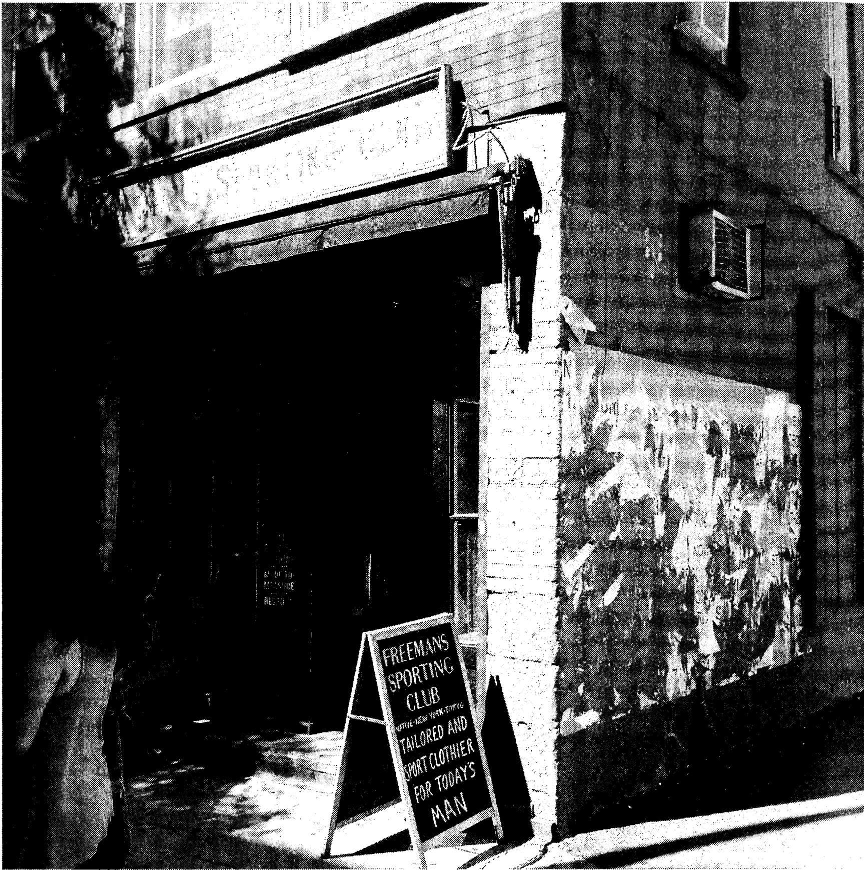

FIGURE 6. Freemans Sporting Club, from the start of Freemans Alley. Photo by the author.

proper bar, with a craft cocktail list.[22]) Others have an espresso machine and premier brands of craft coffee, as at any of the new high-end cafés. The men who pay $15 for a cocktail and $5 for a coffee drink are the same ones who pay $45 for a haircut, their thinking goes.[23] They're largely right.

But these shops' efforts to provide a proper manly community space for men have their contradictions and limits. For instance, unlike traditional barbershops, upscale shops sell men's "grooming products," such as pomades, lotions, and shaving creams, either under their own label or under those of small companies. Barbers use these products on clients and often on themselves in their daily lives. They risk making men's bodies seem "made up" rather than "natural."[24] To reduce this risk they convey to clients their products' quality,

ease of use, and effectiveness for achieving a particular style for men. That is, they emphasize the practicality of products, lest the advice to use them comes off as overly feminine (or metrosexual) to clients.

One afternoon a first-time client named Charles sits in Joey's chair. Quiet for a few minutes after the consultation, Charles asks Joey a question.

"What do you use in your hair?"

"You mean like shampoo?"

"Yeah."

"I don't use shampoo. I keep it natural. And I only use products that wash out. You should only use water soluble products."

"I need to use shampoo. I'm a pretty sweaty guy."

"Sweat's just water," counters Joey.

"Salty water."

Joey shrugs and says, "It's still water. Salt's soluble. It washes right out. Do you use any pomades?"

"No," says Charles with some hesitation in his voice. "Should I?"

"Well, if you want your hair to look a certain way. I could show you one with a strong hold and not a lot of shine. No one will know you have anything in."

In my own conversations with him, Joey praises the shop's aims of giving men a natural look: "I like everything more natural, not as clean. I don't dig the whole perfect clean. Well, I like it, I could do it. But it's not what we're about. Even walking down the street I can tell sometimes [if someone] got cut by our shop. The way we finish a haircut, we never leave lines. You know how someone puts a line? Like a line, and then hair. Sometimes the big [high-volume] shops get those really sharp lines, so you know it's not from [us]. You can tell they don't know how to fade. For this shop, it picks this style over that. We don't leave sharp lines. We usually stay away, even if someone asks." For these barbers gradually fading hair into skin provides a more natural look for men.[25] But naturalness here doesn't come naturally. It must be achieved. Men must work to look natural, and barbers tell them what natural and a natural-looking style means (that is, a pomade that doesn't signal to people that they're using a product).

Another issue of new upscale barbershops is their goal of being a place for men to act like men. They pay homage and strive to be like traditional shops that serve as homosocial community institutions, like working-class, neighborhood, ethnic, and African American shops. They want to be local hangouts and places for community, but they do not play such a role for clients.

Located in gentrifying neighborhoods, and surrounded by other forms of high-priced and trendy businesses (for example, restaurants, bars, clothing boutiques), upscale shops draw clients from the city's population of young urban professionals and creative workers.[26] Nearly all are white and in their twenties, thirties, and forties.[27] They have the financial means to afford these shops' services, want to achieve a certain style (or feel the pressure to do so), and are also attuned to (or at least aware of) the hip forms of manly style they promote and offer. However, most clients travel to these shops from outside the neighborhood and do not use them as hangouts. Many of the barbers who have worked in other shops recognize this reality.

After cutting his friends' hair as a teenager, Miles began his career by working in African American barbershops, known among the barbers as "'hood" shops. He worked at a series of them throughout the city before coming to Freemans. Skin fades are a popular hairstyle among men of African ancestry, and given the clientele of 'hood shops, Miles became an expert at them. He went to Freemans to expand his repertoire, especially using scissors and cutting long hair (that is, white men's hair). But the clippers skills he learned at the 'hood shops served him well. "That theory is like the new way of barbering," he explains, referring to fade styles among white men. "Even though it has been happening for like the past twenty years at least, it's still like the newer way of barbering." As urban white men have begun wearing shorter hairstyles, fades have become an important part of their haircuts. Miles brings those skills and styles, which have been popular in black barbershops for a long time, to Freemans. But working there for him comes at a cost: "Every barbershop I've ever worked at it has always seemed like there were like two or three dudes [barbers] there who were really good and other ones kind of just picked up the rest that those three guys couldn't handle. I would work with a lot of people who I would feel didn't take the craft seriously. I didn't like it. But the conversation definitely was going on. It felt super community, like *really* community. Working here, I feel like, yeah, these guys I work here with are my family, but the connection with my clients isn't really there. I mean, I have a few that I have great connections with. But I think it's just that kind of Manhattan mentality: hustle and bustle, get in, get your hair cut, get the hell out, 'I'm not here for nonsense, I'm not here for bullshit' kind of thing."

New upscale barbershops are the opposite of the 'hood shops from Miles's youth. Group conversations involving clients, who are strangers to one another and usually to every barber except the one they see regularly, are re-

FIGURE 7. Freemans' barbers at work. Photo by Chantal Martineau.

markably rare. The actual social reality contradicts their claim of community, and contrasts with the idea of barbershops as places for community.

A final contradiction stems from this last point. Instead of socializing and community, clients go to these shops for their special services, new and traditional barbering techniques, and the promise of homosocial communality. Their services and techniques include longer-than-average (at least thirty minutes) and finely detailed haircuts, straight razor shaves (with hot towels, oils, and lotions), beard trims, head and face massages with a hot eucalyptus-soaked towel, and little services for certain clients, like trimming nose hair and eyebrows and singeing ear hair.* Although these shops do not offer shampooing or dying services, as salons do, these other high-touch personal services threaten the masculine environment with acts of intimacy, which can create feelings of

* Technically, new upscale barbershops, like any other barbershop in New York State, cannot legally use a proper straight razor on clients because of the risk of spreading a blood disease. The barbers at Freemans use a safety razor made to look like a straight razor with disposable blades that they replace after each use.

Singeing: Burning hair with a small, controlled flame. It originates in Turkey and is believed to last longer than trimming, and in the case of ears prevents loose hairs from getting in the ear canal.

insecurity. Instead of places where "men can be men"—that is, perform masculinity and achieve manhood in front of other men—without compromise, these shops both provide a space for achieving hegemonic masculinity and put this performance at risk. Despite not being a place of community for men, fraternizing still occurs at these shops. But it's between the barbers, who construct and regulate the homosocial environment and provide the services.

Men Are Easier

Nearly all of the barbers in this book are white men in their twenties and thirties who live outside their shop's neighborhood. They resemble their clientele in these regards. Of these four occupations, barbers are the most likely to have had family members who are barbers or stylists, which introduced them to the profession at a young age. (They are also the most likely of these four occupations to be from New York City or the metropolitan area.) But in most cases they did not want to become barbers, and/or their parents did not want them to cut hair for a living.

Most of the barbers have attended college and/or pursued a different career before deciding to cut hair for a living. A few started as barbers at upscale barbershops and have never worked anywhere else.[28] Most previously worked at either other kinds of barbershops (for example, local neighborhood mom and pop shops; "chop shops," their term for high-volume, high-speed shops; racial/ethnic shops with a homogeneous clientele, such as African American, Hispanic, or Russian shops) or women's salons. Those who worked at the former left because they wanted to work at a shop that focused on service and quality and provided stylish haircuts for a hipper and more discerning clientele. At their previous shops they often did similar hairstyles repeatedly and got treated like basic service workers. Joey compares Freemans with a neighborhood shop he used to work at: "People [at upscale shops] treat haircuts more like they *want* it, instead of it being like they *need* it. A lot of times, where I [used to work], [clients] were just getting a haircut to get a haircut; something you do because you need it. And they didn't treat you like you were a stylist or a barber. They would just be like, 'Oh, you're just doing a service for me.' As opposed to here, you get treated with more respect. You went to school for this, you trained for this."

The vast majority of men need to get a haircut at some point in their lives, but barbers see upscale shops as places men choose to go to because they

either have a sense of personal style or are open to acquiring one, and they are concerned about their appearance and want to enjoy their haircut as an experience rather than a necessity.[29]

With a business model of high-quality service and attention to detail, upscale shops also offered these barbers a chance to expand their technical skills. Miles alludes to this opportunity in his earlier quote. Ruben, who worked in a variety of shops earlier in his career, some of which emphasized speed over quality, says, "I decided that I have the skill, so I decided to take it to the fullest, like, be the best at it. That's my attitude. Certain things [in haircutting] need a little bit of attention." As with the other three occupations, when shops give their workers the resource of time to do their jobs, they can attend to their craft's finer details. Achieving mastery over the technical skills of the trade at an upscale shop among style-conscious consumers who respect them gives these workers the opportunity to gain status as hip professionals in today's service economy. As Joey stated earlier, they already feel respected by their clients, who regularly defer to them (sometimes by saying, "you're the expert").

Barbers who previously worked in women's salons, however, certainly used technical skills to provide meticulous haircuts. But they quit because they grew tired of working on women and in the feminine salon environment in general. These people wanted to cut men's hair and work in a barbershop instead. And they chose a new upscale shop instead of a neighborhood shop for similar reasons as the other barbers: at them they can use the full extent of their skills and knowledge of style and feel respected for what they do.

The brother of Joey's best friend owned a women's salon. Joey was in college while his friend went to hairdressing school. After seeing how much money he was making (and all the women he was meeting), Joey dropped out of college, went to hairdressing school, and started working at the salon. After a few years there his feelings changed.

"Then I hated it because the salon environment's way different than a barber shop. A lot of times it's really fake."

"You mean you've got to put on something for the people?" I ask.

"Yeah, and I never did do that ever in my life. It was hard to do that, especially working with women all day. It's just a different vibe. They're more needy. You've got to make believe a lot. You have to make them feel better most of the time."

Like other barbers who previously worked at salons, Joey grew tired of the "emotional labor" he had to do to work on women.[30] He quit and finished college. But he didn't have a clear idea of what he wanted to do with his degree.

Possessing the skills, he decided to try cutting hair again, but this time with men.

"It felt easier. Guys are just easier. It's simple. They almost always know what they want. You never have to pamper them. It just becomes a cool relationship with them, and I could be myself. It's good. I was doing the whole hair stuff for the wrong reasons: money, girls. I was trying to like it, but it never worked out."

Working at a salon made Joey be someone he wasn't.[31] Men, on the other hand, are easier for these barbers. They know what they want, and barbers can "be themselves," or "be men," when working on men in the barbershop. Haircutting techniques, however, are not what make cutting men's hair easier than cutting women's hair. "Hair is hair," as many say.[32] According to barbers who previously worked in salons, the key differences are social. Working on men's hair represents an ease and naturalness in terms of both the interaction ("We're just guys," as Van says) and the haircutting work. Van explains his decision to stop working at a salon: "As soon as I saw [Freemans] I was like, 'Yeah, I want to do that. I never want to cut a woman's hair again.' I would rather not be around another woman other than my wife again. I don't ever want to be around them at all. I can't engage in conversation with them anymore. So this [place] is the in between. It's the good parts of both. It's guys, so that is 50 percent of the equation, which is awesome. Guys are the best to deal with." By contrast, working on women's hair, with the need for putting on airs and spending emotional energy, as well as the extra products, treatments, and procedures, drifts toward being fake and unnatural.[33]

These barbers recognize the need for these men to achieve a certain look for their professional and personal lives. They share a familiarity with the city's cultural zeitgeist. Along with popular hairstyles, they also know about fashion, food, and music (and often personally know and cut the hair of people in these industries). Many also look like their shop's ideal client: young, stylishly dressed (Freemans barbers get discounts from the highly fashionable clothing store), with their own unique hairstyle and facial hair.[34] While they sometimes differ over specific definitions of and criteria for style, these barbers share an avid interest in men's style when it comes to hair and clothing. They each have a clear idea of what is a "good" appearance, with "good" possessing both functional properties (for example, haircuts that are balanced, sides that are neat, neck fades that taper evenly), and aesthetical considerations (for example, haircuts that are stylistically unconventional, cool, or unique for a client's personal look).[35] As they gain experience, they become

better at discerning looks and more comfortable telling clients what they think would be "good" for them. Bret, in his early thirties, explains: "I think over time I've probably gotten better at that. At one point it used to be I'd have a client who would tell me what they want and I would say 'OK' and I would just give them what they want even if it's not the best thing for them. Now over time I've developed [an ability to] talk them out of something that I think doesn't benefit them. That's the difference between the shops in that past that I've worked and this place, more of the men's salon: trying to actually be an actual consultant to their look. They want a better look or [to know] if you think changing their look would actually benefit them."

Along with this notion of knowing what "benefits" clients and the professional desire to teach them such style, they also each hold the idea that men today "should" have a certain level of awareness of and pride in their bodies and appearance. In fact, they consider their role to not just be about hair, but the "doing masculinity" project. When I ask Thorin if teaching clients about their hair is an important part of his job, he agrees and adds: "[Also] how to be an adult, how to be a man, doing what a man should be doing. This is the way a mature adult male acts. A lot of people are not like that. It's also teaching people something about themselves they don't even know. Just investigating yourself, like how your hair is, what type of hair it is. Just put your hands to your hair, you know what type of hair you have, I'm just assuming that, you know? Smart guys, you know, probably growing up learning about themselves, and lack self-awareness."

Banter in the Male Preserve

The group banter between barbers is the most distinguishing feature of Freemans. The promise of fraternity is part of how the shop promotes itself as a masculine environment. Banter can originate between two barbers and then spread to the group, or start with a barber casually making a comment or posing a question to the group for discussion (as Miles did at the start of this chapter). For barbers at upscale shops, being a place for male bonding is integral to what barbershops *should* be like.

While it has the appearance of a performance before an audience, group banter in the shop is not an act that the barbers consciously put on for clients. It stems naturally from their personalities and relationships with each other, which several barbers (recall Miles's earlier quote) refer to as being

"like a family."[36] Banter serves several interrelated functions in the shop. Barbers feel it sets their clients at ease and helps explain why they come to the shop (that is, to have an ideal barbershop experience). It also allows barbers to enjoy themselves while working, keep loose, and maintain their relationships with each other.

Another function of group banter is as a masculine cover for the more intimate, emotional, bodywork going on in the shop. Like hairdressers and stylists who mainly work on women, all barbers who mainly work on men engage in emotional labor. But emotional labor is usually seen as a feminine performance, and workers who perform it often find their work degraded. Hairdressers, who regularly work on women who earn more than they do, use emotional labor to bridge the social distance and nullify the status differences between them and their clients. But doing so comes at the expense of their technical expertise, which undermines their desire to be seen as professionals.[37] Barbers also touch their clients, listen to their problems, and offer them advice (on their hair and appearance as well as their personal lives). But the masculine-coded banter they conduct and the skills-based services they provide help to hide the emotional labor they perform.[38] In short, group talk bolsters the intended social environment of these shops, and shifts attention away from the regular touching and bodywork. And unlike men who work as women's hairdressers, they are not at risk of having their gendered performance "misunderstood" or "misinterpreted" as feminine.[39]

For barbers at upscale shops, banter reinforces the shop as a masculine environment by taking certain forms and expressing certain themes. At the start of this chapter, the banter shifts from storytelling (marijuana experiences) to a hypothetical situation ("Would you ever stab somebody?"), both of which are common forms that banter takes. Group banter also regularly shifts from one form to another as the conversation proceeds, rarely ending in the same form in which it began. In terms of its content, the barbers challenge one another ("I think you couldn't even do it") and joke around, including by making essentializing comments about ethnicity (Puerto Ricans are violent). Given their familiarity with each other and their different backgrounds (for example, Italian, Jewish, Puerto Rican), the barbers regularly make ethnicity and ethnic stereotypes a theme of their banter. While they do not cause offense among each other, it is possible their comments do for clients, who are not part of the shop's social circle or "in" on the jokes.[40] Among the other themes barbers cover are women and relationships, sports, cars, music, food,

and personal manhood. And among the forms that group banter takes, teasing, or "talking shit," stands out the most.

I'm sitting in the shop on a Thursday afternoon when the barbers start talking generally about relationships. The conversation shifts to household responsibilities. Not all the barbers are married or living with a girlfriend, but they weigh in anyway on what men should do in a relationship. Van says he lets his wife handle a lot of their family's business, such as bills and the mortgage.

"Man, you're whipped," says Ruben.

"How am I whipped when I make my wife take care of my shit?" replies Van. "She's already been creating a file for our next truck."

"Wait, truck?" asks Mark.

"Yeah," says Van, somewhat embarrassedly, "my wife drives a truck."

"And you drive a Prius!" interjects Ruben.

"It has good gas mileage! I have to drive from Westchester! You know what says 'I have a giant penis?' A Prius."

"You know what says, 'I have a giant penis'?" asks Ruben, rhetorically. "A giant penis."

While he tries to defend himself, Van realizes he is now the target of teasing and that his argument is indefensible. Accepting defeat, he laughs it off. The banter then shifts along to the subject of cars as the barbers start talking about wheel rims.

In this episode the barbers see the opportunity to tease Van for not being the one in charge in his family. They jump on the idea that he is neither representing hegemonic masculinity nor a status as an independent, self-made man. Of the many options he has during this bout of "shit talking," Van chooses engagement.[41] In doing so, however, he accidentally opens himself up for further teasing. The threat to Van's masculinity is obvious to the barbers, who are well-versed in the basic ideas of what displaying true manhood should be about (for example, driving a certain type of car). But being the center of teasing does not have structural consequences within the social order of the barbershop. Van, the head barber, does not decline in status within the group; tomorrow he will do his share of teasing other barbers. He is not a "lesser" man or barber vis-à-vis the others because of these facts about his life that threaten his continuous pursuit of ideal manhood. By participating he remains an upstanding member of the group while also contributing to the notion of the barbershop as a space where such masculine-coded behaviors (being in charge of the family, driving trucks) are normative.

Like talk itself group banter has rules.[42] "Taking it" when being teased, as Van does, and not getting upset, is one. Barbers expect targets to not take offense when they get teased and recognize that it is essentially their turn. They label those who get upset as "insecure," because they are not comfortable enough to laugh at themselves, a true sign of being comfortable in one's own manhood, when others point out how they deviate from what is normative.

One afternoon the barbers start teasing Mark, exaggerating his New York accent, which they do often. Interestingly, he is not even in the shop, having gone to lunch. Van's client asks him who they are impersonating.

"It's a guy we all like, but he has a thick Long Island accent and says funny things. [To the other barbers] Hey, the other day he said to someone, 'You got nice, small feet. I wish I had little feet like that, eight-and-a-half. I like the petiteness,' " says Van, in a deep and scratchy baritone.

After laughing at the impression, Ruben says, "I'm going to be on him today. He's fucked."

"He gets upset when we make fun of him," adds Miles.

"That's because he's insecure," says Joey. "He should be able to take it."

The barbers know that Mark recently moved into his parents' house on Long Island temporarily while he finds a new apartment in the city. When he returns from lunch, they pick up this fact as a theme.

Van says in his "Mark voice," "Why'd you wash those jeans, Ma? They were just getting good."

Mark usually chooses "inaction" in response to teasing from his fellow barbers.[43] He often just shakes his head with an annoyed grin and ignores them. But after more teasing, Mark says, "Come on, I'm shaving a client."

"He's laughing too!" says Jason.

"I'd like to not laugh when I have a blade to his face."

"Oh, you won't cut him that bad."

"You're a retard," says an agitated Mark.

The barbers like Mark as a person and respect him as a barber. They regularly chat, go to lunch, and hang out outside of work. But in the group context while within the shop they expect him to accept their teasing of his quirks. It's part of the rules of group banter, and doing so demonstrates membership in the fraternity, or being a "part of the family."[44] Deviating from the shop's cultural script by complaining about being teased results in a condemnation of being insecure in his confidence and manhood. Meanwhile Mark's client, whom he does not know, chuckles along with the barbers' teasing as he gets a

shave, but does not participate in it. He understands the playful displays and condemnations of behavior in spite of not knowing anyone personally.

There are limits, however, to group banter's adherence to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. According to prior research, to display hegemonic masculinity in typical homosocial settings, men must compete with each other in some form.[45] When "talking shit" during banter, barbers regularly hype their abilities and sense of style as the best in the shop. In more personal dialogue, barbers honestly assess themselves and the talent level in the shop.

While running his fingers through his client's hair after the consultation, Van asks, "Where did you get your hair cut last?"

"Here."

"Who?"

"The guy over here next to you."

"Miles."

"It was good."

"Yeah, it's a good cut, that's why I asked."

Meanwhile, from the corner chair, Mark asks Jason, "Hey, will you shave me after work on Sunday?"

"Why?"

"A friend who's a hairstylist wants to learn while you do it."

"OK, but I'm not the best shaver here."

"You're good. You're better than me, and you could show him well."

While competition factors into banter as a mark of typical hegemonic masculine behavior and manifests in such exchanges as a form of "shit-talking," it disappears when honesty enters the conversation. Barbers have no problem admitting when they are not as good at something as someone else, as Jason does, pointing out who is better at it than they are, as Mark does, or openly complimenting each other, as Van and Mark do. They do so among each other and with their clients.

Along with such open admissions, barbers in upscale shops also sometimes discuss matters of a personal nature with each other while in the group context. They talk about relationship issues, family problems, health concerns, and other sensitive topics. Sometimes the barbers seek out advice, and sometimes they only want to vent their feelings. In short, they are not as emotionally detached as men are expected to be in a homosocial environment.[46]

One Friday Joey and Miles continue a conversation about a friend of Joey's that they began outside the shop while on a break. Their backs face each other

as they work on clients, and their voices carry over the din of the shop. Joey has an old friend from childhood from whom he has grown apart. But while this friend originally included him in his wedding party, he removed him from it when Joey apparently wasn't as involved in the wedding planning and events as his friend would have liked. So Joey said he just wasn't going to go to the wedding at all.

"We've had some disagreements and I said I didn't want to be in the wedding party, but he insisted," says Joey.

"Well, it's probably his girl who's telling him to remove you," says Miles.

"Yeah."

"When is it?"

"It's next week. Now I'm not even going."

"He's basically saying that you could come, but he doesn't want you there."

"Right. I try to ask him to meet for dinner in the city, but he always turns me down. We've been texting each other to try to talk. You could tell how anal he is."

"Are you sure it's him, though?" says Miles, offering some analysis.

Visibly hurt, Joey nods a little to show he understands, but does not answer. He continues his preparation to shave a client, while Miles cuts someone's hair. They pause the conversation and continue working on their clients for a few minutes. Joey then breaks the silence.

"His mom used to always call my mom."

In short, while group banter comes off as maintaining and promoting the ideal of hegemonic masculinity in the homosocial barbershop, the barbers' segmented group behaviors show an environment with more differentiated meanings. The exclusion (or noninclusion) of clients betrays the individual-oriented nature of the shop, rather than the community-oriented goal owners seek to achieve. While not a fake performance put on by barbers, group banter and the male camaraderie it signifies nevertheless resemble a performed, nuanced masculinity before an audience.

There are two major exceptions to the group banter performance at Freemans Sporting Club, one based on gender and the other based on race. The role that women play in group banter furthers the shop's image as a homosocial space. Quite simply, the shop's one full-time woman barber, Coco, does not participate in it. In her mid-thirties, Coco is originally from Tokyo and decided to get into hairstyling after a dissatisfying career in accounting and

a desire to work with people more directly. She always wanted to work with men ("Women are too much drama," she says), and first worked in a high-priced men's salon in Midtown before coming to Freemans because she preferred the barbershop environment. She gets along with the other barbers very well, and they regularly chat together one-on-one and in small groups. She has her own regular clients, with whom she has friendly conversations. When Coco has an interesting client, such as someone with an unusual haircut request or who talks loudly, the barbers regularly ask her how it went after he leaves, as they do with each other. But during group banter, Coco largely stays silent, offering no hypothetical situations or personal stories. She neither teases nor gets teased. The other barbers also do not tone down the overtly masculine content of their normal conversations with each other when speaking with her, another unexpected occurrence when a woman enters a man's homosocial environment.[47]

A competitive distance runner, Coco snacks on carbohydrate- and protein-rich foods during the course of the day. While sitting around on a break, Van notices Coco's large Tupperware full of snacks.

"Jesus Christ!" he says. "You have to eat all that by the end of the day?"

"Yes. You want some?"

"No, that makes me fart, but thank you. How was your trip, it was good?"

"Oh my God—"

"That's the first relaxing vacation you've taken."

"—I ran, but still."

"You ran a race?"

"No, but every morning."

Women are part of the social life of the barbershop as frequent topics of conversation. Barbers regularly discuss wives, girlfriends, dates, friends, and celebrities in personal and joking ways and to demonstrate and reinforce their own manhood. But Coco, a woman who is physically present in the shop, stays out and is kept out of the shop's masculine performance, which proceeds regardless of her presence.[48]

The second major exception concerns a client who goes to Miles.

Hugh is an African American man around 30 years old. He is husky, of average height, and has a slight widow's peak. Because of his experience with fades, most people of color go to Miles, and Hugh heard about him and Freemans from a friend. On his first visit Miles sits him down and stands facing him, leaning on one elbow against his station—his usual pose for consultations.

"So what do you want to do?" he asks.

"Well, I didn't like what they did to me at another shop. Now, I'm losing some [hair] over here [points to widow's peak], but I want to blend it into my hairline, you know?"

Miles listens and assesses his request. "I can do that, but *next* haircut. Right now it's like this is up [points to one side of the receding area], then it comes down, then it goes back up, and you just want it straight. I gotta even this out first, so I can do it, but in a month. Do you want to do that?"

"Do what you gotta do."

Miles puts on the apron, gets his tools ready, and begins the haircut while Hugh checks his phone. After a few minutes Hugh asks Miles, "You into boxing?"

"Yeah. In fact, I've been doing some training."

"Where?"

"Right down over here."

"Yo, that shit's crazy. You watching the Mayweather fight?"

Van then tells me to check out something he's doing with his client and I lose track of Miles and Hugh's conversation. After a few minutes talking with Van I notice the din in the shop has risen.

"Mike Tyson is the smartest and dumbest person," says Hugh, loudly and clearly to the group, as a barber would do.

"Yeah, but you saw that shit he did to Holyfield?" says Ruben.

"Holyfield? He's smart, he went to college," adds Mark, to some laughter.

"I don't trust any athlete that says they went to college," says Van.

"What I can't get into is that MMA [mixed martial arts] shit," says Hugh. "I'm too old school."

Agreeing, Miles says, "Those guys are standing for like three seconds, then some guy kicks and falls down and waits for the guy to jump on him."

"I don't know," says Ruben, "I have to disagree with you Miles. Check this out. You see this?"

Ruben stops working on his client and takes out his phone out of his pocket to show people a video of an intense MMA fight. He walks over to Miles's station to show him and Hugh.

"Whoa!" they both exclaim after watching a flurry of punches.

The conversation flows freely among the barbers and Hugh. He talks with them comfortably, as if he's been coming to the shop for years. Hugh returns the next month. When I walk into the shop I find him in the waiting area as

Miles finishes with a client. Miles remembers him and they slap hands into a half-hug.

"So what do you think? You wanna keep going?" he asks a seated Hugh.

"Yeah, let's do that."

A few minutes into the haircut, Miles and Hugh start talking about food and restaurants, particularly bagels, pizza, and Italian food in general.

"You ever go to Areo's, in Bay Ridge?" asks Hugh, loud enough for anyone to answer.

"Yep, but I like Lucchese," says Miles. "Also, Staten Island's got some good pizza places."

"Joey's parents ruined me on Italian food," says Ruben, joining in (Joey isn't here today). "They made me a homemade meal once. [Shakes head.] That shit was the fucking best, bro. But I like Cirelli's for Italian."

"That's not Italian Italian, though," says Hugh.

"No, but it's Italian influenced."

"Yo, you know a place called Ma Peche, where they use a lot of fat as an ingredient?" asks Miles.

Barbers almost always talk to their client through the mirror, while they stand behind the chair. They usually only face them directly when they have to go to the station to put down or get something. During this cut, Miles regularly stops what he's doing simply to walk around to the front of the chair, so he can face Hugh directly during the conversation, not to get anything. And at times he turns the chair around so he can face the shop rather than the mirror.

The conversation shifts to what kind of restaurant they would open if they had a chance, with Hugh saying he'd want to have a place for high-end Latin American food. At this point Miles is not even halfway done with the haircut, because he's been stopping so often to talk.

"What's the difference between a Caesar fade and a fadeup?" asks Hugh.

"A Caesar fade doesn't exist. I could do a fade, instead of a fadeup."

After a few minutes of the barbers just focusing on their clients, the conversation then turns to movies.

"I think Benicio Del Toro is one of the most underrated actors," says Ruben, who says he recently rewatched the movie *The Usual Suspects*.

"Oh! Benicio Del Toro!" says Hugh. "He's nice."

The group talks about movies and actors a bit more, with other barbers joining in, until the conversation dies down again. Hugh then reignites the group banter.

"I went to a Kanye [West] concert in Atlantic City, and there were all these smokers. Man, I'm not used to that."

"I know," says Ruben. "Even though I am a smoker, I appreciate that you can't smoke in restaurants in New York."

"I like cigars and weed, but not cigarettes. And I don't allow smoking in my apartment. That's why I bought a vaporizer."

"How's that work exactly?" asks Miles.

And so the conversations go. I observed a few clients make a loud comment to the group banter here and there, but it never lasted, and they never initiated it. But right from the jump, and without knowing anyone, Hugh starts small conversations that grow. Barbers at Freemans usually start their one-on-one conversations with clients, and usually they just make simple chitchat ("Any weekend plans?" "Crazy weather, isn't it?"). Hugh's simple statements can easily lead to a longer discussion about the topics.

Freemans becomes a community-oriented barbershop when Hugh comes in, a place where clients fulfill social needs as well as grooming needs. Given the racial backgrounds of him and Miles, the easiest comparison is the African American barbershop. But really, any barbershop that operates "for" a specific group, or "for" people who live nearby, compares well. These places are not just about getting a haircut. They are hangouts, male preserves. They are where men—both barbers and clients—can challenge each other, tease each other, call each other out, brag, and, most importantly, put their manhood on display in front of other men. In these cases, their masculinity intersects with their race and/or ethnicity. These shops are safe spaces not just where men can be men in front of other men, but where black men (or Dominican men, or Russian men, or Chinese men) can be black men in front of other black men. Perhaps because of his familiarity with the social dynamics of the black barbershop, the group banter among the barbers he heard before sitting in the chair, and his barber's appearance as a person of color, Hugh felt comfortable to treat Freemans as a communal space, where conversations flow and clients interact with other barbers and other clients. The barbers talk with as much enthusiasm when he's in the shop as they do among each other. He may think such open conversations involving clients are common at Freemans. But while they seem normal, his visits give the shop a rare communality its owners strive to achieve.