

From Meritocracy to Seniority:
Shifting Masculine Aesthetics among Blue-Collar Workers in Montréal Lachine

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ABSTRACT

From Meritocracy to Seniority: Shifting Masculine Aesthetics among Blue-Collar
Workers in Montréal Lachine

Exan Yuen Desforges

This thesis examines the workplace culture of young blue-collar males employed by the Department of Green Spaces in the Public Works of the City of Lachine. 2004 marked the beginning of a structural shift that profoundly impacted upon local ideations of work ethics and masculinity. Through extensive participant-observation based field research, I was able to explore how workers interacted with and made sense of their changing world. Following a series of media exposés criticizing the productivity of public workers, *les cols bleus* are often pre-conceived by citizens and politicians as being “lazy.” This stereotype fails to take into consideration the diversity that exists.

By focusing on current aspects of the workplace experience as well as how the organization of labour was configured in the past, I was able to explore an adjustment in masculine aesthetics that prioritized mental labour over manual labour, a product of the current hegemonic regime. Through the position of the *raconteur*, a model I have developed by drawing upon anthropological analyses of working-class masculinity and symbolic performances, attention is brought to the local importance of discursive language. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates, through the contested discourses of *col bleu* members surrounding the complex issues of workplace participation, that if we want to improve our understanding of working-class culture and masculinity, neither can be treated monolithically. The way in which work, life and change are negotiated must be investigated if popular notions of gender and class are to be challenged.

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At home, wherever that might be, I thank my mother whose life taught me much about courage, strength, creativity, endurance and determination. To my father, who passed away too soon, there was still so much to do and see... you would have been proud of me. I thank him for being the kind of man he was: gentle, humorous and a good cook. I thank my parents for nurturing my interest in human cultures, the natural world and the arts. I would also like to thank John Fairweather and Murphy for having brought rays of sun into my life.

For Jocelyne Desforbes,

and Lovat James Yuen

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Introduction

This thesis is based on twenty months of fieldwork as a legitimately employed blue-collar worker, or *col bleu*, in the Public Works (*les Travaux Publics*) of Lachine—Canada’s oldest suburban community. The thesis explores what it means to be “working for the City”—or *pour La Ville*—a local term that is especially designated to this kind of unionized labour. Over a four year period, from 2004 to 2008, I worked in the Department of Green Spaces as a seasonal or auxiliary worker. For my first three seasons *pour La Ville* I was a member of their grass cutting crew and conducted a type of outdoor labour that is constructed as both “hard work” and “unprestigious.” As a member of the crew I wielded *un whip*, or “weed eater”, and I answered to various figures of authority, having become part of *La Ville*’s socio-economic-political structure.

The thesis explores the cultural world of the *col bleu* universe. *Les cols bleus* are often represented in negative stereotypes by the media and other Lachinois citizens, as well as other residents of the Island of Montréal. This negative perception has much to do with how unionized pressure tactics often affect the quality of essential services, however there is a strong discourse attaching a negative value to all public workers creating a homogeneity that is not accurate. In 2004, a major *structural shift* reorganized the workplace creating a moment of crisis and reflection for many workers. The structural shift signified a move from “meritocracy”, a work ethic that emphasized “hard work”, to “seniority”, a work ethic that appeared to intensify a lackadaisical approach to labour. My research question is as follows: How has the structural shift impacted upon work ethics and masculine aesthetics? Meritocracy and seniority represent oppositional systems of knowledge and these two methods of operating within the workplace generated strong

conflict. The thesis concerns itself with the nature of this conflict and its effects on the lives of the young men I have worked with and befriended. It became clear during my first year of working *pour La Ville* that work ethics and masculinity were intimately interrelated and that meritocracy and seniority possessed their own definitions of “manly” performative excellence. The thesis demonstrates that shifting masculine aesthetics need not be solely defined by contrariness and antagonism. Meritocracy and seniority are not polar opposites; they also share certain meanings. Through friction, an articulation of alternatives emerge that challenge many assumptions, two being that *les cols bleus* are a homogenous culture and that gender is an immutable construct.

Conducting fieldwork in my own neighborhood and within an institution that possesses an important pedigree within Lachine has been an anthropological goal that I have anticipated for several years. 2008 marks my twelfth year in the province of Québec. Though I am not “native” to Québécois society, having been born and raised in the City of Vancouver in British Columbia, I was fortunate enough to have been introduced to it at a young age. Through my mother’s efforts, herself a native Lachinoise, my maternal tongue was French-Canadian. Although this has given me an undeniable advantage during fieldwork, to learn proper usage of “Lachinois” became a requirement, as did correct body posturing and other culturally relevant discursive practices within the workplace. In these respects, becoming part of the cultural milieu was challenging, as it is in anthropological fieldwork anywhere—at “home” or abroad.

Chapter 1. Working-Class Culture

The literature that I have found of use focuses mostly upon working class experiences and masculinity for they, like my thesis topic, reflect the realities of my own life experiences and academic interest. There are reoccurring threads that are encountered when reading the writings of scholars such as Sennet and Cobb (1972), Willis (1977), Dunk (1991), Gutmann (1996), Limón (1997), Charlesworth (2000) and Power (2005) who have based their studies on working class culture.

The first commonality is that masculinity often plays a fundamental part in the cultural articulations that are part of the working class milieus that the aforementioned scholars have observed and participated in. These masculine articulations are comprised of discourses that are often described by scholarly work as being regressive and more specifically, as racist and sexist (for examples see Dunk 1991 and Gutmann 1996). Masculinity in and of itself, as a socially engendered construction, often possesses negative connotations of overt physicality and its accompanying descriptors such as violent behavior, to name an oft cited one. As observed by Gutmann in his analysis of “Mexican machismo”, many researchers who write about “manliness” fail to supply a definition of the term in a way that it can mean different things when applied to different human societies during different epochs and across different classes and genders (1996: 223). The lesson that might be culled from Gutmann’s statement is that masculinity, like femininity, possesses unchallenged and taken-for-granted connotations that imply a built-in homogeneity within the notion. Thus, masculinity as a term used in academia as well as in popular culture, is given short shrift since it does not connote complexity and multiplicity—it simply exists as a biological value that is opposite from femininity,

becoming a reduced category. When applied to working class cultural worlds, or any for that matter, it is not a rarity for notions of what a “man ought to be like” to generate confusing indexes in which irreproachable credentials are hard to come by, since the bar of performative excellence is placed significantly high. Dunk observes a similar phenomenon of predefined traits within Marxist analyses that reinforce what the working class should be while conveniently ignoring certain characteristics that offer wider descriptions of working class experience (1991:4).

The second component that emerges when studying working class experiences and the masculine expressions that are involved is that a degree of creativity can be found within engendered constructions of masculine expressions. This said, it is misleading to romanticize this creativity by dwelling only upon its cultural and performative aspects. A misleading stance to take would be to report only upon stylistic embellishments such as a swaggering walk or a hat that is worn just so in order to exude a devil-may-care attitude and not to go beyond what these symbolic acts signify. Willis (1977) and Dunk (1991) have suggested that the creative endeavor present within the expressions of masculinity that they have observed is *limited* in nature due to complex cultural processes. The creativity that is allowed within these masculine articulations not only leads to limited cultural horizons, as suggest the authors, but also has an insidious way of reproducing and maintaining the very capitalist structure that constrains them. The masculine expressions in the working class cultures experienced by the “Boys” (Dunk 1991) and “lads” (Willis 1977) who actively celebrate their modes of knowledge within a capitalist order (all studies that I have used have been located within the capitalist economy) does not represent an advantageous strategy since it secures their subordinate class position

within the capitalist system. It is doubly contradictory considering that there are certain creative impulses (such as the “counter-school culture” [Willis 1977] or the game of lob-ball [Dunk 1991]) that seek to challenge or oppose the capitalist order, however the discourses that are used are often regressive (possessing strong ethnic prejudices for instance) in nature and do not afford transformative critiques—in the end reproducing rather than over-turning the social conditions.

There are a few caveats that are important to outline that have been produced most notably by Dunk, Gutmann and Limón, that are useful to keep in mind. Firstly, romanticized imagery of the worker as an honest, tough-as-nails man (the ethnographies, as well as my fieldwork, focus mostly upon male experience) struggling in a world devoid of respect for his “kind”, or as a potential revolutionary force combating against “the onslaught of individuating and alienating structures of capitalism” represents a concealed pitfall that is as intellectually questionable as negative bourgeois images of the working class (Dunk 1991:4). It is timely to note what Dunk observes regarding his critique of culturalist models used to explore working class experience. A culturalist model applied to the socio-economic process of “embourgeoisement” (wherein members of the working class display increased material wealth) can be misleading since it rests upon material wealth, however Dunk argues that owning prestige commodities does not signify that the working class has transitioned into the “middle class” nor should the *meaning* of consumer behavior retain static definitions in each context (1991:31 emphasis my own). A half ton pickup truck with a “Hemi motor”, rear spoiler and chrome trim may have a steep purchase price, however the cultural signification of a prestige commodity such as this is not frozen and one is bound to encounter widely varying evaluations across

different social classes. Among the male *cols bleus* of Lachine vehicles are important sources of prestige and they also *mean* manliness and “toughness.” Secondly, in discussing regressive discourses such as ethnic prejudice and sexism among white *col bleu* males in Lachine for instance, it is not to suggest that these human beings are more narrow-minded than any other social group, rather it is to draw attention to these discursive instruments as receptacles possessing specific meaning in what Dunk identifies as being “working class consciousness due to the class experience and the mode of thought which this experience generates” (1991:4). Thirdly, masculinity is not a fixed category (Gutmann 1991) nor does working class culture possess a “necessary form” (Dunk 1991:38). Contrary to media exposés, televised conferences and popular opinion concerning “the *col bleu* problem”, it is impossible to report upon a conclusive *col bleu* model or series of neatly boxed categorical molds. The *col bleu* as a violent, “macho”, alcoholic and slovenly person cannot be and should not be supported as a viable “total description” (Gutmann 1996, 1997). Some of the young males I have worked with do espouse this imagery by enacting it, however many do not, while others may choose to utilize some of these recognized elements when it is beneficial to do so. If this “way of being” is generational (i.e. the younger generation) or if it possesses a cultural past within *La Ville* would necessitate a greater amount of research that is not within the scope of this thesis. What becomes crucial to observe is not the cultural details supporting such reductionist positions but to provide an ethnographic account that explores complexities within the specific historical and political economic context of Lachine. Finally, Limón offers a constructive analysis of Mexican working-class culture employing Bakhtin’s notion of the “carnavalesque” (1997:74). The carnivalesque defines a situation wherein

materials and/or activities deemed unprestigious by a dominant cultural ethos undergo a cultural process that subverts the order of valuation (*Ibid*). What is deemed “low prestige” and “low brow” is imbued with positive meanings by a subordinate group. Limón advises that it is only by specifying the historical moment, the social location of the carnivalesque and accounting for race and class (he forgets “gender” here) that the carnivalesque can be read as an expression of class contestative discourse (Limón 1997:75). Without taking these precautions it is a simple thing to romanticize such processes and fail to register the possible limitations and regressive discourses that may or may not be contained within these carnivalesque episodes of value inversion.

Oppositional Creativity and Constraints

Thomas W. Dunk’s ethnography entitled It’s a Working Man’s Town: Male Working Class Culture in Northwestern Ontario has proven to be a useful anthropological source paralleling my own interests and has contributed much in my theoretical understanding of working class experience. Dunk’s study focuses on white male working-class culture (the “Boys”) in his hometown of Thunder Bay located in Northwestern Ontario. The author’s main argument is that the celebration of local knowledge by the Boys is a form of class based resistance to their perceived subordination. What is important about the Boys’ celebration of their local knowledge system, carried out with creativity and skill, is that it carries within it contradictions in the form of “non-class discourses” that produce a limiting effect (Dunk 1991).

“Non-class discourses”, as discussed by Dunk, make up an important part of the Boys’ reality and agency because it is within these articulations that their experience of class and their position vis-à-vis production is articulated (1991:38). Dunk defines these

knowledge practices as “non-class” because they do not belong to a particular economic or political class; discourses like racism and sexism, for instance, enjoy a wide breadth of participation as their organization of knowledge traverses across class boundaries. Non-class discourses are of significance since they illustrate the way in which class interests are “refracted through racist and sexist discourses and get misdirected”, as Dunk suggests, and it is here that the observation of how class intersects with these types of discourses (i.e. working-class *intersecting with* white, “machismo”, sport enthusiast, drinker, etc.) is critical for a successful investigation of the Boys’ working-class cultural world (1991:29-38). It is a concern that shares a similar formulation to Limón’s attention to contextualizing celebrations among *los Batos* (the carnivalesque that values what is devalued) in order to stave off romanticizing “resistance” without identifying more complex constituents (1997). “Resistance” may not provide the best theoretical framework applied to working class experiences and scholars such as Dunk and Gutmann recognize this. Dunk observes that the working class have “settled into a process of coexistence with capital” (1991:23) and Gutmann has explored a creative consciousness that initiates criticality vis-à-vis gender categories (1996). Resistance has an unfortunate tendency to suggest a “semi-idealist transcendence of an unspecified general domination” (Limón 1997:74), whereas a more productive perspective such as the analysis of agency, allows for reformations and negotiations—instead of complete negations—as well as complete success within a hegemonic structure. Here, resistance can be understood as having a dual sense, one that is romanticized and another that is complex, and it is not incorrect to define the Boys’ cultural world as a method of resisting the unequal way

different kinds of knowledge are validated in North American society in a complex fashion (Dunk 1991:150-151).

Dunk suggests that the dominant culture in Northwestern Ontario reflects the values and interests of the bourgeoisie (1991:21). Here bourgeoisie is defined as having “control over the physical means of production, over investments and the process of accumulation and over other people’s labour power” (Dunk 1991:5). Dunk sees the working-class and the bourgeoisie as the two fundamental classes (and in this case the two oppositional poles) in the capitalist mode of production, the latter including archetypical professionals and figures of authority such as “bosses” that the Boys recognize as belonging to a class that establishes norms of excellence. Celebrating what is local and immediately knowable is symbolized by partaking in specific leisure activities (like drinking and “lob-ball”: a non-competitive version of soft-ball [1991:65-100]), aesthetics (both clothes and physique [1991: 75 & 92]), commodity consumption (such as prestige foods and vehicles [1991:11]) and ideological discourses (common sense knowledge and the manual labour versus mental labour dichotomy for example [1991:132-151]) that continually lead the Boys into a situation that embeds them further and further into a world that they wanted to escape (1991:159-160). Thus, their class based opposition, manifesting itself in the cultural taxonomies of common sense knowledge and anti-intellectualism (among others), does not overcome their subordination; in fact it reinforces it and helps the capitalist system to stay afloat, for it goes unchallenged and the Boys’ knowledge is maintained and reproduced from generation to generation, ensuring a steady flow of workers that share a common ideology or ethos (Dunk 1991). Also meaningful, is that through the perception of a

hegemonic system that judges their culture as inadequate and base, the Boys recreate a hegemony themselves, thus reproducing the inequality they sought to overcome in the first place.

Paul E. Willis' ethnography entitled Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs also explores a similar cultural process wherein a dominant culture, or "official paradigm", is challenged by participants that articulate their opposition through creative masculine vocabulary/physicality and involuntarily put themselves in a disadvantageous position within the capitalist system's hierarchical structure (1977). Thus, there are two elements of interest here: firstly, the counter-school system of knowledge as cultural envelope that contains regressive features and secondly, the limitations that the young lads are mirroring themselves in.

Willis' ethnography has proven of great interest since the lads' evolution in their cultural world mirrors that of the young Lachinois males I have studied. Many of my coworkers have described their school days as being a period in life when they discovered they were not "smart enough" and preferred engaging in the wage labour economy (and the socio-cultural matrix accompanying it, i.e. vehicle ownership, *les blondes* ["girlfriends"] and *sortir* [attending discotheques at night]) as soon as the conditions permitted them to do so. I have not made that aspect of their lives a central focus of my research, as Willis has skillfully done, however anti-intellectualism and counter-school culture were crucial elements that propelled them into a world of *les shoppes* (factories, shop floors and other indoor operations such as cutting frozen fish and triaging recycled materials), labouring for contractors in construction work during summers, shoveling snow during winters (also contracted work) and in some cases

becoming professional drug sellers or *des pusheux* (“pushers”) before finding their paths to *La Ville*’s prestigious and exclusive court. For some young men a continued participation in some of these arenas of work supplements their income and helps to maintain a way of life that is frequently expensive. Furthermore, some of the attitudes subscribed to in *La Ville*’s workplace have striking similarities to the code of conduct that the lads learn at school and then apply to the wage labour structure as unskilled labourers. There are of course exceptions and trajectories that contradict some of the lads’ outlook in the workplace.

Hammertown is not dissimilar from Lachine. It is a working class neighborhood still known for its “toughness” and extensive industrial sectors (Willis 1977:3). The lads attend Hammertown Boys, a school with a good reputation in the Midlands. It is here that the lads are involved in the expression of counter-school culture, its most salient feature being, as Willis explains, “...entrenched in a general and personalized opposition to ‘authority’” (1977:11). This opposition has garnered media attention as well as state intervention in the form of a nation-wide inquiry (1977:2-3), a development not unlike the scrutiny *les cols bleu* and *Local 301* has experienced through a consistent stream of media exposés, city councilor denunciations (union partisans are labeled as “irritants”) and stereotypical jokes aimed at blue collar productivity. Within the scholastic arena the working class (as well as being class conscious), non-conformist lads have produced, through considerable creativity, a world in which they are able to rule. For the lads, Willis explains, teachers represent arbitrary power and are the representatives of an “official or formal paradigm” that the young males challenge during their school years, and will continue doing so during their shopfloor years (1977). Counter-school culture

attaches a positive value to expressions deemed masculine such as fighting (with strong connotations to racism, i.e. “Paki bashing” [1977:48]), drinking during school lunch time and when “going out”, abiding to an aesthetic that differentiates them from the “conformists”, preferring wage work over school work, being skilled at the quick repartee, sexual experience and the subjective validation of manual labour.

These culturally established methods of accumulating prestige often solicit from the participants a considerable amount of creativity in order to render their text convincing. Creativity illustrates that a lad has internalized the common sense realm of knowledge he is partaking in by being able to conduct an energetic delivery when articulating opposition to school and authority. By subscribing to a non-conformist world-value system, the lads engage themselves at an early age in winning and controlling space from official authority (not attending classes and “not working”) and of defining their strategies and interests, not only as masculine in construct, but also as a *rational* alternative to the formal model. In this context, rationality is framed by “the working class world of work” as the only source of knowledge located within veracity (Willis 1977:39). The lads simply “know better” than the teachers and “the ear’oles”—a local term designating conformity to formal education. The lads’ notion of time is based upon immediate and culturally significant material acquisitions. They live a “now” that concerns itself with cars, “girlfriends” and money, not with careful planning (Willis 1977:97-98). It is through this powerful articulation of common sense knowledge that the lads will disconnect themselves from a prescribed official life course endorsed by the educational institution and turn to the counter-school culture that will encourage them to

seek out a future work environment that will support this ethos and allow the lads to refine it further.

Willis' discussion of class culture, opposition and constraints offers a useful conceptual framework for my own analysis of *col bleu* culture. Willis suggests that "class cultures" (such as that of the lads and *les cols bleus*) are made in "determinate conditions and in particular oppositions/struggles with other groups, institutions and tendencies" (1977:59). "Familiar themes" are developed within circumstances prescribed by opposition, and these themes undergo a process of reproduction and maintenance made possible by extensive informal groupings whose discursive space accommodates the usage of said themes (*Ibid*). Willis argues that these themes are "shared between particular manifestations [class culture opposition to official paradigms] because all locations at the same level in class society share similar basic structural properties, and the working class people there face similar problems and are subject to similar ideological constructions" (*Ibid*). This bald statement could certainly be misconstrued as being essentialist, however when class culture themes are considered in conjunction to capitalism's hierarchical categorizing of wage earning and the unprestigious valuation given to working-class experience, it becomes a viable insight. Souped-up Chevrolet pickup trucks and Dodge muscle-cars (back in vogue now and spitting in the collective eye of the proponents of the oil and pollution discourse) can thus be as meaningful to a young *col bleu* male as can be to a young oilrig worker in Alberta, and stand as a material performance symbol of oppositional discourse to "academic and intelligent" Volvos or the tiny and ecologically friendly Smart cars for instance. In addition, Willis states that it is a rare thing for the processes of "borrowing, regeneration and return" to be recognized

by the participants as class processes (*Ibid*). In fact, working class/shopfloor themes of valuing manual labour (masculine) while devaluing “pen-pushers” (effete) make contact with the lads at an early age within the household (Willis 1977:95). Gutmann has convincingly argued that “machismo” as a notion of virility and of men as *men* is not only constructed, reproduced and maintained by Mexican males but also by females (1996:245). I believe it is a worthy insight into gender dynamics and relations that can also be applied to Western working-class households and communities: both genders contribute.

Willis suggests that the “larger class logic” (what I believe the author is referring to as democratic society and capitalism especially) could not be developed and articulated without the “regional instances of struggle” (the official paradigm that is endorsed via the educational institution and subsequently rejected by the lads) and that the non-conformist class culture that leads to the shopfloor would not be possible without its dominators—both depend upon one another to articulate their themes and definitions of excellence (1977:60). The nature of the relationship is not symbiotic, nor could it ever be supposed to be, since this would connote that “both” groups are mutually benefitting. Considering the negative value attached to earning one’s living through manual labour, it could be argued that “lad culture” keeps its end of the bargain to its own detriment...and without knowing it. It becomes necessary, when conducting ethnographic research among working-class cultures, to steer clear of the schematic “domination and resistance” model for it only represents a collection of visible details and of romantic categories. As Dunk has pointed out in his introduction, navigating in between “Archie Bunker” stereotypes

(chauvinism, racism and overt physicality for example) and a politically involved vanguard represents a balancing act that is difficult to engage in (1991:4).

As Dunk and Willis argue that working-class roles and values are produced and maintained from generation to generation, it is helpful to consider observations generated by Charlesworth's phenomenological approach to the working-class. According to Charlesworth, the economically and culturally deprived "lived-in environment" of the working-class in Rotherham (an old de-industrialized British town) provides very few ways of penetrating class boundary (2000:8). Using Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" as the locus of working-class identity, the author explores how working-class discourses, such as anti-intellectualism and the manual/mental dichotomy, have become part of their subconscious thoughts and actions (Charlesworth 2000:23). As individuals come into a particular world (that of the working-class) and it comes to be known in a particular way (meager resources and a dearth of opportunities) the realization of life-projects is reserved strictly to labour and leisure (Charlesworth 2000:17). The author advances the idea that the working-class lack "instruments of perception", reflexive tools acquired from formal educational institutions ensconced within a culturally different bourgeois realm, that of academia (Charlesworth 2000:281). Because of this general lack of reflexive tools the working-class of Rotherham (mostly young males of various ethnic backgrounds) are walled-up in a culture of hedonism and consumerism (Charlesworth 2000:294).

Common Sense Knowledge

Common sense is a cultural system of knowledge emphasizing the immediate and concrete. As observed by Dunk, common sense knowledge appears "natural, practical

and obvious” and symbolizes a structured paradigm for making sense of the world in comparison to the “impractical and abstract” musings of those who subscribe to an intellectual way of thought, such as university students (1991:136). As viewed by the Boys, the strength of common sense is that its knowledge can be easily transmitted via proverbs, jokes and *contes moraux* which are accessible to everyone and formal methods are not required to articulate them, such as education and “book learning” (1991:133-135). Gutmann has also correctly perceived “jokes, taunts, nicknames, ridicule, puns and witticisms” as representing discursive envelopes containing meaningful cultural elements that should be taken seriously (1996:53). Dunk argues that the Boys adopt an anti-intellectual attitude towards systems of knowledge that are perceived as being potentially subordinating. In her book entitled What do they Call a Fisherman?: Men, Gender, and Restructuring in the Newfoundland Fishery (2005), Nicole G. Power also investigates the cultural differentiation between the common sense knowledge of the traditional male fisher model and the state endorsed modern fisher model. The former model of masculinity is predicated upon experiential knowledge gained through physical efforts while the latter model, the new version of hegemonic masculinity, is based upon formal training and technological equipment (Power 2005). Similar to Gutmann (1996), Power identifies masculinity as existing in plural articulations with a hegemonic definition of masculine performative excellence governing the ideological and material realities (2005).

It is noteworthy to remark upon two crucial components that are present in Dunk’s formulation of common sense: viable knowledge being transmitted through speech and anti-intellectualism. Speech or storytelling is not ensconced within the realm

of formal knowledge, anyone who has passable oratory skills can participate and it focuses upon *matters that count for the audience*. It is important to note, as I have observed during my fieldwork, that although speech may be rooted within the informal realm, as outlined by Dunk, it is by no means a democratic system that can be shared and enjoyed by everyone. Common sense knowledge imparted through speech in the form of jokes, stories and moral accounts more often than not exclude particular members of society and particular cultural worlds. Within the unionized cultural world of the young, white, French-Canadian blue-collar males that I have worked with, speech is a device that produces solidarity (in a culturally masculine way, in addition to a class-based one) as well as exclusion. When skillfully manipulated by an orator who possesses an acute understanding of the kind of common sense knowledge that is valued amongst Lachine's working-class males, speech becomes an eloquent tool that reproduces and maintains blue-collar culture. This theatrical ability can be observed in *le raconteur's* personage, an important concept that I have designated to this style of speech as index of performative excellence during my 20 months of fieldwork and which I will discuss in detail in chapter 6 entitled "Masculine Aesthetics."

The strength of common sense, as argued by Dunk, is that it determines a precise causation for it is devoid of metaphysical notions, and the working-class Boys' thoughts about Natives, women, and high brow culture are not the product of long reflection and analysis: views are easy to arrive at and there is no need to study or to sequester oneself in deep thought (Dunk 1991:134). I would tend to argue that proponents and consumers of so-called "high brow culture" also nurture perspectives that reduce working class culture; in other words the favor is returned. Such has been the case in the writings of

Samuel Ramos and Oscar Lewis (both intellectuals and part of the “high brow” crowd) who have supplied particularly enduring stereotypical descriptions of working class Mexican men, later challenged by Limón (1997) and Gutmann (1996). Those who do not face what is perceived as being “obvious and concrete”, Dunk explains, are viewed as being naïve, weak and unable to make accurate conclusions, therefore jeopardizing their manliness (*Ibid*). The author is quick to point out the anti-intellectual component within common sense does not mean that members of the working-class are incapable of deep reflection, on the contrary it represents a powerful system of knowledge precisely because they do think, but the way they think and the issues they think about are not valued by the dominant culture (1991:136). Here, it is timely to recall what Willis writes in regards to the notion of ‘intellect’: “cultural location” is a much better model for explaining social mobility than is the “mechanistic undialectical notion of intelligence” (1977:59).

The Manual and Mental Dichotomy

In a bid to counter a definitive notion of prestige that, in Dunk’s opinion, is generated by the “conception and execution” dichotomy (mental labourers conceive, while the subordinate manual labourers execute), working-class culture celebrates the manual side of the division and take enjoyment in what educated professionals and students often consider as being mediocre “mass culture” (1991:139). Therefore within common sense and anti-intellectualism one can observe a strategic reversal taking place as a higher value is attached to manual labour and the knowledge that is produced within this realm. Limón has also recognized this strategic redistribution of value and prestige

through Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque (1997) as has Willis' analysis of the counter-school lads (1977).

A solid grasp of a specific system of knowledge is necessary in order to speak confidently about improving the household's summer deck or making mechanical repairs on one's vehicle. There is also a way to speak about such activities that elicits a creativity often imbued with masculine tones. I have often listened to young *cols bleus* compare technical knowledge about rearing marijuana plants in one's apartment or comparing the performance of certain types of car motors and the conversations can become as complexly structured as any academic report. The celebration of manual labour, as outlined by Dunk, is interpreted in a different way amongst *les cols bleus du Centre Technique* as will be discussed further on, however a quick cultural contrast is noteworthy, even though Dunk's ethnographic work was based upon leisure and not the workplace. "Being good with tools" and being quick witted or *être débrouillard* ("being a jack of all trades") signifying a certain level of skill in regards to ad hoc strategies that belie a "cobbled" appearance by producing beneficial results for the author of the travail—a cultural similarity to what Scheper-Hughes (1992:472-473) has observed in the Brazilian term "jeitoso" meaning cunning and handiness—was part of the meritocratic system prior to the collective bargaining agreement in 2004 (*La Convention Collective*). Manual labour, not to be perceived in this context as an oppositional articulation to a "dominant bourgeois culture", but rather as a skillfully deployed energy that interacted efficiently with tools and quickly solved situations with a keen mind appears to have been the common sense during the meritocratic years. Manual labour experienced a redefinition within the seniority (*l'ancienneté*) system's new hegemony. Manual labour

in this context no longer connotes a celebration of masculine endeavors placed in opposition to a bourgeois and intellectual hegemony that legislate the official paradigm (“book learning” and “cultural” activities for example), but as a hindrance to seniority’s new methodology. This said, it is very misleading to assume that meritocracy has passed from the cultural tissues, because it has not, it is operating beneath a new hegemony with a *muted* and not *silenced* vocabulary. It is highly debatable if any ideal transitions do in fact exist at all. Gutmann reminds us of the “creative consciousness” operating in Colonia Santo Domingo and the ebb and flow effect in regards to degendering and engendering cannot be considered as complete transitions (1991:245). Also of note is Jonathan Warren’s study entitled Racial Revolutions: Antiracism and Indian Resurgence in Brazil (2001). Here, Warren demonstrates that “the law of the white” and “the law of the Indian” were opposing common sense systems that were expressed by a plurality of classes (Warren 2001). Thus, it is misleading to cast common sense knowledge as a discursive preserve of the working-classes. It is much more productive and useful to view common sense as a system of knowing and experiencing that is shaped, developed and employed by all human social classes.

The Informal Group

The informal group is an important feature of male working-class culture (Dunk 1991, Willis 1977). The informal group is composed of friends and is fluid in composition, but more importantly it provides a site of social production amongst friends (Dunk 1991, Willis 1977). In Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs, Paul Willis also observed the young working-class males in his study make use of the informal group to articulate an ethos of opposition towards the school

administration and later on in life apply similar tactics within the workplace (1977). By adhering to an informal group culture the lads produce distance and configure their own agenda within a formal scholastic environment that is trying to get them to participate in the curriculum (Willis 1977:27). Within the work place there is an ongoing effort to resist the “intensity of exploitation” and the authority of “bosses” by attempting to gain informal control of the labour process (Dunk 1991:8). An alienating situation is thus invested with meaning as the informal group embellishes the work day with resistance oriented strategies such as bantering (small talk and joking), “foot dragging” (Scott 1985), petty sabotage (affecting production quality) and the manipulation of time allotted to lunch and coffee breaks (Dunk 1991; Willis 1977). What Paul Willis called “shop floor culture” when observing the working-class lads, shares a very similar nature as the main theme is “the control of space from official authority” (1977:53-54). Informal groups magnify the power of individuals as selfhoods are collapsed into a collective identity that produces boundaries and that maintains certain perspectives about the world and its inhabitants that they deem to be correct (Dunk 1991:132). In Lachine the “preservation of personal mobility” (Willis 1977:28) within a formally structured arena can be readily observed in what I have come to call “Truck Time” denoting a specific temporal frame of activity that stands very much outside of *La Ville*’s daily syllabus (see chapter 5 and chapter 6 for loci of ideology and the *raconteur*). The informal group both in the Boys’ and lads’ cases represents a site where systems of common sense knowledge are produced and shared amongst the membership. One can almost visualize this process as a kind of reversed Enlightenment project once articulated by the French *philosophes*, but instead of moving towards a broader horizon, the Boys and Lads aim for what is

narrower, practical and located in the low end of the cultural spectrum (“mass culture”), high end culture (like theatre, art, erudite conversations) being consumed strictly by the members of the bourgeoisie. Or is it? I have observed in Lachine a veritable “Shakespearean theatre” of erudite discourse born of common sense knowledge being avidly consumed by an audience of *cols bleus* listening with visible merriment to a *raconteur*’s gesticulating eloquence. The performance of masculine bodily aesthetics certainly mirrors artistic flair as sparkling gold chains are prominently worn while insouciant cigarettes drip earthwards from grinning mouths. This said, the cultural markers briefly depicted above should not be romanticized for they are still very much located within a world that is far less advantaged than the cultural markers belonging to the upper classes. An “insouciant cigarette” will never be able to compete with a trip around the world, for example, or a house in a reputable neighborhood.

Marxism

Dunk’s theoretical framework has been influenced by Marxist theoreticians; however he offers a useful critical perspective in order to provide a constructive analysis of working-class culture. The writings of Marx and Engels, as observed by the author, are not concerned with the traditional beliefs and practices of the proletariat, therefore the relationship between working-class discourses (such as the non-class variety, i.e. racism, sexism) and subordinate positions to the mode of production go unnoticed (Dunk 1991:22). Another apparent flaw located within classical Marxism is the formulaic and romanticized treatment of class struggle: the revolutionary proletariat opposes bourgeois society with the aim of toppling capitalism (1991:23). Dunk argues that this vision is too narrow for it is founded on speculation rather than the realistic understanding of the

working-class functioning in a mature capitalist system and it ignores the fact that *coexistence* instead of *negation* has characterized the actual historical working-class experience towards capital (1991:23). *Les gars d'la Ville* I have worked with embrace capitalism with open arms because it is through it that they can accumulate prestige by consuming luxury goods and pursuing valorizing projects, such as conducting home improvements and playing golf. Second generation Marxists such as Lukacs, Laclau and Mouffe assume what class consciousness ought to be like according to Marxism and also assume that resistance to domination is solely based on relations to production, ignoring the wider position the working-class occupy within the “ensemble of social relations” (Dunk 1991:24-25, 40). This produces an inadequate depiction of working-class reality since non-class discourses go unexplored. Rich empirical descriptions of the actual thoughts and practices of workers, such as E.P. Thompson’s The Making of The English Working Class, part from classical Marxist “economic reductionism” of the proletariat (1991:21). However, as Dunk points out, the absence of any theorization signifies that working-class culture is not defined since all the reader receives is a massive amount of cultural information without any outline as to what is specifically working-class (1991:27-29). Dunk states that another problem with the culturalist model is its insensitivity to the changing shapes of the working-class: because certain activities or dress codes are no longer pursued does not mean that the working-class is gone; it means that it has entered a “period of transition” (1991:30-31). Thus, the “embourgeoisement” of the working-class (owning prestigious commodities like expensive pick-up trucks and plasma televisions so that they can play their XBOX 360s [a very popular and expensive video game console consumed by the young Lachinois blue-collars]) does not indicate

that it has merged into the “so-called middle-class”, nor do these objects have fixed meanings that remain the same in each context (1991:31). A Dodge pick-up truck represents an expensive acquisition however while it may be lauded as prestigious by a blue-collar it will not necessarily reproduce the same reaction for a professional. In this fashion Dunk importantly argues that blue-collars with higher grossing salaries do not necessarily adhere to the same cultural markers that a lawyer or doctor might.

In America’s Working Man, David Halle also observes that working-class consciousness amongst the male workers at Imperium (a chemical processing plant) does not dramatically change with augmented purchasing power (1984). In fact, the working-class males that Halle observed that “made good money” could pursue with greater facility what was deemed to be important within their common sense knowledge, such as owning a home and going on hunting trips (1984). However, Halle also observes that because of higher mortgage rates it has become harder for young blue-collar workers to own homes and they must employ different tactics, such as living with their parent(s) for a longer stretch of time (1984:31).

The Bricoleur Model

Lévi-Strauss’ cultural bricoleur sheds some light on understanding male working-class culture and it links well with the notion of hegemony. The bricoleur is an individual that seeks out useful bits and scraps that can be hammered together in order to create a meaningful and useful object. In my opinion “bricoleur” and “bricolage” connote *cunning* but the words also hint to a kind of weakened strategy or a pauperized tactic that is used to navigate a difficult situation: it is not leisurely, it takes some doing, the resources are limited and the outcome’s level of success is not guaranteed. Dunk states that the

working-class does have an objective interest in regards to capital, but that it should not be reduced by Marxism; it will instead be expressed in terms of concepts, ideas, morals and ethics which already exist in the social realm and which can be reworked so as to become meaningful in a new situation (1991:36). Human agency, as discussed by the author, is important to consider in conjunction with the two theoretical approaches because there is a vast difference between *intention* and *realization* when considering class consciousness, furthermore "...there are always unintended consequences of intentional actions" (1991:33-35). The Boys do perceive their subordination, however as discussed by Willis in regards to his Lads, this is only a "partial penetration", or in the case of the Boys it is a partial perception (1977:171). The Boys and the Lads scavenge for ideas and terms that become instilled with meaning within their cultural groups which oppose and resist domination. However, their success is limited by the very components that make up their shared knowledge. The bits and pieces that they have chosen to represent their class ideology are made up of selected aspects of other systems of domination such as attaching a positive value to the masculine while denigrating the feminine.

Through the concept of "hegemony", Gramsci directed attention to the role that culture plays in the formation of class: language, common sense knowledge (or "spontaneous philosophy" as articulated by Gramsci), popular beliefs, aesthetics (physical representation as well as consumer goods) and opinions are treated as cultural signifiers of power relations (Dunk 1991:26). Hegemony, in the sense that Gramsci used it so that it included cultural and political dominance, meant that the working-class was ideologically subordinate to the bourgeoisie (Dunk 1991:154).

Contradictory Consciousness and Cultural Creativity

In Matthew C. Gutmann's ethnography entitled The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City the author provides an alternative analysis of working-class masculinity by exploring working-class Mexican men's and women's perspectives concerning masculinity as in a "processual flux" and never as a static or homogenous model (1996:20). Gutmann demonstrates this by making use of two conceptual models that I have found intellectually engaging in regards to my own thesis: "contradictory consciousness" and "cultural creativity." However, before reviewing these two concepts it is productive to consider Gutmann's cogent discussion on the way in which the notion of hegemony is utilized in his research, for this effectively builds upon what Dunk enunciates, offering a wider definition. At first glance Gutmann's use of hegemony is similar to that of Dunk's since it is representative of the dominant ideas and practices that enjoy mainstream deployment as to produce common sense knowledge for members of society and through which elites gain the popular consent necessary for their continued rule (1996:19). Gutmann enriches the concept of hegemony by observing that power is contested at various levels of society by dominating and dominated groups. Struggles occur between elites and popular classes, as well as *within* elite and popular classes. Therefore it becomes inadvisable to claim that "emergent cultural practices" are the products only of the less affluent members of society since, in the opinion of Gutmann, "culture and class do not so neatly coincide" (1996:19). Thus, for a critical analysis of working class culture one must not only focus upon what Dunk observes as being resistance towards bourgeois thought and practices, one must consider the struggles against hegemonic domination that occur within the working class itself. The important

perspective of “alliances and antagonisms” between and within classes has also been discussed in great detail by Gerald M. Sider in his study entitled Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration (1986, see chapters 5 and 6).

Gutmann suggests, building upon Gramsci’s notion of “creative consciousness”, that creativity can represent agency within structure in the form of challenge towards taken-for-granted gender constructions (1996). Gutmann found that both men and women challenge engendering categories in the Mexican neighborhood in which he conducted his fieldwork by questioning and evaluating notions of machismo—not simply remaining passive recipients to an ideological “inheritance.” However this complex process also possesses similarities with Dunk and Willis’ findings: while creativity is able to degender certain societal constraints it also engenders others (Gutmann 1991:244-245). In other words, although creative consciousness becomes an important instrument of critical thinking, agency is not total nor is it complete. What I find valuable with Gutmann’s notion of contradictory and conscious creativity (1991:239) is that it makes allowance for a more organic and compassionate model of masculinity and the creative energies that are present within its expressive behavior. There are limitations as well as a cultural mechanism of maintenance and reproduction such as can be found in Dunk’s analysis, however there is also room for change, challenge and ultimately of agency within constraints of structure (Gutmann 1996:259). Gutmann describes contradictory consciousness as being “a descriptive phrase used to orient our examination of popular understandings, identities, and practices *in relation to* dominant understandings, identities, and practices” (Gutmann 1996:14). Gutmann argues that the dominant perspective in this case can often be traced to a “traditional” tried-and-true collection of

masculine stereotypes and that the informants in the ethnography are very much aware of this type of thinking (they are conscious of the stereotypes) and also influenced by it (1996:14). These working class men and women possess a contradictory consciousness that is bipartite in composition: they have inherited a type of knowing from the past that they “uncritically accept” and another cognitive experience that is largely implicit and which “unites individuals with others in the practical transformation of the world” (Gutmann 1996:15). On one hand there exists a kind of common sense knowledge that is passed down through the generations and on the other there is a more dynamic space allowing for flux and change to occur. In Gutmann’s ethnography it is in this other half of contradictory consciousness that identities meet, similar to the revelers of the Day of the Dead celebration in Mexico: specters from the past collide with the living of the present and “identity confusion” (1996:18) emerges as various convictions that were believed to be immutable, change. The author has found it crucial to underscore the existence of *masculinities* and not to focus upon masculinity as a concept that is singular and unable to re-imagine itself (1997, 1996). In her book entitled Women of the Praia: Work and Lives in a Portuguese Coastal Community Sally Cole has also cogently explored the negotiability of gender, a social construct that is as susceptible, if not more so than class, to reductionist and romanticized interpretations. Cole writes:

The social construction of gender is not only a process of constructing ideals about gender roles and relations but also a process of manipulating those ideals—a process of negotiation. Socioeconomic conditions, including circumstances of rapid social and economic change, only define limits within which the construction of gender identity takes place; they do not predetermine gender roles and relations. On the other hand, gender ideals are not constructed independently of material conditions and, once constructed, are not immutable... Gender, then, is a historical and social construct, malleable and subject to change. It is actively constructed and negotiated at different, often antagonistic, levels of society—the individual, the household, the community, and

the state, for example—resulting in contradiction and in the layered systems of social and cultural meaning (1991:149)

The notion of cultural creativity is viewed by Gutmann as being a more generous term than “resistance” in the analysis of inventiveness amongst the popular classes because it underscores *active methods* in which women and men seek to shape their daily lives instead of simply emphasizing *reactions* towards life situations (1996:260). These two distinctions raised by Gutmann are important. Within the notion of cultural creativity the author perceives a stronger element of *agency* and perhaps an elevated sense of directed will aiming for a transformation to take place within the particular cultural world he describes in his ethnography.

In Gutmann’s ethnography the notion of cultural creativity is displayed by the Mexican men and women who are actively engaged in challenging the socially prescribed definitions of gender. This creative struggle can be seen in the Mexican father who does not see it as socially problematic to have his two young daughters assist him with manual labour (Gutmann 1996:261). This cooperative act that eschews the more traditionally based beliefs of gendered division of labour was seen as unacceptable and shameful by the family’s neighbors. Gutmann describes this family’s project of gender transformation as a way of seeking to produce distance between it and the more traditionally accepted views of gender harbored by the neighbors, and in doing so the family affirms “a new moral economy for gender relations” (1996:261). I find this pertinent to my own research and even though Gutmann’s concern lies chiefly in gender as flux as opposed to immutable social construct, it is useful to apply the notion of cultural creativity to certain young blue-collar males that I work with, since many attempt to wage a struggle against

an established and mostly accepted common sense knowledge that exists in *La Ville*'s unionized work environment. Using Gutmann's parlance, many of the young men working in *Le Département des Espaces Verts* aim to transform the world that they operate within in order to render its cultural landscape less threatening. In attempting to do so, some of these young males subsequently demonstrate what Gutmann observes as being an important consequence of an act that entails the creation of a cultural space that opposes the dominating or hegemonic cultural landmass: "...consciousness of identity may proceed in a manner that is considerably out of sync with practical experience" (1996:261). Indeed, the young blue-collar male who attempts to move against the cultural grain is very much "out of sync" and engages himself in a difficult contest of oppositions. This contest often takes shape as a particular work ethic that is diametrically in opposition to the unionized version taught at *La Ville*. That is to say that the former work ethic is usually concerned with *bien travailler et de faire une bonne job* ("to work hard and do a good job") and therefore espouses a meritocratic stance towards labour while the work ethic that is encouraged by the majority is more concerned with methods of *se poigner le beigne* (literally meaning to be grabbing one's doughnut or to "fuck the dog") during the workday. In addition there are others who seem to bounce between these two oppositional poles: at times they work very hard and at other times one would be hard pressed to motivate them enough to actually get out of the truck...

This depiction of work ethics in *La Ville* and in the department that I worked in could easily be charged with being grossly stereotypical and essentializing brush strokes that do not do justice to the intricacies that exist in the cultural world of my field site. It is certainly not my goal to endorse and reinforce popular views of unionized blue-collar

males as being what Dunk calls “Archie Bunker look-alikes” (1991), or what Halle has observed as being the unionized profiteer that never pulls his weight (1984) however I am exploring a common sense way of doing things that represents *the way of doing things* that is prevalent in that environment and that impacts upon the lives and quality thereof of these young workers.

Chapter 2. A “Tough Little Town”

Lachine is an interesting place to conduct fieldwork. It is Canada’s oldest suburb, sports many historical buildings and displays a large gap between the affluent and the less fortunate. Some have a lot while others have very little and a fine example is seeing a sparkling Hummer parked alongside a rust bucket of indeterminate age. There are many green spaces (public parks) such as *Parc René Lévesque* which is located on a long peninsula extending into *Lac Saint-Louis* and sports a collection of modern sculptures and an arboretum. It is within this old neighborhood that the young men I have observed, befriended and worked with have lived most of their lives. Some have moved to Vaudreuil and Dorion (both are suburbs and are attracting young couples who wish to get away from “city life”, high housing prices and do not mind the commute) where mortgages are cheaper and vestiges of country life are still present, yet many have stayed in Lachine and have become homeowners in their natal neighborhood. These young Caucasian French-Canadian blue-collar males, or *les cols bleus* as they are locally known, have what many in Lachine consider *une bonne job*, a good or ideal job. In this chapter, I present a social and historical introduction to Lachine and describe the methods I pursued in my fieldwork there.

My fieldwork site’s founder was *Cavelier de La Salle*, an ex-Jesuit who arrived in *La Nouvelle France* in 1667. He disembarked in the West end of *L’île de Montréal* and the location’s geography was perceived as strategic due to its accessibility by water: its western limit being the shore of *Lac Saint-Louis* and the Lachine Rapids. During its natal phase *Cavelier*’s newly acquired turf served as a simple rest station but it was not long before it was upgraded to a full-fledged outpost dedicated to the lucrative fur trade. The

fur trade attracted many people seeking wealth and entry into *La Nouvelle France's* pantry. By 1669, the name "Lachine" (literally meaning China and an excellent source of humor when considering that many of *Cavelier's* contemporaries sought a route to Asia) was given to the outpost which had now grown larger and was encouraging the development of river traffic, industry and small communities of adventurous souls. In 1687 *Cavelier de La Salle's* expeditions and expansionism caught up with him and he perished in Texas.

On the 5th of August 1689, twenty years after Lachine was incorporated; a force of Iroquois warriors crossed the waters of *Lac Saint-Louis* and attacked the European population. This turn of events is rather interesting, not because of the carnage that ensued, but rather because it is a historical occurrence that has experienced a kind of political erasure. Because of this historical editing, the archives produce few insights or accounts pertaining to Lachine except for lot numbers, zoning laws and bucolic reminiscence. An iron forged monument (two trees supporting a bilingual plaque) that once existed and stood as a testament to Lachine's bloody history was silently dismantled and left to rust at the very back of *Le Centre Technique's* vast yard, well hidden underneath thick masses of rampaging vines and large weeds. The plaque commemorates those who were killed by the Iroquois warriors and is proof that Lachine was largely built upon violence when considering the European factions that vied against one another and the wars against the First Nations. The erasure of certain aspects of a locale's history and the aggrandizement of others is all part of keeping face and conducting historical triage. From a political perspective it is always appealing to cook the books. In this case, bloody battles against the indigenous populations are not perceived as being a quill in one's cap,

however it is a fact that French soldiers and professional prostitutes (*les filles du roi*, literally meaning “the daughters of the king”) were the forefathers and foremothers of Lachine. On the 18th of September 1759, Québec City surrendered to British forces a few days after the pivotal battle of *Les Plaines d’Abraham*. In 1763 the French colony became a British possession forever changing the quality of life for many members of the French-Canadian population. This regime that favored English speakers over French-Canadians (Irish, Scottish and Americans could find work while many French-Canadians were forced to move Northwards to attempt to eke a living off the frozen land fed by starch laden diets while other families slogged through the Mississippi to Louisiana) lead to the 1837 Rebellion that demonstrated that French-Canadians would fight for their rights.

It is in this fashion that I perceive my research topic as being unique for it focuses upon 1) blue-collar 2) French-Canadians 3) in a working-class neighborhood 4) that is located in a province that carries the proletariat stain up to this day. These four elements are part of a crucial perspective to maintain because negative values are still attached to French-Canadians today as well as manual labourers in general. Being French-Canadian is a negative stereotype that possesses a similar construction to stereotypes that are imposed upon “exotic Others”: French-Canadian women are perceived as “good lovers”, “sexually experienced” and “very warm” (*chaude*) while the men are considered masculine, good physical labourers (Albertan oil rig hiring policies target French-Canadian men because of this stereotypical construct) and dangerous because they are potential separatists and the FLQ used bombs during the 1970 October Crisis, therefore they join the special ranks of terrorists. An Albertan, responding to Michaëlle Jean’s

investiture as Canada's Governor General, compared her to "Osama Bin Laden." The remark was based on allegations that charged Jean of having come into contact in her youth with sovereignists and also made reference to her "brown skin" of Haitian descent. Being "terrorized" need not solely signify the usage of mailbox bombs in English-speaking, upper-class Westmount, it can also mean loss of culture, minimal job opportunities and poverty, a status that First Nations people have experienced all too well and it is a status that can be best characterized as living life in fear. The conflict in Northern Ireland has certainly been marked with many bombings and firearm skirmishes yet Saint Patrick's day in downtown Montréal is completely devoid of politics—it is hygienic—and as a fête it is on par with Easter or Halloween: apolitical and unthreatening. The same type of value cannot be effectively applied to *La Saint Jean Baptiste*: it is threatening because it is French-Canadian, it is proud and it is touted as culturally distinct—elements that the Canadian federal government has often discouraged. It was only recently that Prime Minister Stephen Harper declared that French-Canadians in fact possessed a cultural configuration that was distinct in Canada. This was an unprecedented statement in Federalist history, however it was also concluded with the remark that Québec would never be allowed to separate. This logic certainly resonates with Trudeau's initiation of the War Measures Act during *La Crise d'Octobre* (the October Crisis) when military tanks rumbled in Lachine's streets and when the RCMP arrested and detained with impunity individuals who were suspected of having connections with the FLQ. Those who are antagonistic to French-Canadian culture choose not to see the October Crisis as a battle for democratic rights, although they had very few. Antagonists may have the tendency to portray Bill 101 as symbolizing the

exclusion of Anglos and the birth of “Anglo minorities” but for French-Canadians Bill 101 was a battle for democracy, human rights and cultural survival. Anglophones were never known as the “White Niggers of North America.” Signage, in my grandparents’ time, would often read “No French” or “No Frogs” and “to speak White” meant to speak English. However, the historical aspects of this struggle have often been downplayed, disregarded and even villainized. As Sider observes, “feelings of powerlessness, pervasive but far from total” are not unique sentiments in Canada as one of his informants, a Newfoundland construction worker, candidly states: “We Newfs, we are all niggers, we are all indians, we are all Eskimos” (1986:184).

The fashion in which a nation and its people are perceived regionally and internationally, be it in a negative or positive light, has much to do with hegemonic practices: those in power have something to gain by representing the group in question by use of discursive devices (Power 2005). Following Thomas Dunk’s logic pertaining to common sense knowledge, it could be surmised that there even exists a global or international common sense. As Dunk illustrates, common sense is easy to use and it is dangerous, because it only adheres to a single narrow-minded vision of increasingly complex socio-economic, political and cultural matters. International common sense knowledge values certain ways of acting and also values certain cultural groups more than others. Nicole G. Power has correctly observed that fishing communities in Atlantic Canada also view themselves as being culturally distinct from the rest of Canada and that they, like French-Canadians, also experience representations that are demeaning (Power 2005). In addition, antagonists often link French-Canadian concerns to FLQ style separatism that is pejoratively described as being traditional, corrupt, fascist,

conservative, irrational and dangerous. Rather similar in character to stereotypical depictions that are attached to Latin Americans, Blacks, Arabs and certain Asian peoples such as North Koreans. For some groups cultural pride can be articulated with impunity due to powerful media manipulations that give the green light to certain nationalist articulations justifiable while others must walk on egg shells.

Le Canal de Lachine was completed in 1825 (12 years before the Rebellions) and it, along with the Historic Fur Trade museum represent two of the town's most recognizable and celebrated landmarks. Once the canal was completed, Lachine experienced rapid economic growth which promoted residential and commercial development and the creation of a heavily stratified landscape. *Le Canal* or *le bord de l'eau* (the water side) as it is known by *les Lachinois* has seen the value of real estate augment significantly in the past few years due to revitalising efforts and a host of condominiums that have popped up like mushrooms. These condominiums, lofts and modern housing schemes (usually strings of connected houses with different color doors being the only differentiating characteristic) have been able to attract young families that are now changing Lachine's tired face. However, *la rue Notre Dame* remains as vacant and lifeless as it has been for the last few decades.

Not all landmarks are imbued with prestigious historical capital, in fact some have become reminders of the dire effects that de-industrialization can have on a population. 215 years after Lachine's conception, the Dominion Bridge Company Limited was founded. In 1886 Dominion Bridge, a steel bridge constructor based in Lachine, represented the largest employer of labourers in the area. Getting a job at Dominion Bridge meant being able to put food on the table and entire Lachinois families depended

on this work for their survival. There were day shifts as well as night shifts and the work was intensely physical. Secretaries, *contre-mâtres* (“foremen”), bosses and manual workers were all part of the Dominion Bridge Company. Working there meant having access to *une bonne job* and being able to say: “*j’t travail à ’Bridge!*” (I’m workin’ at the Bridge!) summed it all up. The modern version of that bravado-filled exclamation now is: “*j’t travail à ’Ville!*” (I’m workin’ for the city). Working *à ’Bridge* meant manual labour for most men, and human beings who have done this type of work have never been overly respected, but in Lachine it meant prestige and being able to generate a paycheck. It was a desirable job that did not demand a high level of education. In the mid 1970s Dominion Bridge experienced major decline after work was completed on projects for Montréal’s Olympic Games in 1976 and the families that had depended on this kind of work were faced with a difficult situation. It is with bitter irony that Lachine, or China, experienced job closures and de-industrialization due to cheaper Asian competitors. Employment at the Lachine plant alone dropped from approximately 2,000 in the early 1970s to about 250 in 1990. The plant, a steel behemoth, still stands today and echoes with the ghostly footsteps of workers. General Electric, another large employer in Lachine is also closing its doors now. The only alternative now are *les shoppes*: in-doors shop floor work with few benefits and long, dull hours. *Une bonne job* in Lachine is hard to come by, but if one is fortunate enough to enter *La Ville’s col bleu* work force one has, in a very literal way, “made it.” *Un col bleu* in Lachine can effectively be perceived as an elite above others for a few reasons: 1) when considering job scarcity, inferior wages and negligible benefits that are offered in “shopfloor” type jobs; 2) the remarkably high educational levels that are required for an individual to be able to compete in the contemporary labour

market; 3) working *pour La Ville* represents one of the most desirable jobs one can get in Lachine, and to a very serious degree, in Montréal proper. Desirable jobs change from generation to generation but the trend in Lachine continues: working-class boys get working-class jobs and *La Ville* represents the holy grail of opportunities in this working-class neighborhood (Willis 1977). However, not all is rosy on the stony shores of the Lachine Rapids as my research has revealed.

Lachine Now: Class Dynamics

Post-deindustrialized Lachine is as stratified as it was during its more youthful days. During the lucrative era of fur trade and before Khanawake became an Indian reserve, it was widely recognized that Lachine's socialites and businessmen lived in the west (upper Lachine) and the labourers lived in the east part of town (lower Lachine). This configuration is still part of the community's common sense knowledge and the avenues still very much possess the power to classify a person's social standing. From 1st avenue to 15th (*le bas de Lachine*, literally "lower Lachine") one can observe the lasting effects that the closing of *the Bridge's* doors had on families: joblessness and dependency on unemployment insurance. Between 15th and 32nd the new families of the future have established themselves. 32nd avenue acts as a "zero" on an integer scale for it divides the positive from the negative, the nice part of town from "the wrong side of the tracks." The closer one gets to the West Island and Dorval's border (Lachine's immediate westerly neighbor), the closer one gets to greater material wealth, "good taste" and "old money." The immediate difference is in fact startling when compared to French-speaking, manual-labouring Lachine. Take the borough of Pointe-Claire for example: Rows of grand houses, green streets, gardens, centennial trees, small stone walls gently covered with

moss and carpets of sweet smelling flowers, pink, white, lavender, soft yellow...An emerald golf course is located on Golf street. On the course, middle aged Caucasian males all wearing khaki shorts, their legs very white and hairless, their golf shirts smudges of pastel against the flawless green. Once in awhile one of these club brandishers yells "Fore!" The houses are increasingly breathtaking as one climbs Golf Street, its roads sandwiched between splendid estates and the vastness of the golf course. One does not wish to be anywhere else, right here will do: floating between the leisure activity of the privileged and their habitats, of which some are exercises in architectural precision while others blend into their lush surroundings, harmonies of wood and stone. The women with their short, disciplined hair look like their men-folk from afar. They also wear pastels and khaki in the summer. The children of the privileged are attractive and smooth skinned, hail limbs, straight backs, barefoot in their patches of cool, springy grass. Nothing is invulnerable in life, mountains yield and oceans dry up, yet these good people possess something that is almost akin to timelessness. I have studied with some of them and at times reading anthropology has evoked similar emotions (a mixture of awe, envy, intimidation, anger and a wish to belong to *this*) as walking up this street does: one feels like an uncouth intruder who has only managed to clothe himself in a burlap sack at an elegant cocktail party. *Les Québécois, né pour un petit pain* ("born for a small bread" and the title of a television program during my mother's time) when compared to the West Island inhabitants and street names like Apple Hill, Gay Cedars and Green Circle. It is no mystery that communities like Beaconsfield or Town of Mount Royal want to keep the street names in English: they represent historical capital, prestige and distinction from French-speaking communities. It is no mystery either that they were some of the first

neighborhoods that wanted to demerge since they could maintain their distinction with impunity and because these places have deeper municipal coffers they can afford private security and/or contractors that will quickly remove their snow in winter.

As noted above, Lachine's numerical avenues are given cultural meaning which denote social position. Generally, rents increase as one ventures westward and the quality of housing also gets better. This geographic hierarchical organization has given Lachine a very eclectic and Third World look: luxurious fortresses are in close proximity to ram shackle homes. There also exists in Lachine class-based communities that actually have boundaries such as Duff Court, Village Saint-Louis and Louis Basil-Pigeon. Duff Court, or *La Duff* as *les cols bleus* call this impoverished area, is located on the East side of 32nd avenue ("the wrong side of the tracks") and is comprised of several very large bloc apartments, like those that can be found in Parc Extension (its immediate neighbor being the Town of Mount Royal and one of the most wealthy communities in Montréal) or Habitation Jeanne-Mance, a veritable ghetto constructed in the heart of downtown in the 1940s. *La Duff* shares many characteristics with these other impoverished areas: single parent families, low rent, visible minorities and unemployment. *La Duff*, amongst the young males I have worked with, possesses a kind of mythic quality: it is where *les tuffs* (the tough ones) live. Being "tough", a label used by the citizens of Lachine and *les cols bleus*, is a positive cultural value (especially among the latter group) but *La Duff* is a locus of paradoxical symbolism. It may be recognized for breeding "tough guys" but a strong racist discourse is also attached to this community within a community: visible minorities are either *des nègs* (essentially a short form of *nigger*, a deprecating descriptor lobbed at human beings who are perceived as having "dark skin"), *des races de sable*

(literally “sand races” meaning any individual perceived as being of Arabic descent), *des Pakis* (another pejorative issued for persons who are perceived as being Indian) or *des Wongs and/or les Chins-Toks* (a blanket term used for any “Asian looking” people). There are Caucasians that also make *La Duff* their home however they are also classified: they are known as *des BS* (an acronym for *bien-être social* or a person receiving welfare payments). Young Caucasian girls who live in *La Duff*, be they French-Canadian or English, are depicted as being “easy”, meaning that they are sexually active at a young age and are perceived as not being selective of their sexual partners. Many of the young *cols bleus* I have worked with have lived in *La Duff*. Sauvageau, one of my main informants, grew up in that community and harbors *des beaux souvenirs d'enfance* (pleasant childhood memories). Sauvageau, a very serious bodybuilder and ex high school basketball athlete, is often referred to by other *cols bleus* as the one who “survived *La Duff*.” *La Duff* is reputed as having cheap rent and this has enabled many of the guys to make use of a recognized strategy: they find a cheap room and live there for a bit while saving up money in order to pursue other projects. Many of my coworkers who moonlight as seasoned drug dealers built up a portion of their capital this way. This strategy is economic and it is through this particular lens that living in *La Duff* becomes an enabling agent instead of a disabling one. *La Duff* is also separated into two different areas characterized by different purchasing power: those living in the South part, on Provost Street enjoy more financial security than the residents of the Northern section.

La Duff's complete opposite would have to be Village Saint-Louis (also known as *La Prével*), a community that was built on an old golf course. The West Island it is not, however certain similarities are echoed: an abundance of green spaces, ponds and creeks,

shade providing trees, quaint paths and quiet residential streets. The difference in home structure is that wealthier West Islanders have homes that are unique and ancient while *La Prével* is largely composed of nondescript, albeit well-built homes. *La Prével*, like its poorer counterpart *La Duff*, is an enclave of class. It overlooks *Parc Grovehill* with its gigantic green hump. This park is one of the many locations that *l'équipe du gazon* (the grass cutting crew) cut and *cols bleus* often pejoratively call it *Negro-ville* because there is a basketball court often being used by young African Canadian males.

Another series of large bloc apartments face the park's southern side and across the 32nd divide (Highway 20 can be reached by going North on 32nd), heading East, is *Le Maxi* (a big franchise supermarket store with a neo yellow color scheme) and *Les Galleries Lachine*, which can be best described as being a run-down mini mall where the old-timers meet one another to gossip. *Le Maxi* provides "cheaper" food prices than its rival IGA and some of *les cols bleus* that I have worked with have stated that only *les BS* shop there. IGA is another franchise supermarket however it has experienced a bit of a class oriented rebirth in Lachine. There used to be two IGAs in Lachine: one on Notre Dame Street and another on Victoria Street. The owner of the IGA on Victoria decided to move closer to Remembrance Street and to establish a monstrous supermarket that targeted a different class: the new well-to-do families that have been moving to Lachine and are changing its demographic. The new IGA followed a much more refined aesthetic and signaled the death knell for the smaller, less aesthetically pleasing IGA on Notre Dame. A few crack-emaciated prostitutes used to skulk around the parking lot of the new IGA and enter the supermarket to buy *des quilles* (literally meaning "bowling pins", a local term for big bottles of usually very strong beer). The manager called the police

several times until the prostitutes moved out. Young, fresh faced high school students are often employed at this modern-styled IGA, while the “dropouts” find work at *Le Maxi* or McDonalds. At the IGA, cashiers are mostly female while baggers are always male. The cashiers at *Le Maxi* are friendlier and are reputed for being flirtatious with male customers.

La Prével has been experiencing developmental growth as more homes are built and the aesthetic of the community is refined. It was not a rare thing to hear fellow coworkers dreamily talk about one day living *dans 'Prével* or listing the girls that they had been with who had hailed from those green streets of hope. On the other hand, when cutting grass *pour La Ville*, it was not rare to hear the same dreamers complain about the very same streets because of their labyrinthine nature and also because the inhabitants complain at the slightest imperfection, especially if grass clippings are found in the various bodies of water.

Louis Basil-Pigeon is representative of recent residential development and of middle-class housing. It is located to the North of *La Duff* and in close proximity to Highway 20. Young families live there for it is a peaceable spot. There are duplexes as well as single family houses; however large bloc apartments do not exist there. New housing has been built on Victoria as well as on Notre Dame that mirrors Basil-pigeon's aesthetic and condominiums are always sprouting somewhere at a constant rate. Because of these new families and professional couples, a European-style food market was constructed on Notre Dame in a bid to attract business and also to attempt to reinvigorate the town's pulse. Gourmet French bakeries and cafes are trying to gain a foothold into the economy but this is still proving to be difficult. Life for small businesses is a precarious

affair. Notre Dame, and much of Lachine for that matter, is a landscape of “blue chip” businesses: garages, *dépanneurs* (the ubiquitous corner store that is as much of a cultural institution as are taverns and churches) and hair/tanning salons.

There are three choices for *l'école secondaire* (high school) in Lachine and all three possess differing qualities—which of course have all been placed in hierarchical order. Most of the young blue-collarers have attended *Dalbé Viau Secondaire*, a francophone public school that has recently made a type of low profile “uniform” (black pants and white polo shirts with their school’s football logo on the left breast) obligatory. Some of the drug dealers learned the ropes of their trade at that school and have fond memories of being popular, wealthy and being able to exercise their largess by funding extravagant parties and were able to *payer la traite* to their friends. *Payer la traite* is a perfect example of the expressive richness and paradoxical nature that exists in the French-Canadian language: firstly, it can be meant as an act of generosity—to treat one’s friends to a beer, for instance, and secondly it can be meant as a threat—the beer is replaced with a closed fist and *la soupe aux dents* (teeth soup) becomes the main dish. *Dalbé* is known as a “tough school”; however it boasts an excellent football program: *Les Aigles d’Or* (the golden eagles) is the name of their team. Sauvageau once told me how he and his friends would sometimes play football against *les Anglais* from *le haut de Lachine* (the wealthier sector) and get in their licks. *Dalbé* boasts 950 students, the average revenue of parents is \$45,100 and there is a failure rate of 29.3%. Grade wise, female students outperform male students.

If Duff Court represents a kind of complete opposite from *La Prével* then *Le Collège Sainte-Anne* is the Yin to *Dalbé*’s Yang. *Sainte-Anne* is where the parents who

have money send their children to get a good start in life and to make friends with the right children. It is a private francophone school and the five years of secondary education will cost a hefty \$10,000. There is also an entry exam. Surprisingly enough, some of my coworkers have attended this school and do not hide the fact that they did: not all made it to the *secondaire cinq* (secondary school ends after the completion of the fifth year) finishing line, however some have, and those that did state that it is an excellent school. Their praise ends abruptly when the classic finishing line is uttered with finality and snarling humor: “But look where it got me! I work for the fucking city now!” What is important about this self-deprecating ribbing is that the *raconteur* (literally “story teller”, see chapter 6) is intimately aware of the cultural value that the school possesses: it is private, it is costly, it is renowned as a respectable institution and those that go there are *supposed* to become something “better” than *un col bleu*. Two oppositional cultures arise from the seemingly droll statement: the implied crassness of belonging to *Le Centre Technique*’s work force and the cultivated stance that *Sainte-Anne* was meant to inculcate. Of chief interest is the class conscious spirit that lies at the heart of the statement and *les cols bleus* know exactly what it means to live in *La Prével* or in Dorval or what it signifies to have gone to *Dalbé* when compared to the explicit cultural and class capital involved with having gone to *Sainte-Anne*. 1,175 students attend *Sainte-Anne* and the average revenue of parents is \$80,700. The failure rate is 1.6% and female students outperform male students.

Collège Saint-Louis represents a middle path choice: it is an international, francophone public school, burgundy uniforms are the rule and the entry exam is renowned as being more exigent than *Sainte-Anne*’s. *Saint-Louis* is depicted in Lachine

as being the intellectual's choice of institution. One of my coworkers attended this school and states that Sainte-Anne provides one with an inferior education while *Saint-Louis* obligates students to take "advanced classes." The student body is composed of 925 souls, the average parental revenue is \$60,400, the failure rate is 1.9% and female students outperform once again their male counterparts.

There is a fourth choice, however this is an Anglophone public school and no one attended that particular institution except for myself for one year many moons ago. It was once known as Lachine High and has since then attempted to improve its image by changing its name to Lakeside Academy and having the students wear uniforms. I use to get my head smashed in by the older and bigger students. It was a school of hard knocks. 696 students attend Lakeside, average parental revenue earmarked at \$55,200, there is a failure rate of 51.4%, males outperform female students.

Schools, residential areas as well as where one is situated on the overall social positioning of Lachine's avenue-integer are all culturally meaningful indicators that are part of the blue-collar world. My coworkers have given values to educational institutions as well as residential areas: a discursive space is developed and values are produced and distributed, at times in a very arbitrary manner. It is part of Lachine's common sense knowledge, a method of operating, perceiving and being in the world. Lachine is a de-industrialized town and work is not plentiful, the service sector now providing the vast majority of jobs and small businesses holding on for dear life in the face of larger competitors. Living here is not easy and *travailler pour La Ville* represents an excessively rare opportunity for young males with little education. Some blue-collarers acknowledge Lachine's charms like *le bord de l'eau* during spring and summer and the old stone

buildings, however they also state that it is a “tough little town.” “*Lachine c’est bandit*” (literally meaning that Lachine is full of crooks or rogues) and “*C’est tuff à Lachine*” (Lachine is tough) are commonly articulated opinions by youngsters that have been brought up in Lachine. “Toughness”, as a cultural element, is probably best described as being part of common sense knowledge and a positive value is attached to its various articulations amongst the males I have worked with. It could be placed in opposition to “high brow culture”, at the opposite spectrum of bourgeois concerns and mores, however this would be perilous and misleading since it would implicitly connote that higher classes do not possess common sense knowledge—a false assumption to make (Warren 2001, Gutmann 1996, Sider 1986). To state that Lachine is “tough” is far from a dehumanizing statement, it is simply meant as a descriptive statement. It can be seen in the way that people speak, the way they move and the way in which they perceive their world: their tools are powerful, easy to use and simplify what is usually complex—in other words they exercise common sense knowledge (Power 2005, Dunk 1991).

Selling drugs is also part of common sense, and this illicit economy was undeniably present in my fieldwork site. *Les cols bleus* sell and use drugs and this creates a veritable second paycheck for some of my coworkers. Most of my young coworkers use drugs that are associated with a hedonistic jet-set approach to leisure: cocaine, speed and ecstasy possessing positive cultural value when consumed. Cocaine is often referred to as *la ching-a-wing* or *d’la poud’e* (a shortened form or pronunciation for *poudre* or “powder”). Speed, taken in capsules and tablets is alluded to as *des peanuts*, an oddly derived codename from snack food. Crystal meth is also gaining in popularity because of its relative cheapness compared to cocaine. Alcohol, marijuana and hashish are important

“soft drugs” and are widely perceived as being acceptable social drugs. A popular drug to sell is cocaine in its powder form which is consumed by sniffing quantities in one’s nostrils or “crack cocaine” which is often called *du crack* or *d’la roche* and is essentially cocaine that has undergone a process of cooking. Cocaine is mixed into a vat of cold water containing baking soda and the chemical reaction that ensues creates formations that appear as uneven white pebbles that can be smoked using a glass pipe (Bourgeois 1995). *Du crack* is not a popular drug to consume amongst *les cols bleus* and it is preferably sold in order to make hefty profits. Cocaine in its powder form, on the other hand, is very popular and weekends are planned around its consumption. Nights that are dedicated to snorting cocaine mixed with speed with a dash of ecstasy and alcohol binging are called *des tempêtes de neiges*, literally meaning “snow storms.” These hedonistic undertakings are expensive, severely damaging health wise and can lead to addiction (putting a young *col bleu*’s career on the line due to exhaustion and absenteeism and/or running the risk of being labeled as “morally weak willed”), however binging is still perceived as being acceptable and successful binges are well received from the audience. Great feats of alcohol drinking and drug usage can only gain renown if the participants produce lavish tales of their escapades. Social resources are awarded when certain culturally meaningful activities are conducted or cultural markers are correctly displayed then transformed into amusing tales: precisely what *le raconteur* excels at when aggrandizing his social estates and letting his fanciful boasts out to pasture (see chapter 6).

The Historical Moment: Mergers and Newspaper Exposés

The historical moment represents an important element to my research and this is due to the fact that I actually experienced firsthand the transitional period that the field site was currently engaged in. This meant that the blue-collar cultural world in the City of Lachine was experiencing a shift that was nothing short of being dramatic. This cultural change had to do with the old meritocratic system being supplanted by the newer seniority system. Before discussing what this change meant and still means for *les cols bleus* two issues must be discussed: the City of Montréal's merger/demerger process is important for establishing the political climate and the newspaper exposés that attached a specific value to blue-collar manual labour are also important concerning the impact they had on the population and on the cultural world of *les cols bleus* in Lachine.

Until 2001, *Île de Montréal* (the island of Montreal) was divided into 28 municipalities: the city of Montréal proper, and 27 independent municipalities. On the 1st of January 2002, the 28 previously independent municipalities of the island of Montréal (27 municipalities along with Montréal proper) were merged into a single entity under Law 170 by *Le Parti Québécois*. The slogan for this restructuring strategy was *Une île, une ville* (one island, one city). Montréal was divided into 27 *arrondissements* or boroughs (it is sheer coincidence that there were 27 pre-merger municipalities and 27 reconfigured boroughs) in charge of local administration, while the city above them was responsible for larger matters such as transportation issues. In many areas *les arrondissements* did not correspond to the former "shape" of the municipalities, boundaries being redrawn in order to incorporate the new configuration.

During this period I was not yet employed as *un col-bleu d'la Ville*: I was employed by an ambitious French-speaking contractor who cut grass during the summer and removed snow in winter. The company was called *Daniel Robert et Fils*, paid \$8.50/hr as a starting salary and operated in many municipalities such as Outremont, St. Léonard (their base of operations was located in this Northern Italian speaking municipality) and Dorval. I was part of a crew that worked in Dorval (the West Island) and it was not rare to see City of Dorval *col bleu* crew trucks with decals on their trailer gates stating “*le virus d'une île*”—a clever play on words signaling discontentment vis-à-vis the mergers by incorporating the concern for the West Nile virus that reached a somewhat pitched level that summer—citizens were often reminded via radio broadcasts to report any dead birds to health board authorities who felt that the density of feathered victims in specific areas offered a way of tracking any inroads that the virus may have achieved.

The province-wide PQ-initiated Law 170 resulted in the merging of many municipalities that had operated independently from Montréal. Merging was ideologically constructed by its proponents as a way of streamlining and synchronizing the municipalities. Merging in a bid for improved efficiency was not a Québec-only scheme, this also occurred in other Canadian cities such as Toronto which also annexed its neighboring municipalities in 1998 to form the GTA (Greater Toronto Area). As happened elsewhere in Canada, the mergers experienced criticism and became a highly contested topic. Merging meant that predominantly English-speaking municipalities, such as Town of Mount Royal (TMR) and Beaconsfield, would be arm-barred into mingling with the predominantly French-speaking Ville de Montréal: a veritable shotgun wedding

that the more affluent communities did not wish to experience. The ensuing reaction was to demand that all municipalities, which had now become *arrondissements* or boroughs, be allowed to organize referendums in order to demerge if they wished to do so. Many municipalities did not want to pay higher taxes and lose control of their tax money to *La Ville de Montréal*, that they perceived as managing a municipal budget more poorly than did their councils before. The Liberal Party of Québec used this exclusion-oriented concern as one of their political platform's lynchpins during their campaign. At the provincial elections of April 2003, the Liberal Party defeated *Le Parti Québécois*, a significant deed to accomplish, and on June 20th of 2004 demerger referendums were held throughout Québec permitted by the creation of Law 9. However, demerging was not without its consequences: the "distinct fifteen" would experience curtailed powers (when compared to those they had previously enjoyed before the mergers of 2002) and heavier taxation, given the fact that the recreated municipalities incurred substantial financial costs. Many decision-making powers would thus remain with the City of Montreal's board members.

Jane Cowel Poitras, Lachine's president of intercultural relations, explains what Law 170 signified for Lachine:

I was against the mergers when they were first proposed, but then once it became law, it became a question of making the best of a bad situation. It [demerging] would also prove to be quite expensive, since the processing system has been transformed...In Lachine, it [merging] really didn't change as dramatically as it did in other places...after all Lachine was Lachine, we had already merged with Ville St. Pierre [another working-class neighbourhood located to the East of Lachine and part of les cols-bleus' worksite sphere] and so therefore we became the borough [arrondissement] of Lachine. Now we have three people: two city councillors and one borough councillor. In our case it [the merger] isn't as good because before we had 11 people to cover the territory of Lachine and now we only have three; it is difficult for P.R., you don't go out there and get seen by the electorate, you have a lot of trouble in getting re-elected...

Here the contrast is striking to the municipalities that demerged as Lachine's experience becomes one that is marked by pragmatics: "a question of making the best out of a bad situation." Demerging possesses a class-conscious thrust, however as stated by Poitras, the merger suddenly saw Lachine's political labour pool decrease by a third, there is also the certainty that certain municipalities were based upon an ecosystem of established networks and privileges, in other words a political economy existed and experienced a deracination when all became part of Montréal's civic space through Law 170. Privileges and municipal ways of seeing their business through suddenly faced a complete reconfiguration. Poitras seems to have been implying that Lachine, on the political and administrative level, was a municipality that benefitted from a more than adequate team of town hall officials. A municipality like TMR on the other hand seems to have benefitted from a healthy budget as attests their usage of a private police force as well as streets free of potholes. What Poitras had to say about their potholes, a craterous problem that afflicts roads in Québec, representing the No. 1 issue in 2005's autumnal city elections and that was also at the center of the newspaper exposes:

The city councilors of TMR were explaining to me that 'til the mergers, every 10 years the streets were repaved, and not just the repaving itself, I mean they did the whole bed of the road, so no street ever went longer than 10 years without being paved...you're not seeing too many potholes on that side of town, whereas in other municipalities that were part of the former city of Montreal, they didn't have money for doing roads...

In the February 22nd 2006 issue of The Gazette two short columns illustrate the different economic status of different municipalities. In Outremont, an *arrondissement* of 42 kilometers of sidewalk that did not demerge, the sidewalks are salted and ice free, offering pedestrians safe footing. The mayor claims that it is so due to preventive measures in the form of a privately contracted company, not blue-collar workers. The

mayor explains that this has been made possible by “savings” that are placed in a snow-removal reserve. In NDG, another un-demerged arrondissement (but with much more sidewalk: 420 kilometers or 10 times more than Outremont), the sidewalks are encased in ice and perilous. The mayor states that because there is a lack of funds, the borough is at the mercy of les cols-bleus and it cannot compete service-wise with its richer neighbors. The mayor of NDG also mentions “historic budgets” that have been retained even with the new configurations that the 2002 merger has produced. While the mayor of Outremont accredits the de-iced sidewalks of his borough to “preventive maintenance” and not to affluence, the mayor of NDG is aware of the limitations that are imposed upon his borough due to lack of capital.

What about Montréal-Est with 87% of its population being French-speakers? This municipality also chose to demerge yet it cannot lay claim to the same type of Anglo-centric historical capital as Baie d’Urfé or Dorval. Three large oil refineries are located in Montréal-Est’s district: Shell Canada, Petro Canada and Gulf Oil Canada Ltd. Perhaps this leans more towards the possibility that a political economy of established networks and privileges existed there and that those who were benefitting wanted to keep it that way...after all, this municipality that never made the transition to that of arrondissement represents the only community with a French-speaking majority.

Le Journal de Montréal, regarded by many as being a tabloid that appeals to the lowest common denominator (when compared to *Le Devoir* or *La Presse*, which, however, do not enjoy the readership that *Le Journal* does), was the first newspaper to produce an exposé concerning the manual labour supplied by a group of cols bleus working for *Le Département de la Voirie* (roadwork department) filling potholes (or *des*

nids de poules, literally meaning hen's nests) in the Ville-Marie arrondissement on the 8th of February 2006 and was based on the findings produced by an "internal city probe" (The Gazette Feb 9, 2006 A6). Ville-Marie comprises all of downtown Montréal, the *Centre-Sud* area, much of *Parc Mont Royal*, *l'île Saint Hélène* and *l'île Notre-Dame*. The investigators followed a group of *cols bleus* from January 23rd to the 25th (the workers laboured on three different shifts) and found their productivity to be subpar. The *dossier choc* (shocking article) stated that long hours inside of warm restaurants was often a favored method of whiling away the day instead of actually filling potholes, the work the crew was supposed to be performing. *Le Journal* stated that in 90 hours nine potholes had been filled in the Ville-Marie borough and that the quality of work was shoddy. One crew spent 6 minutes in a 9 hour shift working and managed to fill 3 of the 9 holes slotted for filling. *Le Journal* also stated that the probe showed a lackadaisical attitude among a *minority of workers*—an important and sensitive addition to the information. Jean-Yves Hinse, the city's personnel director declared a "zero tolerance" policy for non-productivity, a statement that served as precursor to the augmented surveillance that outdoor Lachine worksites would experience in the following years. A *Gazette* columnist calculated each pothole costing taxpayers \$220 to repair. The relationship between "taxpayer" and *col-bleu* produces an image that is loaded with significance and that most well-meaning individuals adhere to, after all imagery is often linked to discourse (Hall 1996). The taxpayer, in the *col bleu* context, is depicted as a "good worker" (which s/he is in most cases) who dutifully pays tribute to the government (again in most cases, however there are many loopholes available for the affluent). Michel Parent, president of *Local 301* (and still is in 2008) allocated blame to the inefficient administration of *les*

arrondissements and also argued that the investigation represented a tactic to exploit existing prejudices aimed at *les cols bleus*.

17 days after *Le Journal's dossier choc*, on the 25th of January 2006, The Gazette, not to be outdone by a tabloid, decided to jump on the band wagon and conducted an investigation of its own. Leading to the January 25th Gazette article, were a series of articles (February 9th [which appears above], 14th, 22nd, 23rd and 24th, 2006) relating to *les cols bleus* that are of interest to the thesis as are the series of post-Gazette investigation articles (February 20th, 26th, March 2nd, 21st and May 17th, 2006). In 2002, municipalities were not the only ones to experience merging; more than 20 blue-collar unions were fused with *Local 301* of the C.U.P.E. (Canadian Union of Public Employees) which is affiliated to the F.T.Q. (Fédération des Travailleurs[euses] du Québec). On January 1st of 2006, 15 municipalities were allowed to demerge after having been granted the right to hold referendums on June 20th of 2004. However, the mega-union that had also been created by Lucien Bouchard's *Parti Québécois* did not have this option. It was in the newly merged union's interest not to demerge because its vastly increased membership gave it more political clout. The pickup trucks that are driven by *les cols bleus* (*les camions d'la Ville*, meaning trucks designated for blue-collar usage in Lachine) are not only discursive sites (see chapter 5), they also serve as mobile political signage. I remember during my first year of labour as *un col-bleu* in the spring of 2004, seeing large blue and red decals on the sides and trailer gates of vehicles making the following announcement: "Défusion=Confusion" (original underscoring). The slogan, of political nature, declares that to demerge would lead to (or "equal" in this case) confusion, however the equation does not end there—the underscoring of the letters "C-O-N"

produces a play on words (or a word within a word) where “con” means stupidity or intellectual inadequacy. Therefore to demerge would be confusing as well as “stupid.” In order to remove the large decals the administration must call in a company that specializes in the removal of adhesive signs and graffiti. The newly configured mega-union pleased its top brass, but as the municipal mergers unbalanced the existing political economy of communities, the same occurred on the level of *les Travaux Publics* (public works) within each municipality. There is no doubt that for some *Travaux Publics* the merger was beneficial and that for others it created an effect of cultural deracination as the prior “way of doing things” significantly changed. This was the case in Lachine.

In the February 22nd, 23rd and 24th issues of The Gazette (2006) there are a few interesting insights. On A3 of the February 22nd issue there is a report pertaining to a two hour protest of 2,000 members of *Local 301* in front of Montréal’s city hall. The protest was largely due to the harmonization of wages that occurred after the 2002 mergers and a perceived disparity thereof. The city treated the protest as an illegal wildcat strike. While other unionized city employees saw their salaries increase by 11.5% over 5 years, *les cols bleus* received raises of about 8% over a 3 year period. In Lachine the pay raises for auxiliary workers were only initiated in the last quarter of 2004. The other major reason for the protest was to draw attention to the work week’s organization: amount of hours worked per week and amount of workdays that made up the workweek. For *l’ancienne* (pre-merger) *Ville de Montréal* workweeks were configured as follows: 35 hours of labour conducted along a 4 day week. There were also protests of an internal nature as was once demonstrated by an older *col bleu* who sermonized the younger workers in the cantina in my 2005 season. The auxiliary workers were vocal concerning their augmented

purchasing power and an older worker reminded them (with no small amount of yelling) that if their wages had increased it was because the benefits for permanent workers (like him) had been significantly diminished. When chatting with the older workers concerning *La Convention Collective de 2004* (the collective bargaining agreement of 2004) many stated that young workers did not deserve to have their wages increased since *y' font rien d'leur dix doigts* (“they have idle hands”, in other words they *are representatives of mediocre work ethics*). Amongst the younger workers, such as the ones that make up *Le Département des Espaces Verts*' workforce, the 2004 *Convention Collective* that was imposed by an arbitrator is affectionately called *Le Torchon*, literally meaning a rag that is used for wiping up messes and locally it also signifies a piece of soiled toilet paper. The reason behind this colorful slight was that their pay raises did not follow the salary augmentations that other public workers experienced.

In the February 23rd issue, a follow-up to *Le Journal*'s February 8 *dossier choc*, the ten lackadaisical *cols bleus* were suspended for “a couple of days without pay.” The columnist supports the notion of outsourcing services to contractors as a method of improving *col bleu* performance. A rare perspective to be offered, the columnist reports that many *cols bleus* are tired of *Local 301*'s militant tactics and “want to work for their money.” The February 24th issue sees the commencement of the Québec Essential Services Council (QESC) hearings into the wildcat strike considering that striking only becomes a viable recourse for blue-collar workers when the existing contract expires on August 31st 2007. The *arrondissement de Lachine* lead the strike with 91% of its *cols bleus* walking out. They threw roses upon the steps of the city hall to symbolize the wish to negotiate peacefully, however the “illegal strike” had caused many complications

regarding de-icing, the maintenance of damaged water mains and garbage pick-up—services that are of a crucial nature in winter. In the March 2nd 2006 issue of The Gazette the QESC charged 1,600 *cols bleus* of “illegal striking” and a conviction on contempt of court can result in a fine of up to \$5,000 or one year in prison.

In the February 25th issue (The Gazette’s response to *Le Journal*’s printing of the *dossier choc*) Gazette personnel conducted a 2 day investigation by randomly choosing 2 crews and tailing them. The Gazette team found that the randomly chosen crews espoused a “casual work ethic” which included 2 hour long lunch breaks, gross over manning (“one person could have done the entire job”), poor quality work, private shopping sprees, constant coffee breaks and misuse of city vehicles “aimlessly wandering around the city.” It was observed covertly by The Gazette team that 20 minutes of actual labour were completed within a 6 hour period. The investigation was concluded when The Gazette vehicle was surrounded by *des camions d’la Ville* and intimidated by a salvo of horn honking and cussing: the gig was up and the spies had been discovered. The Gazette report concluded that the administration was lax in surveillance and that productivity amongst *les cols bleus* in *La Ville de Montréal* was dismally represented.

In the February 26th issue of The Gazette, Michel Parent, current president of *Local 301 (le syndicat des cols bleus, the blue-collar union)*, contested the damning exposés that had focused upon *col bleu* productivity and the criticisms produced by their city-paralyzing pressure tactics, such as slowing down labour efforts pertaining to sidewalk de-icing and snow removal. Parent, who had boasted in the February 24th issue that the union could put the city in a choke hold if need arose, blamed the apparent lackadaisical work ethics on the city management: in other words, the administration.

Parent stated that it was the administration's bungling of manual labour organization that slowed down pothole repairs: if *les nids-de-poules* need to be fixed "80% of the workforce should be put to it, not just a few crews". Jean Lapierre, former president of *Local 301*, chose a different strategy to denounce the monolithic depiction of workers by articulating the need for reporters to also observe "hard working" crews and that by focusing on a few rotten apples the entire *col bleu* work ethic was being painted as slothful. Lapierre added that every business was plagued by a few "bad workers", but that blue-collars are in position to be continuously scrutinized. Finally, the former president of the union made a statement that the older male *cols bleus* often echo: the laggards were playing into the hands of those who advocate the privatization of essential services. This statement, although sounding plausible, is rather ironic when considering that the initiation of pressure tactics come from union top brass, such as Parent. Pressure tactics are not only about actively deciding not to de-ice and salt sidewalks. They are also about slowing down labour, a more passive, but ultimately viable approach to advancing the union's cause, however an approach that can easily become habit forming and part of the worksite's hegemonic code of conduct, especially when seniority is involved. Therefore, if "foot dragging" (Scott 1985) and proponents of lackadaisical attitudes towards work are unwittingly playing into the hands of city council hawks, according to Parent, how should the union be held accountable when it issues orders to slow the work pace at a consistent crawl? Parent's statement is constructed to appear good-natured by effacing the complexity of the situation: the rotten apples are to be blamed, but if fruit are perishing quickly perhaps it has to do with the tree they grow on. City council hawks perceive outsourcing essential services as being cheaper (also a popular view amongst the

citizenry as well as some *cols bleus*) since there are no benefits, *worker's compensation* (*la CSST—Commission de la Santé et de la Sécurité du Travail*) or pension plans to pay into.

In the March 21st issue of The Gazette, the columnist refers to the counter-productive nature of staff rules, cluttered municipal garages that contribute to late starts in the morning and outdoor crews that prove to be consistently problematic due to the logistical reality that defies the possibility of constant surveillance from the foreman or department bosses. Hinse speaks once more of a “zero tolerance” policy that will tighten management, counter non-productivity and act with more sternness vis-à-vis dismissals and suspensions. There were 16 firings in 2004 and 17 in 2005 and Hinse states that these figures are much higher than previous years.

A study conducted by Angelo Soares (a professor at UQUAM's management school) appearing in the May 17, 2006 issue of The Gazette is interesting for a few reasons. The union mailed a questionnaire to its blue-collar members; there was a response rate of 15%. The study shows that 40% of *cols bleus* showed elevated levels of psychological stress, almost twice the Québec average observes the columnist, 16% suffered from depression, 23% of despair and 22% had suicidal thoughts. Soares found that most problems related to organizational aspects of work, such as employees not receiving constructive feedback for their efforts or being humiliated by figures of authority within the workplace, and the media portrayals of *cols bleus* combined with citizen reactions. Soares' study is important for it draws attention to feelings that media exposés often leave out. My thesis is also important for it furthers findings based upon the *col bleu* experience by basing its exploration upon 20 months of participant

observation. My participant observation as an employee has sought to uncover the more nuanced and subtle variations of the workplace experience—something that a questionnaire might be unable to achieve in the most favorable conditions.

The controversial career of Jean Lapierre, who has become a legendary personage within *col bleu* folklore, is illuminating. My discussion here is not to generate a critique of Lapierre's leadership but rather to look at certain elements that are part of the cultural imaginings and underpinnings of what it means to be *un bon col bleu* (a blue-collar who is good *at being a man* and not necessarily *a good man* [Herzfeld 1985], an undeniably important social and cultural resource amongst some of my young coworkers). Lapierre's actions are often met with approval amongst the young as well as older male *cols bleus* in Lachine; the bronze bust in his honor that decorates the entrance of *Local 301* at 9650 on Papineau Street suggests that enough public workers of *La Ville de Montréal* also approve. Lapierre's actions display the prestige of imprisonment (the hero's lament, see also chapter 6), violence as a viable resource, promoting the "union cause" while discouraging contrary perspectives and alliance building with figures of authority are all part of this. These elements create a particular discourse—a stylized rendering of masculinity and an accompanying celebration of it; after all, females who "step out of line" are often punished (at times mortally so) instead of aggrandized "twice their size" to borrow one of Virginia Wolfe's piquant wordplays.

Lapierre was president of SCFP (*syndicat des cols bleus regroupés de Montréal*) from 1985 to 2003. In 1999, Lapierre along with Secretary-treasurer Denis Maynard of *Local 301* were imprisoned, following a sentence, to six months each on rioting and conspiracy charges arising from a violent protest held in 1993. The demonstration was

held at *l'hôtel de ville de Montréal* (City Hall) to oppose Bill 102, a legislation passed in 1993 that allowed municipalities to cut wages by 1% and to freeze salary levels for two years (<http://cupe.ca>). The protest was a physical one and had been orchestrated by Lapierre. It involved a group of *cols bleus* outfitted in protective hockey equipment (helmets, pads, gloves) that served as makeshift armor and wielding improvised battering rams. *Les cols bleus* clashed with police officers in anti-riot gear and managed to storm City Hall causing \$35,000 worth of damage wherein *Local 301* was held accountable for restitutions. Lapierre and Maynard's six-month prison term lasted 29 days.

On April 7, 2000, Lapierre retired and handpicked Michel Parent (then vice-president of *Local 301* and a welder by profession) to take his place at the helm of the SCFP at *Local 301*. With Lapierre's blessing, Parent defeats his sole competitor with 90% of the votes in his favor. Lapierre retains tactical proximity to Parent therefore maintaining decision making power within the union as well as protest orchestration and he is given the honorary title of "lifelong union member." In Parent's case, his upgraded post was very much inherited and this underscores the importance of networking and position jockeying within the blue-collar cultural world although the current seniority regime paradoxically frowns upon such activities. On the other hand, one could effectively argue that networking, nepotism, throat cutting and brown nosing are part and parcel of power struggles and are present wherever one may tread. That assumption is fair enough and likely enough, however here I am interested in the particular techniques of exclusion and inclusion that are present within the fieldwork site that I chose. The construction of alliances—whether by espousing a stance that promotes union ideology (seniority) or by a method of cooperating with other meritocratic young males within the

workplace—is an essential part of a political economy that is active in Lachine’s *col bleu* cultural world even though the newly configured reign of seniority has created a hegemonic ordering that is experienced through an articulation that is both implicit (a silent code or *way of doing things right*) and explicit (verbal warnings and social ostracizing).

In 2000 Lapierre and a group of *cols bleus* disrupt a *Parti Québécois* meeting in order to oppose the oncoming 2002 municipal mergers being perceived at that moment in time by union top brass as affording a foothold for proponents of privatization that would make the outsourcing of public labour easier. As was stated above, while merging the municipalities, the PQ also merged more than 20 unions with *Local 301*’s Public Works blue-collar workers. In The Gazette issue of March 22, 2006, the figure for blue-collar workers is 4,800 for *La Ville de Montréal* (this includes merged municipalities that have become *des arrondissements*) and another 725 in the 15 demerged suburbs totaling more than 5,500 members. This figure more or less correlates with membership figures given to me by coworkers and older *cols bleus* in Lachine. In the May 17, 2006 issue a *Gazette* columnist pins down the number of employees from various unions in *La Ville de Montréal* at 22,000. The exact figure for the new *Local 301* mega-union is unclear since the new membership does not include every employee from the 22,000 labour pool. That said, it is not off a political bull’s eye to state that once *Local 301*’s top brass understood that the mergers would give them an edge, for example more clout vis-à-vis the application of pressure tactics and collective bargaining, a leash was put on any further protests: after all one should not look a gift horse in the mouth. However, as many older *cols bleus* have remarked, it is possible that the union’s collective bargaining will play against the future

of *les cols bleus* and precipitate them towards privatization as the effects of seniority over meritocracy are felt as has been the case in Lachine. In his book entitled America's Working Man: Work, Home, and Politics Among Blue-Collar Property Owners, David Halle observes that the union is perceived among workers at Imperium (a chemical plant in New Jersey) as being a "necessary evil" (1984:175). While the union promotes "solidarity", a culturally important expression of the interests workers have in common and in opposition to those of management, as well as security and better pay, it is also viewed in negative ways (*Ibid*). The union protects the jobs of incompetent workers, can slow an ambitious worker's chances of promotion, is "corrupt" and excessive demands can lead to plant closure (*Ibid*).

Strong arm tactics and a bronze bust are not Lapierre's only legacies though; the tenuous nature surrounding his departure from presidential position and his continuing involvement with the union fuelled many controversies amongst both union members and the media. There are allegations that Lapierre was granted the luxury of negotiating his own benefit-laden contract upon leaving *Local 301's* presidency to Parent and he waged a legalistic battle against his disciple's competition, Serge Lapointe, during the 2006 union presidency elections. Lapierre charged Lapointe, before the end of March electoral results, with a \$150,000 law suit for defamation. The accusation stemmed from the interception of confidential conversations and paystubs relating to Lapierre's self-negotiated salaried retirement package (<http://lcn.canoe.ca>). The legal fees of this Lapierre-sponsored protest were defrayed by the union. The accusations made for an effective smear campaign that deflated Lapointe's presidential running and discouraged

union members from giving him their votes. Parent, along with Lapierre, remain in power in 2008.

Methodology

Methodological strategies were directly shaped by my status as a legitimately employed *col bleu* working in Lachine's *Département des Espaces Verts* as a member of the grass cutting crew and as a member of an old Lachine family. I was hired based upon my previous experience with a contractor doing the same kind of work. The thesis is based upon 20 months of fieldwork: 2 full seasons of six months each from May to November in 2004 and 2007 and 2 part seasons of four months each from May to September in 2005 and 2006. During my first year in 2004 I became interested in the way in which my partner, Arsenault, was treated by other members of the department. Many perceived Arsenault's work ethics to be "too productive" and to run counter to what was supposedly "the right way to work". These sentiments were being articulated during a period of change, a structural shift, in Lachine's Public Works: pressure tactics were being used generously (the slowing down of production for instance) and many were speaking of a "system of seniority" which was to be implemented for the new year of 2005. During my job interview with Honorine (a pseudonym), the female head of the department, I was specifically instructed that I would be working with Arsenault because she thought that my several years of contractor labour would give me a common work ethic with my future partner. Thus, I came to be known during my first year as *un bon travailant* or a "good worker", effectively categorizing me as being a person who was sympathetic to management, an attitude that was seen by workers like Meloche as being docile and against union interests. I soon found myself caught between two oppositional

common sense ideologies that significantly complicated fieldwork. It was necessary to attempt to balance both *meritocracy* (a term designated to “Arsenault’s work ethic”) as well as *seniority* in order to keep my job which had also transformed itself into my fieldwork and to be able to construct productive relationships with the young males who worked in the department.

I tended not to take any notes in public or ask intrusive questions during my fieldwork. I began to jot notes in a stall in the men’s washroom during breaks and found it generally more useful to take part in discussions instead of asking direct questions. I once vaguely talked about a research project in “anthropology” (a culturally alien word that was met with many bewildered frowns) focusing upon blue-collars and this news circulated quickly enough to pique the concern of my department boss who wanted to know if I was going to report back my findings to media outlets. During my third and fourth seasons I started to talk about my research a bit more and met with more suspicion since work ethics and the public’s opinion of *les cols bleus* are highly contested subjects within the workplace. Many workers were immediately on the defensive when I talked about my interest in our labour and all members of management or *l’administration* were not forthcoming when I asked them for brief 5 minute interviews. Honorine once replied to one of my interview inquiries that she did not want to have anything to do with my research since it could possibly have negative repercussions on her livelihood. *Le Centre Technique*’s director, upon hearing that I was a student of anthropology and conducting participant observation, asked me what I thought about his “monkeys” (*mes singes*). Regardless of the director’s misperceptions or stereotypes about anthropology, I found his reference to “monkeys” used as a pejorative against blue collar-workers to be of

interest, especially coming from a man who currently filled the capacity of blue-collar administrative brain. The defensive stance many coworkers took and the unwillingness of the administration's members (as well as some older workers) to share any thoughts regarding their experiences corroborated with the "culture of silence" (see chapter 5) that reigns within the workplace as well as the essentialist categories that circulate in regards to the public workers that keep the City of Montréal running.

As *un col bleu* I worked and earned a weekly paycheck. I got into spats with coworkers, worked hard, worked slowly, attended soft-ball games and stag parties, drank beer and ate hot dogs, went out to exotic cabarets with members of my department, talked about work ethics and remained silent about them too, learned Lachinois French (so much for being an "insider") and yelled at *les belles filles* (attractive girls) when riding in the safety of the crew pickup truck. Becoming a unionized *col bleu* is no easy feat and my thesis attempts to do justice to this as well as the complexities and contradictions that abound in a workplace operating within one very "tough little town".

Family Names, Nicknames and Pseudonyms

The names "Sauvageau", "Taillefer" and "Laramée" refer to the informants' family names. Most names appearing in this thesis are family names and nicknames and are all fictitious. Greeting a fellow coworker by his family name occurs with enough frequency that it can be perceived as a cultural ritual within and outside of *Le Centre Technique*. The cultural formula proposes using the family name as a way of transmitting endearment or intimacy, and most importantly, membership to the informal group. The usage of familial names within greetings (or gossip for that matter) signifies a method of displaying knowledge about one's social environment that is shaped by allies,

acquaintances and even rivalries. Greeting by way of familial name is not a rigid system—it changes as familial names are either adopted or dropped in preference for a more culturally pleasing and acceptable *surnom* (“nickname”) that can be used interchangeably. Therefore *un col bleu* could possibly have several “names”: a given name (i.e. Exan), a family name (i.e. Desforages) and perhaps a *surnom* or two such as P’tit Nick. In this case “*P’tit*” (literally the colloquial equivalent of *li’l* or little) acts as a diminutive, however in this case it is not meant as an attack, it is a codename of acceptance. There is an economy to *les surnoms*: they can be endearing and they can also be insulting or wounding, targeting an individual’s deficiencies be they physical or representing evidence of social inadequacy. *Surnoms* can be meant as barbs that exclude (for example see chapter 6) or friendly devices that include. I have never heard of a female *col bleu* being accorded *un surnom* by one of the young males of my department that did not have at least a small grain of hostility buried within it. In this case, *les surnoms* that are given are often descriptors of the female *col bleu*’s appearance such as *tête de mouton* (“sheep head” for curly hair), *la face* (“the mug” for a visage judged to be unattractive) and *la grosse* and/or *toutoune* (“the big one” or “fatty”). What is ironic is that many male *cols bleus*, old and young, are overweight and sport great paunches. This “beef cake” look is an aesthetic that mostly passes (i.e. is not judged) however in the last years of fieldwork big bellies (*des bédaines*) have been criticized and mocked and many male *cols bleus* actively struggle to lose weight by way of dieting and exercising.

Familial names also draw a link to the names emblazoned on the back of jerseys worn by professional team sport athletes (especially hockey). To complete the athletic allusion we

all have *des numéros de punch*, three digits that appear on our microchip tags that we all put on our key chains to punch in and punch out.

Chapter 3. The Nature of the Work

Overtime requires a surprising amount of stamina to complete in the hot month of July. Finishing at 18:00 in the afternoon demands equal measures of mental and physical discipline. Usually *les cols bleus du Département des Espaces Verts* pack it in at 15:30, but those who are seduced by overtime and its promises of extra purchasing power decide to give a little bit more. While others wait to “punch out” inside of the cantina, safe from the sun and cooled by air conditioning, waiting there in a messy file, jostling and laughing, we, the few, enter the arena for a second serving. We have a brief meeting with our *contre-maître* who modifies the pad’s “to do” list. The location is unimportant; it is a park and always will be a park. Our work is to cut grass using “weed eaters” or “whips” and we cut a perimeter around trees, hedges, fences, sidewalks, baseball diamonds, rocks, shrubs, flower beds, grates, creeks, ponds, buildings and earth works of the ornamental variety. It is dull, tiring work yet requires an unbelievable amount of strategizing. One must take account of the direction that the cut blades of grass are traveling in, since an entire sidewalk covered with a green carpet is a direct violation of the aesthetic code that we have all sworn to uphold and honor. One must also keep track of the others’ progress so that areas that have been already completed are not re-visited.

Four of us walk towards the great white pick-up with #46 branded on its flanks. A red trailer is hitched to it carrying a small tractor and the various tools of our trade. *Le Centre’s* yard is empty and is scoured by the sluggish and muggy breezes of summer. Heat is emanating from everywhere at once. The yard is a cauldron and the body becomes nothing more than a piece of flotsam tossed about the cresting and crashing of waves. Heat arrives from all cardinal directions as July’s oven makes everything

shimmer. From afar the pickup flutters wildly. Fortifications of dust rip across the yard and through the yellow gauze the silver tower of *L'Église des Saint Anges* can be seen in the horizon. It shines brightly.

Le Centre's garbage dump, located at the back of the yard, is bubbling in the sun. Fat flies bob in the air, their oily abdomens winking green and cobalt. Congregations of sea gulls rise into the air laughing and terribly beautiful; coral beaks, coffee bean eyes, such whiteness...It is only during overtime that miracles such as these appear. In many ways they are better than the money—they are Lachine's hidden treasures. The electric chanting of cicadas filling the yard dramatically emphasizes the heat. Skin oozes with slick excretions that have nothing to do with sweat. It is exhaustion being pressed from the pores and it has the texture of wax.

As we cross the yard there is a dry rasping of boots. The jerry can is re-filled with gas and oil admixture and the heavy machines that we must bear are equipped with fresh lengths of orange plastic wire. We get into the truck and overtime begins in earnest as we exit from *Le Centre's* gates on St. Antoine Street. As we cross the threshold from headquarters to civic space I glance at *Le Centre's* front entrance and there is a carpet of *crachat* ("loogies", mucus and saliva that is spat out) that has been decorated with pink cherry blossom petals deposited there by the wind.

The truck winds its way to St. Joseph Boulevard and there are always many things to see. We pass an imposing bronze statue of Jesus. His arms are stretched wide, an embrace of sorrow exposing his heart. Behind, the Lachine Canal is steaming and full of aquatic plants, brown muskrats, frogs and fish. We then pass Père Nazaire Piché's stone figure, his left arm stretches a stone crucifix towards us as we pass by. We drive by the

Saints Anges convent, the trailer clattering horribly. The truck's windows are rolled down and we study *le bord de l'eau* intently. The young roller-blading girls, *les belles filles*, glide by on the cycle path. Their copper fleshed thighs jump out of their fruit colored shorts as they take their long perfect strides and their liquid eyes avoid our collective stare. They are beautiful and young, watching them is like watching wild horses galloping. We pass the lighthouse and the bait and tackle shop. We arrive at the park...it is time.

We descend upon the park like a catastrophe, the four whips and the tractor making a terrible racket. People are annoyed and leave. Taillefer lowers the trailer's two heavy grills, un-cinches *la strappe* and drives the tractor off into the park's expanse and proceeds to cut the grassy surface area by doing lengths or *faire des longueurs*. We, *les whipeurs*, split up as we choose different directions to work in. It is a large park and there are many areas to choose from. Gingras picks the baseball diamond, the chain link fence that surrounds it and the bleachers, while Laramée works his way to the north zigzagging from tree to tree. JP slinks to the east and focuses on the benches and enclosed soccer field. I decide to edge my way west into the area we call *la p'tite forêt*, the small forest. A whip makes a lot of noise; it fills your brain with a constant nagging buzz. Its tiny metal sphincter exhales a blue cloud and when the wind is *just right*, one can work during an entire afternoon completely smothered by it. Arms ache during overtime as do feet and lower backs. Our repertoire of motions while carrying the whip is very restrained. One holds the whip very still while cutting around long obstacles such as fences, one makes left-to-right and right-to-left patterns when cutting large areas that the tractors cannot reach or makes circular passes when clearing a perimeter space around trees and poles.

The spinning wire may be of plastic but it can cut through most green things. When arms droop a little out of weariness one may have the bad fortune of letting the spinning wire scrape on the ground. This is the reason why we are all equipped with protective eye wear. Twigs, pebbles, sand, fragments of glass and other loose debris are transformed into flesh penetrating missiles by the wire's momentum.

I watch Laramée work for a brief moment before I enter *la forêt*. He could really move. He worked without a shirt and was very tanned. He moved with grace and refined precision—the whip an extension of his body. He would often call himself the *le Wayne Gretsky du whip*. The heavy gold chain jerked fantastically about his throat and his amber colored sunglasses gave his face the appearance of an extraterrestrial war lord. It was a fine thing to watch him. When his wire gets too close to a tree: THRRRAAP! The trees in Lachine's parks are riddled with old whip scars near their bases. I am tired and sloppy. My shirt is slimy with perspiration and during this moment of carelessness the whip's head dips to the ground and is immediately yanked to my right side, leaving a weal across the grass and slicing through a sun-baked dog turd. The turd is ripped apart by the rotations of the wire and giblets scatter about. I smell very much of shit. It is all over my work pants and boots. There is a steaming glob on my left shoulder and a smaller drip on my protective glasses. I stop working. The smell is reaching its climax. It was a mature turd. I have reached the North façade of the park. It is 4pm in the afternoon and July has won another round. The overtime cash is mine but at a cost I may not have been prepared to pay had I known ahead of time what the trade would be.

Fieldwork has disappeared from my mind a long time ago. There is only labour now, only this, only the grass and the crew, *Le Centre Technique* and its intangible laws

and codes. I no longer know where to stand, where to be. A plane streaks across the sky, its belly glittering in the blue sky. I think of other students who have left for Latin America, Africa, mysterious islands and other far off lands. The whip is part of me, the smell of grass, the beating sun, Lachine...that's all there ever was. In many ways I have become what I have studied as fieldwork is combined with livelihood and my future.

A General Overview

In *La Ville*'s organizational structure, cutting grass, the most physically demanding of all labour, is located within *Le Département des Espaces Verts* (The Department of Green Spaces) which is found in *La Voirie* (roadwork) division. *Les Espaces Verts* is a department of unique qualities amongst *La Ville*'s roster of departments and is sub-divided into a few different branches. Most of *La Ville*'s other departments also contain sub-divisions that require different skill sets and that generate different salaries.

Les Travaux Publics (the Public Works) of *La Ville* is made up of 3 separate divisions: *Voirie* (roadwork), *Bâtiments* (buildings) and *Génie* (engineering). Each of these 3 divisions are headed by a division chief. *La Voirie* division is composed of 4 departments: *La Voirie*, which shares the same name as its division, and focuses upon roadwork and repairs, *Mécanique* (mechanics), *Aqueduc et Égout* (sewer systems) and *Les Espaces Verts*. All of these departments have a departmental head and "foreman" or *contre-maître* who organize the labour of their employees. *Les Bâtiments* comprises *Les Métiers* and *l'Électricité*. Finally, the *Génie* division is a sort of standalone department that does not possess any further divisionary schemes. In all there are 7 departments and roughly 30 branches. Because I have never experienced life in other departments it is

difficult to produce accurate descriptions of their work, nevertheless I have been able to observe their members go about their business once in awhile. *Génie* or engineering, is a department that is populated by *les cols blancs* (white-collar workers) and is unfortunately far removed from the scope of my participant observation. *Génie*, a rather small department, is composed of 5 *ingénieurs* and a solitary “foreman”. Information concerning *cols blancs* hourly wages and benefits are classified and I was unable to pursue the matter. *Cols blancs* membership includes secretaries (there are 3 of them: 2 conduct lower ranked office work while the third, whose desk is adjacent to the director’s door, is busied by higher-end administrative labour); *les chefs de division* (division chiefs); *les contre-mâitres* (foremen); *les ingénieurs* (*Génie*’s engineers) and *Les Travaux Public*’s director. These positions are located at the top of the hierarchy.

l’Administration

Les cols bleus I have worked with designate the blanket term *administration* to all of *les cols blancs*, thus creating an ideological separation between the two. The culturally laden phrase “*Aller en-haut*” (to go upstairs) denotes several things however it is always treated as a bureaucratic realm separate from manual labour. *Le Centre Technique* is a hierarchically structured world and its uppermost floor is where the offices of the foremen and chiefs are located and where decisions are taken. In other words it is the realm of executive power and *les cols bleus* take their orders from them and the quality of their labour is also measured by them. The reasons to go *en-haut* can often be perceived as ambiguous. One heads upstairs on the double when the numbers on the week’s pay stub do not add up. I have observed that a lot of time is dedicated to the scrutiny of one’s pay stub which displays remaining sick hours, federal and provincial taxation, pension

fund accrument, lateness deductions, union fees, work hours tally, over time pay and so on. This information is pertinent to one's future and well being since it essentially is a status chart and one can feel awfully gypped or compromised when discrepancies are discovered with no small amount of horror. The feelings of treason are especially spectacular when overtime hours seem to be off the mark and loud *tabarnaks*, *sacraments* and *câlisses* erupt in the cantina, the area where pay stubs are meticulously studied. "Tabarnak", "sacrament", and "câlisse" (to name only a few) are culturally meaningful curses in Québec and any self respecting *col bleu* (including the researcher) makes good usage of these dynamic expressions that can be easily calibrated to fit a slew of different circumstances by simply changing the intonation.

Another reason, perhaps the most culturally significant, as to why a negative value is attached to the act of *aller en-haut* is that it has to do with *stoolé*. *Stoolé*, which is used as a verb, is taken from the English expression "stoolpigeon" and retains its meaning: essentially, it is to rat someone out. In the *col bleu* context *stoolé quel qu'un* is to divulge damning information concerning another worker to a figure of authority. This confidential report, to a *contre-maitre* for instance, is frequently based upon someone else's work ethics, a culturally tabooed subject. *Stoolé* thus takes the form of covert criticism aimed towards another coworker and although it may be perceived as an act of treachery and is socially constructed as such, it also represents an important resource for the individual(s) making the complaint: *stoolé* can be a strategy employed to counter the adverse effects of a hegemonic environment. Therefore, *aller en-haut* might be socially constructed as being an act that is clearly out of sync with the rest of the existent culture

however it can also mean a step towards a better quality of life at work for others (see chapter 5).

Le Centre Technique's parking lot also reflects a hierarchically organized structure: all of the white-collars have their own designated parking spaces with signage that bears their name and position. The rest of the parking lot's space is a free-for-all and one must be vigilant not to be the last one in or else one gets stuck with parking spots that require more complex maneuvers (especially near the back next to the low masonry wall) and a farther walking distance. The quality of one's parking must respect the white division lines on the lot's area because some members of *la circulation* (men that drive small white jeeps and that administer parking related fines) are not above covertly slipping a ticket between one's wipers and windshield during hours of work. In Lachine, *la circulation* is particularly reputed for being ticket-mongers and will even mail a fine if it means that they can get their point across.

The Great Outdoors

La Voirie and *l'Aqueduc* are similar to *Les Espaces Verts* in that their labour is conducted outdoors, as opposed to having a designated area of work like the mechanics who stay inside *Le Centre Technique*. A few members of *l'Électricité* are also mobile within Lachine as they check lampposts and conduits while others stay at the base working alongside the mechanics. The members of *La Voirie* are responsible for maintaining the roads and streets of Lachine. They have access to several types of heavy machinery (saws that cut pavement and jackhammers) and industrial grade vehicles such as dump trucks, steam rollers and backhoe loaders. In fact, it was precisely this department in Montréal that attracted the media's attention. Members of *L'Aqueduc* busy

themselves with underground pipe inspections and sewer maintenance. This department is composed of 9 members while *Le Département de La Voirie* is split into 2 entities and each is headed by *un contre-maître*. This makes *La Voirie* the second largest department (tied with *Les Métiers*) with a cumulative membership of 30 employees. *Le Département des Métiers* is also split into 2 large groups and is characterized by its diversity of labour that include welders, carpenters, plumbers, painters, brick layers and masons, janitors and graffiti removers. The carpenter sub-division is especially recognized as providing its members with a great variety of tasks that keep the workplace exciting and dynamic as opposed to dull and routine, such as the labour conducted by the grass cutters. Carpenters also enjoy some physical mobility during the summer since they often busy themselves with certain outdoor projects such as building stages for performers. Carpenters can thus enjoy elements of both indoor and outdoor worksites: while indoors one is sheltered from the weather and outdoor labour nets its participants “Truck Time” and sightseeing possibilities (see chapter 5). A strictly outdoors department, as found in *Les Espaces Verts*’ profile, may seem appealing to some observers: one gets a lot of air and sun as well as truck rides, however one is also under much more surveillance and the weather can often defeat the most hardy of folks.

Les Conducteurs

When considering who is allowed to drive a vehicle, seniority comes into play, however specialized qualifications are also crucial. Vehicular accessibility is based upon 3 levels of qualifications: C, B and A which is the highest level and also called *la classe 3*. An individual who has a driver’s license and the required seniority will be able to drive tractors and pickup trucks which are categorized as being a C level *conducteur* or driver.

Bigger and more complex vehicles (status B and A) that have additional moving mechanical parts and airbrakes such as street sweepers and loader backhoes necessitate the successful completion of courses and examinations. These courses, which are called *des formations*, were often sponsored by *La Ville* during the pre-merger years and participants attended the courses during work hours. The pursuit of specialized formations is an attractive prospect since one's weekly paycheck is not affected by one's absence and this breaks up the monotony of the workweek, not to mention that this also serves as an important catalyst of mobility: successful completion of a course can lead to a higher salary and thus an augmented purchasing power. Increased purchasing power is perceived as being very advantageous amongst *les cols bleus* I have worked with.

According to *La Liste des Fonctions et Taux de Salaire* (Annexe A-1 2006: 97-104) an A level *conducteur* falls into the group 12 salary category at \$24.12/hr., whereas group 10 B level drivers earn \$23.27/hr. Level C *conducteurs* are recognized as being located within the group 7 salary category earning \$22.06/hr. C levels can also upgrade in order to access the level 9 salary category and pocket an 80 cent raise which marks their salary at \$22.86/hr. It is important to note that in the cultural world that I have explored *conducteur* status may not generate as much prestige and security as being a full-fledged *permanent* (especially one with "A level" qualifications), but it is still a sought-after position amongst auxiliary workers. However, there are interesting contradictions to this (see chapter 5).

Jobs and Vehicles in *Les Espaces Verts*

Les Espaces Verts contains most of *La Ville*'s jobs that are concerned with the aesthetic appearance of green spaces in The City of Lachine. This thesis focuses upon the

grass cutters' branch of *Les Espaces Verts* however there are other branches such as: *Émondage* (tree pruning), *Planteur d'Arbres* (tree planting), *Jardinage* (planting/watering ornamental floral arrangements), driving "Madvac" (small gas powered carts equipped with a vacuum array used to clean parks and sidewalks), hedge and shrub trimming, the maintenance of *les plate-bandes* (ornamental earthworks) and *Les Plateaux Sportifs* (caring for soccer fields and baseball diamonds). The grass cutting team, as I have experienced it, usually has been comprised of 8 members. There have usually been 3-4 *whipeurs* (this is a term designated for a type of unpopular labour that I will define in the following section) and 4 *conducteurs* who drive tractors. Vehicle wise the configuration for *les conducteurs* is as follows: 2 are *conducteurs* of *les Toros*, 1 has control of *Le Kubota* and *La Trainante* and the last *conducteur* does double duty as *Le Quarante-Six's* (number 46) driver as well as *La Gravelly*.

A *Toro* (said by using the French pronunciation "*taureau*", which means bull) refers to the brand name of a relatively fast moving, gas powered, medium sized tractor equipped with a front mounted hydraulic controlled, ground skimming plate with a series of spinning blades on its underside. The 2 *Toro* tractors are used for cutting medium sized grassy surface areas and are painted bright red. A *conducteur* of a *Toro* controls the vehicle by means of a steering wheel and gas/brake pedals. *Le conducteur* of this type of tractor is at the mercy of the weather since it is not equipped with a cabin and is reputed to prove an uncomfortable ride because of the hard seats that cause back aches. *Le Kubota* (a type of small but powerful tractor manufactured by a Japanese company), on the other hand, does provide *le conducteur* with cover and a degree of comfort: the small cabin has a ventilation system, a seat that is easier on the back and protects its *conducteur*

from sun and rain. *La Trainante* (literally meaning “the dragger” in feminine) refers to the system of deployed spinning blades that *Le Kubota* draws behind it and which is strictly used to cut very wide surface areas. Finally, *Le Quarante-Six* is the large white Chevrolet pickup (the number 46 is emblazoned on both of the vehicle’s sides) that serves to ferry around *les whipeurs* (the young males that cut grass) and which also draws a long flat bed trailer that carries *La Gravely*. *La Gravely*, which borrows its nickname from the American company that produces this kind of compact tractor, is the smallest type of tractor operated in *La Ville* which is used for *le découpage* and this technical term entails cutting a perimeter width around obstacles. This tractor is completely controlled by left and right levers, being devoid of a steering wheel or pedals. It is this bizarre system of levers that give *La Gravely* superior maneuverability over the other tractors and has been manufactured exclusively for *découpage* jobs that demand a sharp and fluid turning capacity. The spinning blades are located directly underneath the tractor and can be lowered and raised by activating a small lever that controls a hydraulic system. *La Gravely* is loaded onto the trailer by manually lowering two heavy grills that serve as a ramp and then a long and wide nylon strap (called *la strappe* in Lachinois) is cinched tight with a crank to immobilize the small tractor. Cinching *La Gravely* requires proper usage of the metal hook on the end of *la strappe*, cranking it with care so that the nylon band does not twist and then checking if the tension is adequate. Three-tiered metal brackets have been welded to both of the trailer’s sides and are used to hold the whips or weed-eaters in place while *Le Quarante-Six* is moving from worksite to worksite. *Les whips* are held in place with rubber bungees that have metal hooks on their ends so that the tools will not be dislodged from their brackets if *Le 46* hits a rough patch of road—or

if *le conducteur* is driving “vigorously”. The trailer is also equipped with an open metal cylinder that has been welded on to receive the jerry can (*le bidon*) which contains the workday’s supply of gas and oil admixture for *les whips*. Next to *le bidon*’s designated spot is a metal box with a heavy lid that is used to store tools, the spool of plastic wire, extra oil (Tanaka brand) and spare parts for *les whips*, such as springs, nuts/bolts, handles, *les palettes* (plastic shields that are fitted near the spinning wire) and extra whip heads. Rain water always finds its way into the box’s interior and all of the contents are usually coated in a thick sludge of rust and oil.

Grass cutting with a “weed eater” or “whip” and being part of a crew is a kind of labour organization that is relegated to male employees who are categorized as being *préposé aux travaux généraux* or *journalier*, however the proper cultural term is *un helpeur*. *Un helpeur* usually does not have access to vehicles and conducts what could be viewed as unskilled labour. *Un helpeur* who is working with *les émondeurs* (the tree pruners), for example, will not be allowed near what is deemed to be complicated machinery and will not be allowed to enter *la nacelle* (the fiberglass basket that is extended to cut high branches). This usually requires specialized training. *Un helpeur* in this case will collect the cut branches, some very big and heavy, and carry them to the wood chipper to be shredded. There are exceptions of course to this division of labour, especially if the *émondeur* has taken a liking to the *helpeur*. I was sometimes allowed to climb trees *with* a chainsaw to cut down “snags”, big branches that are broken and hanging. These opportunities (although considerably dangerous) grant access to different labour and are a welcomed relief from the usual drudgery of either cutting grass or pulling weeds. Turcotte, one of *La Ville*’s *émondeurs* once gruffly stated: “A young guy

like you has better things to do than wasting his time on all fours pulling weeds!” Pulling weeds is a type of labour often reserved for women in the green spaces department and it is very demanding work. On the whole, *un helpeur* is often perceived as being assigned the least desirable jobs within the hierarchy of *La Ville* and the grass cutters are ranked as conducting the hardest labour *un helpeur* can do.

Auxiliaire (auxiliary) is another important term having to do with *un col bleu*'s status. It signifies *un col bleu* who works seasonally and does not have permanency. Recently the salary of all auxiliaries was exponentially raised (discussed in the next section) putting their purchasing power almost on par with older permanent workers. Auxiliary workers do not have any benefits apart from 40 to 60 sick hours per season.

Les Espaces Verts' Characteristics

As a department of *La Ville*, *Les Espaces Verts* possesses a few defining characteristics that demarcate it from the rest. For starters it is the largest of *Les Travaux Publics*'s departments in 2007. *Les Travaux Publics* employed 111 workers in its various departments; 35 of those *cols bleus* operate within the department that my thesis is concerned with. In other words 32% of *Les Travaux*'s labourers are *Espaces Verts* employees. That is 5 more employees than that of *La Voirie* and *Les Métiers*. Currently, as is displayed in *Les Espaces Verts*' 2007 organizational roster, there are 5 *Émondeurs* (earning \$24.55/hr), 3 level B *conducteurs* (\$23.27/hr), 2 *Jardinières* (they are both female *cols bleus*, hence the feminized form of the word “gardener” and the head *jardinière* earns \$23.27/hr. while the other earns \$20.54/hr.), 15 level C *conducteurs* (it is unclear how many of these are located within the standard C level [group 7] and how many are at the slightly more lucrative upgraded version [group 9]) and 10 *journaliers* or

helpeurs (group 3 salary category at \$20.54/hr). This group 3 category places *Les Espaces Verts' journaliers* at a lower level of pay when compared to the *journaliers* that are in other departments because they are considered to conduct especially unskilled labour.

Les Espaces Verts possesses the most level C *conducteurs* and the most *journaliers* when compared to other departments. The closest competition is from the second division of *Les Métiers* with 9 *conducteurs* designated as level Cs and 8 *journaliers* who work as concierges, graffiti removers and garbage collectors. The department's larger numbers in low level *conducteurs* and *journaliers* correlate with the logistics of conducting outdoor work. In order for *Les Espaces Verts'* type of labour to be properly executed the department is reliant on the mobility of its participants. The labour that is conducted is not restricted to a single worksite (such as the mechanics for example), instead it is wide ranging and it is not rare for the department's *contre-mâîtres* to contact a crew of workers via CB radio in order to redirect their trajectories. The large *journaliers* pool would appear to reflect the department's need for acquiring the necessary amount of manual labour to cope with Lachine's sizeable outdoor worksites.

What is also revealing about the number of *journaliers* is that *Les Espaces Verts* is considered to be an introductory department to *La Ville*. Most newcomers start their career as employees of this specific department, unless they are already equipped with specialized training as electricians or welders for instance, however these spots are limited and require a degree of seniority. Pinould, an older worker with permanent status, approaching retirement (also called *un vieux permanent*), once commented briefly about *Les Espaces Verts*:

PINOULD: Me, like you, I started in the Department of Green Spaces and they would work us hard. People who say that us blue-collar workers don't work hard are bloody damn mistaken [*y's'trompent en maudit*], because I tell you that every black cent that I make I earn [*j'mérite chaque cenne noère que j'gagne*].

EXAN: So that's how you started?

PINOULD: Yup [*C't'en plein ça*]. A guy who didn't have any experience began there and he had to show that he was tough [*Un gars qui'avait pas d'expérience y commençais là, pis fallait qu'y montre qu'y'avait du chien*]

[“Avoir du chien” *curiously translates as “to have dog”, but the expression signifies a person's toughness and directness, almost to the point of being brazen. Someone with a lot of “chien” is akin to someone who is recognized as being “débrouillar”—adept at making do with limited resources or being able to benefit from unlikely circumstances*]

Pinould's brief commentary points to his beginning in *Les Espaces Verts* and the need to demonstrate to *l'administration* that he was a “good worker” in order to advance. The commentary also broaches the sticky questions surrounding *col bleu* work ethics, a prevalent topic in the media and amongst Montréal's citizenry at the moment, by underscoring meritocracy and honest wage earning: every “black cent” (*noère* is a considerably blacker color than simply saying *noir* and adds intensity to his fruits of labour) earned was witness to a daily struggle.

Les Espaces Verts is recognized by Pinould, as well as many other *cols bleus*, as being a starting point for many workers and as being physically demanding. The department is still portrayed as a gatekeeper whose hurdles must be successfully negotiated in order to be able to advance within the higher ranks. This marks an entirely natural process considering that many of the new employees lack the necessary skills and qualifications to come out of the starting blocks as “A level” *conducteurs* or as *un menuisier*. This does not mean that *Les Espaces Verts* is devoid of job typologies that are perceived as being desirable. Becoming *un émondeur* (pruning trees) for instance is seen

by many as being desirable work because there is a degree of variety and specialization involved. Driving certain tractors, such as *Le Kubota* or one of the *Toros*, is also considered to be *une bonne job* in *Les Espaces Verts* and the central reason being that one is not subject to the grass cutters' crew dynamics since one is an essentially solitary worker going about his own business (see chapter 5).

In addition to being the largest department and an introductory arena where workers test their mettle, *Les Espaces Verts* also has the largest number of female *cols bleus* of any other department in *La Ville* with the exception of one. Out of the 111 *col bleu* employees, 11 are female: exactly 10% of the labour pool. Amongst the 22 members of *les cols blancs* 8 are female (36%). Within *Les Espaces Verts*, at the moment, there are 6 female *cols bleus* and 2 female *cols blancs* who act as departmental heads. Honorine is the head of the green spaces and the other is head of one of the carpentry divisions. Out of these 6 female workers 1 is a B level *conducteur*, 2 are *jardinières* and 3 are *helpeurs*. That means that 2 of the 6 female *cols bleus* are *conducteurs*. There are no female *cols bleus* in *La Voirie* (composed of 30 employees), in *Mécanique* (composed of 8 employees), nor in *Aqueduc et Égout* (composed of 9 employees). There is 1 female electrician in *Électricité* which has 7 members and there are 4 female *cols bleus* in *Les Métiers*: 3 are *journalières* and 1 has access to a pickup being a C level *conducteur*. All of the 3 secretaries are female *cols blancs* while the small *Génie* department (engineering, which is considered to be white-collar work) has the strongest female presence: 80%, translating to 4 out of the 5 employees being female, not including the division chief who is male.

These numbers reveal that the most physical of the departments is headed by a female and has the most female participants while the department that is characterized as necessitating a fair degree of education has the most female participants. It is important to note that the female head of the Department of Green Spaces successfully completed a BA in horticulture most likely putting her on par with the level of education held by the engineers, who are also mostly female. Therefore the strongest female presence is in *Les Espaces Verts* which is characterized as being the most physical of departments and *Génie* which is characterized as being the most educated of departments. When I approached Honorine, the head of my department, about these gendered figures she replied the following: “Because I’m a woman I hire more women than the others”. Here, “others” refers to *La Ville*’s other departmental heads responsible for hiring. When considering the strong showing of female *cols bleus* in the Department of Green Spaces Honorine had this to say: “Women work hard and they are meticulous”. Thus, women are constructed by the head of the department as being “good workers” (see chapter 6).

Lise, a fifty year old female professional leather worker, was once a landscaping contractor in Lachine and spent many years working alongside blue-collar workers. Her feelings towards *les cols bleus* are strong as she communicated most candidly during a discussion. The discussion had started when I informed her that I was conducting research on blue-collar workers in Lachine.

LISE: All my life I’ve worked with blue-collars and they’re a bunch of alcoholics and drug abusers [*des drogués*]. If *La Ville* really wants to get work done they should layoff all the blue-collars and hire contractors to do all the work. Anyways I know how it is with blue-collars...they want to break your jaw [*ils veulent te casser la gueule*] if you work harder and if you want to do a good job...

EXAN: There are a lot of people who say similar things.

LISE: When I was a landscaper [*aménagement paysagiste*] around Lachine I had a good reputation and the big wigs [*les grosses poches*] of *La Ville* knew my name and the kind of quality that I produced. I told them that they should hire more women when it comes to landscaping. I even said the same thing to the mayor of Lachine once...

EXAN: How come? [*Comment ça?*]

LISE: Because women [*les femmes*] work harder than men and they care about the job they do. They have heart [*du coeur*]. Blue-collar men care less and do less [*les gars cols bleus s'en fichent d'l'a job*]. They tend to spend all their money on beer and drugs... [*Y'flaubent toute leur argent sa'bière pis sa'dope...*]

EXAN: Do you think that what you say stereotypes blue-collar men?

LISE: Listen, I used to work all around Lachine and as a contractor and my crew could plant up to 500 trees in one day while the blue-collars might plant 4 or 5. I would hire more women than men because of the effort they put into their work and if *La Ville* were looking to hire some personnel and they knew that such and such person had worked for me they would hire her immediately. All that blue-collars do is cost *La Ville* tax money...

EXAN: The male blue-collars right?

LISE: You bet!

In this brief discussion Lise depicts male *cols bleus* as being violent (“they want to break your jaw if you work harder and if you want to do a good job”), decadent, lazy and ultimately costing taxpayers and the municipality money. It is a description often supported by the media and many people following *col bleu* developments. On the other hand, Lise perceives female workers as being “hard workers” who produce high quality labour through their initiative and discipline. Honorine also supports the notion of women *cols bleus* as being “hard workers”. During my fieldwork, especially in my fourth year (2007) I was given the opportunity to work with a crew of female *cols bleus* (throughout a one month period more or less) and to describe their work ethics as being “hard working” and “meticulous”, as maintained by Honorine in the above quote, is accurate. The complication surrounding the notion of female *cols bleus* as “good and/or hard

workers” is that this positive-value descriptor conceals the fact that there are divisions of labour in *La Ville* that are often based upon gender where difficult and/or dull work is often delegated to women by Honorine herself (see chapter 6). Thus, female *cols bleus* are often faced with a lack of variety in the labour they conduct and receive jobs that most male *cols bleus* (both young and old) would frown upon and deem to be “a waste of time”. An example of the division of labour based on gender can be seen in Turcotte the *émondneur*’s above description of pulling weeds as a type of labour conducted “on all fours” and unfit for a “young man”.

The intensified surveillance of outdoor labour in Lachine following the newspaper exposés has a tendency not to include female *cols bleus* since they are constructed as being “good workers”. In addition, from what I have observed while working with female *cols bleus*, they do not have access to typically masculine cultural resources such as Truck Time (see chapter 5), the *raconteur* model (see chapter 6) and certain loci of ideology (again, see chapter 6). It is therefore not surprising that Honorine delegates repetitive work to “her girls” (*mes filles*), as she calls them, for they represent a source of labour that is highly productive and concerned about quality.

Another important trait of *Les Espaces Verts* concerns how many employees have “permanent” status. Permanency is a desirable condition to acquire. It is through being *un permanent* that one obtains job security. Permanency is a goal that most share, unless one does not envisage establishing a career as a *col bleu* for *La Ville*. Most young *cols bleus* are anxious to obtain their permanency and to be able to leave their auxiliary status behind them, that is to say being a seasonal worker without benefits. In *Les Espaces Verts* not a single *col bleu* has his or her permanency yet, and some have been at it for

more than a decade. Turcotte, an older *col bleu* in his early fifties, has been working in the department as a tree pruner for 13 years without obtaining permanency. Turcotte's daughter, who is one of *Le Centre Technique*'s secretaries, beat her father to it and received her permanency after having worked at *le bureau des licenses* (the driver's license bureau) for 3 years. All agree that it takes a good deal of time and hope to finally get one's turn on the sunny side of the street.

Briefly returning to Lise's dialogue, during my 20 months of fieldwork and research I would observe that there are many hard working young men in *La Ville*, however they pay a great price for their work ethics within the grass cutters' clique. While working in *Les Espaces Verts* I never once observed a female *col bleu se poigner le cul* or "fucking the dog". Although Lise's statements may seem reductionist and stereotypical there are definitely certain aspects that reflect what I and what other workers have experienced. This said I would carefully remind the reader that to adhere to biases while embarking upon a research topic such as this one would be a breach of anthropology's central tenet: to observe a culture while attempting not to reduce it into clusters of static simplifications. Lise's overall negative experience of blue-collar workers is reflected on issues pertaining to work ethics (*les cols bleus* are lax vis-à-vis labour and their salaries come from tax payers' money), gender dynamics, aggression and substance abuse.

Cutting Grass: Unpopular Labour in an Unpopular Department

Les Espaces Verts is certainly recognized as being the hardest working department within *La Ville* and most *col bleu* employees start their career there in the hopes of securing a "better" position. This said the grass cutters' branch of the

department (*La Tonte du Gazon* or simply *Le Gazon* as it is called amongst the young males that make up its ranks) is undeniably portrayed as the most undesirable of jobs in *La Ville*'s lineup of labour because of its level of difficulty and discomfort. What is perhaps one of the most interesting traits of this branch, aside from its intense physical nature, is that it is relatively new. It became a branch of *Les Espaces Verts* in the spring of 2001, exactly 3 years before I was taken aboard as a member of the grass cutting crew or as *un whipeur*. Before I continue it is important to offer an in depth description of what this labour entails and how one goes about doing it.

Historically *l'équipe du gazon* (the grass cutting crew) has always been, and it currently remains, an all male crew. This signifies that *couper du gazon* is a kind of labour that is reserved only for young males and thus they operate within an exclusive same-sex environment. An individual who cuts grass is called *un whipeur* due to the name of the machine that he uses: *un whip*, however there are also a few culturally specific code words for this loud machine. The French equivalent of "weed eater" is *un coupe bordure* and this pertains to any of the brands of gas or electric powered, mechanized tools that are used to cut grass in a perimeter, not large surfaces. The whips that *La Ville* have purchased cost approximately \$700 and they are a variety that are bigger, stronger and heavier than the small electric ones that slightly curve downwards and that can be observed being used by homeowners when trimming the blades of grass that cannot be reached by lawnmower. *Le whipeur* manipulates the machine by way of two separate grips or handles. The first grip is located near the base of the machine where the motor and fuel cell is found and is a rubberized sheath that also serves to protect the fragile wiring which runs from the trigger box to the sparkplugs (which are found under a

rubber covering on the top of the motor). The trigger regulates the machine's power or the velocity in which spins the head and is also set with an on and off switch. A bit farther along the machine's aluminum shaft is a handle that can come in a variety of shapes, some ergonomic while others are uncomfortable, that can be slid farther down the shaft or closer to the trigger box according to one's preference and height. This handle is made out of plastic and rubber and is usually the part of the whip that breaks during the season of grass cutting. At the very end of the shaft is a plastic disc shaped apparatus that is held into place with a metal bracket and bolts. When pressure is applied to the trigger it is this part of the machine that spins and does the cutting. This apparatus must be opened in order to place a new spool of plastic wire or to fix any problems that are affecting the quality of the cutting.

This trimming array is made up of 3 different parts that are all subject to a significant amount of wear and tear throughout the season. The first part is the one attached to the shaft and spins while also serving as a receptacle for the other parts, hence its name: *la coupole* or the cup. The second part, called *le beigne* or the doughnut, because of its circular shape with a space in the middle, serves to hold everything in place. The last part fits under *le beigne* and pokes out of the center and is called the head or *la tête*. To open the trimming array *le beigne* is pressed down and twisted counterclockwise thus releasing a locking mechanism which frees *la tête* followed by a strong spring. There are various *tête* models however all operate on the same principle: three arms length of plastic wire must be carefully wrapped around it (if one's grip slips prematurely the entire coil comes undone and the wrapping process must be restarted) and *la tête* must then be packed into place. Wrapping the wire requires patience and care.

First of all the center of the three arm lengths of wire must be located. To accurately find the middle, the wire can be looped around any young tree or threaded through a chain link fence while firmly grasping the ends. If none of these things are available it is a simple enough trick to use the whip's own weight and handle while the machine is resting horizontally on the ground. Once the wire's center is found it is to be pinched so that a small loop is achieved (thus two lengths of wire are formed) and then snagged into a notch that is situated on *la tête's* grooved side. One hand holds *la tête* firmly and slowly turning it counterclockwise while the other hand holds the lengths of wire making sure that they are evenly distributed. The remaining three to four inches of wire are passed through two small round openings found in *la coupole's* walls as *la tête* is simultaneously pressed back into place. If wrapped too tight, sections of the wire will melt and stick together due to friction when the machine is activated and, if wrapped loosely, the wire will entangle itself from the interior of the trimming array and *le whipeur* will need to open everything up once again in order to probe the malfunction. Once *la tête* is back in *la coupole's* casing, all is secured by firstly placing *le beigne* back on top and twisting it clockwise until a snapping sound is heard indicating that the machine is ready to use once more.

As the trimming array rotates the wires spin like a propeller easily cutting through grass, plants and even small branches. The plastic wire's extremities that do the cutting as *la tête* spins are inevitably shortened due to the friction caused by making physical contact with vegetation, chain link fences, rocks and concrete. In order to draw out more wire one gently taps *la tête* (which slightly protrudes from *le beigne's* center thus acting a bit like a pressure sensitive button) the ground so that the spring behind it is momentarily

compressed thus releasing pressure and by doing so the centrifugal force lets out a small length of wire. To obtain the desired length one need only to tap two or three more times.

Attached to the underside of the shaft, directly behind *la tête*, is a rigid plastic flap that serves as protection for the *le whippeur* and which is also equipped with a small metal blade on the right edge which automatically cuts the wire if it gets too long. This shield like apparatus is called *une palette*. When a wire is too long it creates too much de-centered weight and this causes the motor to work a bit harder. Motors that are often operating beyond their intended capacity burn out and must be either replaced or fixed. *La palette* does not always live up to its purpose. The wires can reach considerably high rotations and if they graze the ground at a particular angle, any loose debris (i.e. pebbles, shards of glass, twigs, sand, pinecones, etc.) will be picked up and flung forcefully back into the worker's body. Getting hit with these pieces of shrapnel can prove to be very painful and dangerous. A pebble, for instance, can hit one with stinging force (sometimes enough to break skin) on the side of the nose, on the mouth, in the teeth, on an ear, in the neck, in the inner thigh or on the tibia. All locations are very painful and it is not rare when working to hear loud curses of pain and surprise echoing through a park's expanse and competing with the decibel level of one's own whip motor. Perhaps the most dangerous area to be hit in are the eyes and this why protective eyewear (*des lunettes*, literally meaning eyeglasses but this particular sort is made from plastic) is mandatory when operating *un coupe bordure*, however, like the plastic *palette* that fails to provide full protection, a stray missile can sometimes find an opening from the side or slip through the tiny gap between the bridge of the nose and the bottom rim of *les lunettes*.

Un whip is not the most elegant piece of machinery that one could hope to work with for it has little regard of its operator's health and wellbeing. Its overall weight is misleading for it grows heavier as the hours pass and the wrists strain mightily to keep the machine pointed in the proper direction. The shoulders are also affected by continuously holding *le whip* aloft and the trimming array off of the ground (lest a sharp pebble finds itself embedded in one's upper lip). To hold the machine properly is harder than it sounds since the contraption has an unwieldy nature thanks to its uneven weight distribution: on one end is the motor while on the other are the three light plastic parts and the wire that makeup the trimming array. *Le whippeur's* arms (shoulders, biceps and forearms), shoulders, back and neck are thus always contracted when maintaining a work posture and can only relax when the machine is not being operated. *Le whip's* incessant vibrations compound the problems of constant muscular contractions by leaving joints and articulations inflamed. The fingers, wrists and elbows are especially prone to inflammation and particularly so when the weather starts to grow hot. Any injuries related to articulations that are not dealt with can feel numb and stiff when the weather grows cold or damp. Arthritis can start to make an appearance in the wrists and fingers, especially the fingers of the hand that apply pressure to the trigger. These physical ailments are cumulative and can really wear down a worker's body. The sciatic nerve can become inflamed (which also travels in both legs), necks can be sprained and a serious medical condition called *doigt de gachette* ("trigger finger") leaves one's fingers clenched.

The three required movements that *un whip* asks from its user are repetitive: 1) from right to left and from left to right in order to achieve a wedge shaped pattern that

covers as much surface area as possible when cutting locations that tractors or lawnmowers cannot reach 2) a half circle to the left followed by a half circle to the right when circumference-cutting free-standing objects such as trees, manhole covers and posts 3) holding the whip very firmly to the left or right side of the body (depending on one's level of dexterity) so that the trimming array is almost parallel to the worker's body as he walks forward while hugging the stretch of a chain link fence (*une clôture*) or any other partitions such as the outer walls of a building or the low masonry walls (*des murets*) found in certain parks. Hedges that are grown into wall-like formations also necessitate #3's technique. The movements that are present in #1 are difficult on the back muscles due to the hips that pivot back and forth while #3's challenge lies in the fact that a single position must be maintained for lengthy periods of time. There are of course different variations with their own degrees of difficulty and physical discomfiture such as crouching low to cut the grass underneath clusters of pine trees that have broad, flaring ground branches or moving laterally on inclinations which is quite difficult on the ankles.

As if the weight, vibrations and whipping movements were not enough one must cope with *le whip*'s sound and fumes. The sound that the motor emits is a high pitched buzz that can prove to be a source of great annoyance to beginners and *un whipeur* can get enveloped by exhaust fumes for surprisingly long periods of time when the breeze is just right. Furthermore, there exist missiles of an entirely different nature that one can have the misfortune of propelling towards one's own body. Dog excrements can act as a park's own brand of landmines considering that many people eschew from the noble activity of picking up after a pet's moment of relief. Obviously the unwary can step on a dog turd, the simple equivalent of a pratfall in mediocre comedies, however a more

unorthodox or creative method of interacting with canine excreta is by touching it with the trimming array while it is spinning vigorously. When this outstanding phenomenon occurs, if the angle of the machine is properly aligned with the worker's body, the result is a literal "shower of shit". In Lachinois *col bleu* speech one calls this dramatic experience *whipé dans un tas d'marde*, to whip a pile of shit. As was the case with Pinould's pronunciation of "*noére*", a much darker version of *noir* (the color black), "*marde*" is a much more potent form of "*merde*" as its heavier pronunciation attests. There are also different varieties of turds as there are varieties of terrain that *un whipeur* must cope with. The most benign of turds are the ones that have been baking in the sun and that have the appearance of dark leather nuggets. These nuggets or "pebbles" as they are often called by *les whipeurs* and pronounced "pè-belle", rarely pose a threat since they are not wet enough to stick to one's clothing or exposed skin and bounce off harmlessly. The most dangerous types are *des flaques de diarrhée* or diarrhea puddles produced by dogs with indigestion or rendered soft by precipitation. When *un pauvre whipeur* who is oblivious of the whereabouts of these dastardly puddings and slices one of them with wires that are only a blur due to the speed of the rotations, one often must seek out a source of water to wash away the offensive morsels and change clothes later on in the day if possible. While *les flaques* are quite unpopular to encounter one must be vigilant when cutting a circumference area surrounding pine tree clusters since these densely packed conifers are just what the doctor ordered for people who really "have to go". It is prudent to keep an eye out for the any scraps of white paper napkins or any other makeshift wiping aids when in close proximity to these natural outhouses because

whiper dans un tas d'marde humain (to whip a human pile of shit) easily trumps any other type of excreta on a basis of revulsion.

Considering the repetitive nature of *un whipeur*'s slim repertoire of movements, the incessant vibrations generated by the machine's motor (which is in close proximity to the *col bleu*'s hands) and the other various factors this type of work properly lives up to its reputation as being significantly taxing labour. In order to obtain a little bit of comfort in otherwise unaccommodating conditions, *un whipeur* can make use of a small amount of customization and judicious usage of certain equipment. It is possible to remove *la palette* in order to give the machine's extremity a bit more lightness and give the shoulders fewer grams to strain against. This also gives *le whip* a slimmer silhouette and facilitates cutting in general since *la palette* can often snag itself when cutting underneath *les estrades* (bleachers) that are located in a few of the parks and *plateaux sportifs* (fields reserved for various sporting activities) we work in. Removing this rigid piece of plastic also means that if the worker is not experienced he will undoubtedly hit himself more often with pieces of loose debris. Furthermore, *le whipeur* is no longer restricted from using lengthier cutting wires since casting away *la palette* also means giving up on the metal blade that automatically cuts one's wires when one draws out too long a length by tapping *la tête* on the ground. Longer wires means more reach and simplifies certain tasks, such as when cutting perimeters around trees or when neatening the appearance of a sidewalk. However, working with longer wires also means that the motor experiences more stress, eventually leading to *un moteur crammé* or a motor that has burned out. Motors that are nearing internal destruction give off thick black smoke and are increasingly difficult to start. In my experience, figures of authority such as *Les Espaces*

Verts' contre-maitre and head of department (Honorine) have never liked the fact that some workers decide to get rid of *la palette*, therefore it is discarded covertly.

The adjustment of the handle that serves to point the machine's trimming array in the desired direction can also play a small part in establishing personal control upon work conditions. Improper handle adjustment to one's height and arm length can cause severe back muscle soreness over the course of the season. A well-adjusted handle can also serve effectively to sling the whip over one's shoulder, somewhat like a rifle, with the trimming array pointing skywards while the motor acts as a counterweight. This represents a more comfortable way of carrying the machine when covering long distances on foot without having to do any actual cutting. Other methods of carrying the whip while walking include grasping the machine at its center and holding it like a briefcase or holding it by its grip (not the handle bar) so that the shaft dips towards the ground and using *la tête* as a small wheel. It is a slovenly technique yet it is appreciated when the workdays are grueling and our heavy union issued boots feel like blocks of lead.

Wearing work gloves absorbs a portion of the whip's vibrations as well as affording the hands some protection against any shrapnel that the whip's spinning might send. Due to the job's nature *un whipeur's* body is usually covered in grass. One's work pants often have the appearance of fuzzy green carpeting. Grass clippings are not as harmless as they might seem to most observers, however they can become a source of infection. *La tête du whip* can certainly see to it that a twig rockets into one's nostril once in awhile (may sound unlikely yet this has happened), however a worker's body is always coming into contact with a steady shower of grass. Exposed arms are especially vulnerable. What happens is that fragments of grass are embedded in the exposed skin

(due to the high revolutions of the trimming array) and cause infection. The infection takes the form of small boils (*des boutons*) that are filled with clear yellow fluid and itch horribly. These boils quickly spread if *le whipeur* scratches himself and it is not rare to do so when one is asleep at night. The boils can travel up one's arm and can even spread along the torso and legs growing in size and density until entire areas of skin are so afflicted that an appearance of serious disease is achieved, hence the nickname given to this ailment: *la peste du gazon* or "grass plague". The best way to avoid *la peste* is to wear long sleeved shirts during the summer days, however this method of prevention often conflicts with perhaps more important aesthetic concerns.

Not all customization choices are geared towards making one's life as a wielder of weed-whackers easier, some are uniquely aesthetic. The reason that many whipeurs refuse to wear long sleeved shirts, apart from the summer's heat, is that getting a tan (*bronzage*) is culturally desirable as is being able to show off one's *pipes* (the English pronunciation is conserved) or arms, however with a focus on the shape of the biceps. *Montrer ses pipes*, literally meaning to show off one's arms, is seen as valid because it is a form of masculine aesthetics amongst young male workers in *Les Espaces Verts* which places an onus on physical strength, even though manual labour itself is often not considered masculine during seniority's dominant culture (see chapters 4 and 5). There is a yearly issue of working garb that includes a new pair of boots and four t-shirts depicting the City of Lachine Public Works logo. Young males tend to lace up their boots in a very loose fashion as opposed to tight and snug. This mirrors hip-hop tendencies with its focus on loose fits and an unconventional approach towards clothing such as pants, headgear and footwear. T-shirts often undergo a masculine overhaul as sleeves are cut off in order

to fully expose shoulders and biceps. The removal of sleeves is not a sloppily carried out project: many are excised with precise scissor-work and any tell tale ragged edges of a missing sleeve is further refined by a judicious dose of sewing. Other young males prefer to leave their sleeves where they are, however this does not mean that their sleeves are devoid of panache. Sleeves that are left on will often be rolled up to frame the upper shoulder with an attractive fold of cotton or be used so that a pack of cigarettes can be enveloped and held in place like an amulet of manliness. Some young males eschew from sleeve conversion and rather opt for a tighter fitting size so that the t-shirt hugs the contours and shape of the torso.

Un whip can be equipped with *une ganse* (a shoulder strap) that can be clipped to a small ring that is located near the trigger box. By wearing this strap slung across a shoulder a good portion of the machine's weight can be redistributed giving the arms a bit of a break, however I have never observed this piece of equipment being used. First of all it tends to get entangled and most importantly, using it is not culturally recognized as being very manly since one cannot build one's *pipes*. A last bit of equipment that elicits much attention is eyewear. The protective plastic glasses or lunettes that are standard issue are either *blanche* (white or in this case clear, uncolored plastic) or a striking yellow (*jaune*) that when worn transforms the world into an old Western movie set, which can sometimes be appealing. The color that is preferred by far are the dark colored *lunettes* that mimic sunglasses with ergonomically shaped contours while *les blanches* and *les jaunes* are blockier and less aesthetically appealing. The only way to obtain the sunglasses-styled *lunettes* is when a few members of the crew gets to go to *Marina* (a local supplier of landscaping tools and machinery that is also equipped with a garage that

specializes in repairing mechanical problems of that nature) and have them clandestinely charged to *La Ville*'s account. In the summer of 2005, my second year, a new color of sunglasses-styled *lunettes* became available *chez Marina* and many young *cols bleus* wanted to get their hands on a pair, including the researcher. The plastic was still dark however with a garish effect that made the *lunettes* appear as if they had been dipped in an oil slick for the lenses glinted pink, blue, gold and green in the sunlight. Several pairs were secretly charged to *La Ville* along with more legitimate repairs and supplies that served to mask the bonus loot. The crew was very proud of them and Maçon, one of the younger members of our crew that year, would even wear his during weekends.

Another item that is chosen with care *chez Marina* are fresh spools of plastic wire for *les whips*. Wire is sold in single 5 pound spools. Wire comes in a variety of colors and shapes and is manufactured by a variety of companies. Colors are usually white (another more expensive brand of this color contains a small metal wire inside of a plastic sheath allowing for extra cutting power), orange and green and wire shapes can either be round (standard wire), square or star. The reason for a square and star shaped wire is that the sharp edges are more likely to successfully shear through tough vegetation, but these shapes also produce more air friction and drag as *la tête du whip* spins it, therefore the crew usually settles for less ornate weaponry. I have observed that the crew usually settles for the simple orange round wire for its durability and its speed since it is a more or less aerodynamic form that can achieve fast rotations. Greasing *la tête du whip* once or twice a week also helps to keep the rotations smooth and powerful. *L'œillet*, a small metal nib located at the end of the aluminum shaft where the spinning array is attached receives the thick red grease that serves to lubricate moving parts.

The second week of the month of May usually marks the beginning of the grass cutting season which lasts, depending on precipitation and sun, until October. Thus the grass cutting crew's labour is framed within a 6 month period. Even though most of *les whipeurs* dislike this kind of work all members of the crew want to find and claim a machine that functions properly. An understandable reaction considering that half of the year will be spent cutting grass and no one wants to begin the season with *un whip* that vibrates too much or that is difficult to start in the morning. One obtains *un bon whip* by carefully testing them one at a time. *La Ville* owns a dozen of these machines. Some are outdated and it has been in my experience that *La Ville* has never taken stock of each whip's quality before the season's start. Prior to being employed by *La Ville* I worked for *un contracteur* for 4 years from beginning of May to September. The family owned company would always spend a few days patching up their whips and troubleshooting them before the start of the season. This is why it is in each *whipeur*'s interest to find a machine that works well from the beginning because *un whip* that malfunctions frequently complicates the job and can even irritate the most lackadaisical of workers.

To start *un whip* the proper mixture of *gaz et huile* (gas and oil) is needed. The metal jerry can is filled at one of the two gas pumps in *Le Centre Technique*'s yard and a capful of oil is added. A whip's fuel cell is located underneath the motor and has a bright orange cap bearing a gas pump icon that is secured by twisting it. The orange cap is removed and the fuel cell filled. A small clear rubber bubble often called *la tétine* (the nipple) found on the motor's side is then pressed a few times in order to inject gas into the motor. This step is called *primé le moteur* and is indispensable especially when starting the fickle machine for the first time during the workday's morning or after

prolonged inactivity such as after the midday lunch. It is also important to remember to flick the small switch near *la tétine* on “choke”. Once this is done the flat red switch on top of the trigger box is slid into the “on” position and an aggravating ritual of vigorously pulling on the string crank that has a hard black plastic handle can begin in earnest. Getting hit in the ear with a piece of bark or a small rock is enough to make any *whipeur* curse loudly in a park, however the crank also garners its own share of verbalized frustrations. It can take as little as one try to start the dratted machine or as many as thirty bone-jarring yanks using the nylon string crank. The traditional cranking position is to hold the machine by its grip (not its handle bar) with one hand and to yank the string crank with the other hand while standing. The motion is an opening and closing of the arms with a thoroughly odd weight distribution: one arm supports the entire weight of the whip while the other busies itself with pulling. It looks and feels like calisthenics and one can even break a sweat before a single blade of grass is cut. Because starting *un whip* can represent an exhausting endeavor, it is not rare to witness a disgusted *whipeur* throw down the machine in an awful clatter. Once breath has been regained the ritual commences anew or another strategy is employed: the machine is pinned to the ground with a foot and a hand while the other hand frantically pulls the cord in rapid successions. At this point in the game it is always advisable to flick the choke switch “on” and “off” in a bid to revive the stubborn tool. Once the machine sputters to life (at first very weakly and often coughing itself to silence) and starts to vibrate *le whipeur* presses gently upon *la gachette* (the trigger) giving tiny bursts of gas until *la tête* spins with more force indicating that all systems are a go. The more troublesome the whip is the more often one must go through these surprisingly draining motions, therefore it is rational to seek out a

machine that works well and that one can depend on for a good portion of the season before bringing it *chez Marina* for an inevitable tune-up. During my career as *un whipeur pour La Ville* I have successfully ruined two motors and I have snapped one aluminum shaft in half during a grass cutting session underneath some bleachers.

Un whip is certainly considered to be the representative tool of the young auxiliary *cols bleus* in *Les Espaces Verts*, however the usage of *une tondeuse*, or lawnmower, for specific areas that are found in our usual routes are equally important. The areas that are lawnmower designated are characterized as being difficult labour. These areas are either too small to accommodate the tractors (even *La Gravely*, the smallest tractor that fits onto the crew's flatbed trailer) or too time consuming to cut with *un whip*, therefore a lawnmower is used to complete this particular task. At times it is a relief for the body's aches and pains to conduct a slightly different kind of labour since one's arms and shoulders are given a rest from the whip's vibrations and weight. The lawnmower, as inconspicuous as it may seem, is not free from politics, much like everything else in the cultural world of *les cols bleus*.

Chapter 4. The Structural Shift: From Meritocracy to Seniority

Meritocracy and seniority represent two differing regimes of common sense knowledge that have become oppositional forces within the workplace. Merit can be seen as a system of knowledge that supports a work ethic denoting initiative, ambition, industriousness and forging beneficial relationships with figures of authority such as with *les contre-mâtres* (“foremen”, a position held by both men and women). Before the 2002 mega-union merger initiated by the *Parti Québécois* hove into view and before *La Convention Collective* of the fourth quarter of 2004 became synonymous with a structural shift brought about by *l’ancienneté* (seniority), Lachine’s *cols bleus* operated within a meritocratic milieu. Here, one’s station as col bleu was based largely upon “merit.” Merit is a word that is employed by *les cols bleus* to describe a period of recognition and reward. In Lachine, it has become a cultural term that is often juxtaposed with the system that came into place following the mega-merger. The “Bourgeois Period” (the local name for the era when workers were evaluated by merit based on “hard work”) takes its nomenclature from an influential political figure, a Lachinois council member, who encouraged an ethic of “hard work” remunerated with possibilities of mobility. It would be inaccurate to assume that seniority as a device for distributing immediate benefits based upon one’s duration of service for les Travaux Publics was non-existent during the meritocratic moment. Seniority was present and merit cannot operate adequately without it, for a “good” or “hard” worker produced seniority through his efforts. It is here however that the two typologies of seniority diverge: merit focused upon one’s ability to labour effectively and to create linkages with the “pyramid of power”, to borrow the parlance of an informant, while the seniority system brought by the structural shift is

based upon a list (*La Liste*) that effectively put a stoppage to self-propelled mobility and replaced it with a standardized form based upon the passing of time and not performance.

Some individuals at work perceive 2002 as the advent year for the new common sense that emerged with the seniority system. 2002 was the year of the mega-union's inception following the mergers of the boroughs. Most, however, agree that it was the collective bargaining agreement of 2004 that entrenched and compounded the problems with seniority. During the fourth quarter of 2004 wages almost doubled for auxiliary workers and the seniority list was enforced, in other words *La Liste* became a legislated document that tracked one's progress within the echelons of manual labour. *Le Département des Espaces Verts* is almost entirely composed of auxiliary or seasonal workers (see chapter 3). Many feel (especially older workers) that once *les jeunes* (the youth, signifying the young males of *Espaces Verts* or the new generation of workers) attained seniority, along with a new pay grade, that many ceased to care about initiative and "doing a good job" within the workplace. Seniority, as it is currently defined by the union and its representative delegates, affords massively augmented protection to workers. It is now difficult to get rid of *un col bleu* who is causing problems or whose level of production is maintained at subpar levels throughout the work season. This has created many complications, not only for the administration that must acquiesce to these changes, but also for other *cols bleus* who must shoulder the labour of those who are constantly making use of pressure tactics. One of the two union delegates of *Le Centre Technique* once told me that: "Soon it'll be impossible for *un bleu* ["a blue", a short form referring to blue-collars] to be fired. Not even drunkenness or drug abuse can get someone fired...It takes much more now. Like physically attacking a foreman or

theft...but as for the rest, we've got protection now." Allocating blame to the new generation of younger workers is a difficult proposition. Other factors are at play. Some older workers also abide to lackadaisical work ethics. In fact many young workers maintain that older workers were the first individuals to have told them to "slow down" their labour efforts. Some members of the new generation subscribe to what could be defined as being merit-driven work ethics. Pressure tactics, the usage of "sick hours" with impunity and wildcat strikes are communicated by the union and the workplace continues to comprise a strong culture of masculinity. To allocate blame to a single event is not a productive solution and complex nuances are lost.

In the structural shift from merit to seniority, the meritocratic-based seniority that *un col bleu* had accumulated up to date was annulled in what many considered to be a rather draconian manner. This moment of structural readjustment represented a re-genesis of sorts: *un col bleu* with 4 years of experience, for example, was liable to lose his accumulated seniority. This did not signify job loss; however it did represent one being distanced from one's accrued proximity to benefits and advantages. The 2002 recall for winter work was thus used as a method of demarcating those that were working before January 1st from those that came in after. Many *cols bleus* say that they had no idea that the answer they gave for the period of winter work in 2002 would affect their seniority. Auxiliary workers were thus split into two groups with differing levels of seniority depending upon a positive or negative answer to the recall: labourers that committed themselves to winter work would retain most of their seniority while those who answered negatively were at a disadvantage. The finer points regarding this period of transition are difficult to hammer out since there are varying versions of the winter recall and all

members of the administration declined to be interviewed, even though I guaranteed their anonymity and made clear that the goal of these interviews was the clarification of certain pertinent details and not the discussion of workplace tensions. As to why *un col bleu* would have passed up a recall for winter work in 2002 is startling, however some coworkers have supplied answers. Some did not relish the idea of winter work, especially when they felt they were guaranteed the flagman's position (a difficult and unprestigious job), while others preferred to receive unemployment insurance payments. Furthermore, many were exhausted from cutting grass, a recent addition to *Le Centre Technique's* responsibilities. Answers vary, however most have made clear that the rules and repercussions surrounding 2002 winter work were not clear. Communication has never been *Le Centre Technique's* forte at any rate and this may have been a by-product, and perhaps a sign of things to come, of the union's encouragement of cultivating antagonistic attitudes towards management. In reaction to pressure tactics that include the informal control of production and damning media exposés, management or *l'administration* has replied with an increase in surveillance and stiffer penalties. It is noteworthy to add that the increased surveillance of labour intensity/frequency, work quality and unionized coffee breaks have augmented since the media exposés and, more importantly, since the raise of the salary cap for auxiliaries since 2005. Furthermore, this augmented surveillance has been largely aimed at the young males who constitute the grass cutting team.

If pre-merger communities (Lachine has now become *un arrondissement*, a borough of *La Ville de Montréal*) possessed much more decision-making capabilities in regards to organizational methods and economic allocations, it is fair to apply this

reversal of executive power to the various *Travaux Publics* and *Centres Techniques* as well. The structural shift not only had various effects and consequences upon un col bleu's seniority, conflicting work ethics and feelings towards an administration that was increasingly viewed as distant, but it also caused a deracination on the municipal level. The workplace has transformed into an environment that is imbued with suspicion, surveillance and antagonism.

My informal interview with Leclerc, an older Lachinois col bleu who works in the department of carpentry and construction (*Les Métiers*), is meaningful in providing a background for meritocracy as well as exploring what the structural shift to seniority signified for workers. The following interview was conducted in French and was recorded with the informant's permission at his home. The translations are my own.

EXAN: What is the "Bourgeois Period" [*la période Bourgeois*] that I sometimes hear about at work?

LECLERC: [laughs] Well...I knew Bourgeois very well. He was Lachine's General Director, a real character. He was somewhat forcibly retired when the merger took effect in 2002. He had received a lawyer's education and his father was a contractor. He liked *les cols bleus*.

EXAN: What does that mean? He was mayor of Lachine?

LECLERC: No, but *he* had the power, make no mistake about that...and a big budget. He bought loyalty with gifts and vacations. He didn't want to retire but he received a package deal to leave once the mergers had taken place.

EXAN: What was his relationship with *les cols bleus*?

LECLERC: *Un col bleu* during the Bourgeois Period, as you call it, was never too far away from the pyramid of power...

EXAN: So *un col bleu* had access to a special network with Bourgeois?

LECLERC: I think that all of the city of Lachine was recognized in what was happening in regards to political power...be it blue-collar, be it white-collar, be it a civil servant [*un fonctionnaire*] in any of the echelons.

EXAN: Before the mergers.

LECLERC: Before the mergers, yeah...definitely.

EXAN: I would like to know more about this “pyramid of power” you mentioned...

LECLERC: Yeah well, everybody was closer, close enough in fact so that, probably, top brass [*la haute direction*] could have peons in all levels...who can be a peon for Tremblay? He's way too high up, too distant, you'll never reach him...he can't know what is happening in the lower echelons...while in Bourgeois' time it was easily possible...he knew what was happening and he was very approachable since he was always talking [*“il jasait”*, signifying a fondness for chitchat and other venues of gossip] to the guys.

[*Leclerc names a few older cols bleus in le Centre Technique who were very close to Bourgeois and that were often in his office conducting “chitchat”. All seem to have benefitted from their relationships to Bourgeois since all are either contre-maîtres or benefit from mid to high level status within Lachine's bureaucratic levels*]

LECLERC: Bourgeois was the summit. He was higher up than the mayor, don't even doubt it...it was he who gave the mayor instructions...who told him what to do and how to do it! [laughs]

EXAN: Who got to get close to Bourgeois? Any citizen? Or only guys with big jobs [*des grosses jobs*, meaning culturally valued status positions] like cops, firemen and blue-collars...

LECLERC: Everybody! There were obviously advantages if the person was part of the municipal mechanism of power...certainly that kind of person was much more interesting for Bourgeois and his type of politics. The mechanism [*la mécanique*] started from *les cols bleus* to all levels of management, all those who worked for the municipality...

EXAN: Has the merger dismantled these networks? Can a guy still get close to the pyramid? Can a guy still get his brother or chum in? [*In*, signifying the ability to procure an aperture into unionized blue collar work in Lachine via networks]

LECLERC: Surely, yes. Surely and probably the mergers created pyramids within the pyramid...You see, all the municipalities, merged or demerged, answer more or less to a central power that is far...that is in Montréal and that has made a banality of the worker, that has distanced the blue collar...Most people are ignorant of our work. A few years ago carpentry schools came to visit our workplace and they couldn't believe the type of work we were doing there...they thought that public workers [*le monde de la Ville*] worked with shovels and wheelbarrows! Geez! A city is much more complex than that...there are all sorts of jobs to be done. People [the citizenry] never look at that...they only see the guy that is leaning on his shovel in the street...

EXAN: They only see a category...

LECLERC: Yeah! They see a mythology [*une mythologie*]

EXAN: Let's get back to Bourgeois a bit. Can you summarize the positive aspects of his rule?

LECLERC: [laughing] Ah! Back to your favourite man! He was a guy that knew how to make things work, no doubt about it...he was a veritable dictator and negotiations for him were a quick affair...but at the same time he acted like a good family father. He attributed himself a lot of power that's true, but he was a good family father [*un bon père de famille*] and a lot of people were able to taste his brand of protection as lawyer and as power...

EXAN: Protection?

LECLERC: People that found themselves in economic turmoil, diagnosed with health problems, in legal disputes, in divorces, separations...he protected all of them. Bourgeois wasn't just a demon. He had a heart and he loved the working man.

EXAN: Right. His father having been a contractor...

LECLERC: Exactly.

EXAN: So was that period better for *un col bleu* than it is now?

LECLERC: I can only give you my personal opinion...it suits me. The new situation suits me fine.

EXAN: The merger and the 2004 collective bargaining round suit you?

LECLERC: The merger suits me because I do not need to flatter anybody...I just do my job. While during Bourgeois' Period there was a courting process, a courtesan's job that was necessary and I always hated that aspect.

EXAN: One had to flirt...

LECLERC: Yes! It did not agree with me...however one's ambitions could be curtailed pretty quickly if one did not flirt with those in power.

This segment reveals certain traits of the Bourgeois Period that ended with the 2002 mergers. Bourgeois was a Lachinois council member who possessed significant political clout and the administrative and executive body he belonged to is depicted by

Leclerc as being accessible to all residents in Lachine. An intimacy with political figures was made possible by the conditions of that period's climate and rewarding networks could be nurtured. Pierre portrays Bourgeois as being "the summit" of political power during his career on the council—he even outstrips mayoral decision making. Bourgeois is also juxtaposed with Tremblay, whom my informant deems as being embedded within a hinterland of bureaucratic sandbags discouraging accessibility. In this context Bourgeois appears as a benevolent "father figure" who demonstrates largesse by employing his educational training in legal studies as well as his political status in order to supply "protection" to specific individuals. Two important points are to be noted here: firstly, these individuals were also part of Lachine's municipal tissues, thus facilitating their capacity to network effectively (being a Lachinois *col bleu* handily fulfilling this condition and one must not forget that Bourgeois was fond of "hardworking" manual workers) and secondly this so-called protection should be perceived as an exchange of services located within a political economy that has not been made completely extinct by the 2002 mergers (both municipal and union) and the 2004 *Convention Collective* that ushered in seniority and its accompanying list that decrees the order of calls back to work at the beginning of every new work season (after the snow melts, usually in April or May). The Bourgeois Period, as currently described by Leclerc in this interview segment, is one where networking and the construction of ties to figures of authority figure prominently. If one attempted to circumvent this "courtesan's job", one ran the risk of being excluded by key political figures who are the holders of certain beneficial resources in Lachine. It is to be noted that Leclerc himself prefers the current seniority system and independence from a "father figure."

Bélanger, a young male in his thirties who had been *un col bleu* for 9 years in Lachine shares an interesting account concerning the meritocratic years. He started his career in the Department of Green Spaces, like most workers do. He granted me a short interview that I was able to record with his permission. The translations are my own.

BÉLANGER: Back in those days Bourgeois...before the merger and before the harmonization of salaries...he was more of a hard liner since in those days municipalities overlooked the allocation of funds themselves and this included the salaries of public workers. Bourgeois was the reason auxiliary workers [*des travailleurs auxiliaires*, seasonal workers with few benefits] earned less in Lachine when compared to Lasalle or the City of Montréal. When I was working, auxiliaries earned \$10/hr. and this was done to keep costs down.

[Auxiliary workers now earn \$20.52 due to the collective bargaining agreement of 2004]

EXAN: What else was different back then?

BÉLANGER: One thing that wasn't half bad was that if an auxiliary drove a vehicle for even 20 minutes during the day, he would earn \$18/hr. for the entire day...that was lucrative [*c'était rentable ça*] and it worked in the favour of a guy who could show that he was a good worker [*qu'il était vaillant*]

EXAN: Why a good worker?

BÉLANGER: Well, because back in Bourgeois' days guys who worked hard and proved that they could be trusted to do a job were rewarded [*"ils étaient valorisés"* literally being valorised for one's efforts] and got to drive trucks and there was the question of winter work too...

["Winter work" will be discussed further on since it once represented the most concrete form of recompense that one could attain during the Bourgeois Period]

EXAN: Did you do ok with this system of merit?

BÉLANGER: For someone like me it was great [*c'était très bien*]...I got my permanency quickly, soon after becoming *un conducteur* [a worker who is permitted to drive pickups and other machinery not requiring specialized training] at \$18/hr. during my second year. That's fast when compared to the wait that guys nowadays have to endure.

EXAN: When did you receive permanent status?

BÉLANGER: I got it in my 4th year.

EXAN: That's impressive...Most guys are now having to wait 15 years to get it.

BÉLANGER: Yeah, things were different...and it is because of me that *La Ville* was able to develop a graphic department [the process required for the production of signs], since they would out source all of their work to other companies in order to have signs made. I got tired though...9 years was enough.

EXAN: What tired you?

BÉLANGER: I wasn't meant to stay there forever. I studied to be a graphic designer and my goal has always to become an entrepreneur. Besides, the reign of terror [*le reign de terreur*] refers to workplace tensions, powers struggles and the appropriation of labour by one's coworkers (see chapter 5)] got to be too much after a while...

[Here I briefly describe the workplace tensions that some labourers have faced and how it has affected their quality of life at work and encouraged them to seek out alternatives, i.e. a way out of the Department of Green Spaces]

BÉLANGER: I think that it's the new generation who are those responsible for making life hard for others who want to demarcate themselves [*les nouveaux jeunes*]...they spend the night drinking and smoking [marijuana] and they don't want to look bad, so they hate it when someone outshines them. They want to establish work ethics like way back in the day [*comme dans l'temps*].

EXAN: And what were "back in the day" work ethics like?

BÉLANGER: Like in the 60s...a lot of bullying and threats and power struggles [*des gamiques*, contextually signifying cliques vying for resources]. I got fed up of the administration...you never get any feedback and it really is downright depressing [*c'est dévalorisant*]. Besides I wasn't meant to have a career there [*La Ville*].

Temporal markers are defined by Bélanger as well as juxtaposed in order to draw attention to their oppositional qualities. Bourgeois' meritocratic moment stands in stark contrast to temporal markers exemplified by the following terms: "back in the day" [*comme dans l'temps*], "the 60s" [*les années 60s*] and "after the mergers." These temporal markers represent different systems of common sense knowledge within *La Ville* that have operated during different time frames. "*Comme dans l'temps*" is equated to "*les années 60s*" which is depicted by Bélanger's opinion (an opinion shaped by having worked *pour La Ville*) as a time of decadence and corruption. Whether this is an

accurate portrayal or biased by Bélanger's own experience is difficult to support and beyond the scope of the thesis, however what is of import is the fact that he draws linkage from the negatively described past to the new generation of workers—"les nouveaux jeunes" (the new youth). When older workers speak of *les jeunes* within *Le Centre Technique* they are alluding to the young males who populate *Les Espaces Verts* since this department is the only one composed of this negatively perceived demographic.

Thus, *les jeunes*, as depicted by Bélanger, adhere to a type of mentality that he finds to be reflecting older values of work: lax work ethics, drunkenness and bullying. In post-merger Lachine, Bélanger describes an emotional experience characterized by a "reign of terror" and a distant administration: "I got fed up of the administration...you never get any feedback and it really is downright depressing". This marks the entry into a period of unaccountability and indifference for the quality of work that he was producing and he uses a key word that many other young *cols bleus* have used: *dévalorisant*. This is an important term that I have frequently heard utilized during work hours and denotes a surprisingly emotional and intimate quality to the speaker's statement. It is misleading to understand it as an attack upon management; it is more akin to disappointment and a deeply embedded sadness—that of a child's brave efforts that go unrecognized and uncelebrated by figures of authority. But even this depiction does not go far enough. To feel that one's efforts within the workplace are of little value does not rest entirely upon the administration's shoulders and its lack of feedback; it is a sincere feeling that is also generated by the subtle mechanism of mediocrity created by seniority's proponents and supporters. *Dévalorisant* becomes an acceptable word to transmit emotions that are usually seen as being culturally unacceptable and effete within that particular work

environment and also serves as a much more realistic counterweight to the *raconteur*'s usual arsenal of manly boasts and bravado (see chapter 6). The strong feeling of isolation within one's labour vis-à-vis the possibility of not receiving recognition or reward is one that is not only experienced by "good workers" who have been able to secure advantages underneath the meritocratic system, it is also felt, in an ironic and contradictory twist, by workers who support the union perspective. Workers have also conveyed feelings of isolation, distance and mediocrity (the root emotions of *dévalorisant*) and are not pleased about it. When I have asked workers who advocate the seniority system if they like their jobs and enjoy working *pour La Ville* the answers I have received a unanimity of negative responses. Most are lukewarm at best about their careers and in order to exorcize these feelings the current salary is often mentioned and celebrated.

It is during these final years of feeling *dévalorisé* that Bélanger produces a cultural line of demarcation. He disassociates himself from the post-merger *Ville* by stating that he had greater ambitions and that he was willing to pursue them, a statement most likely stemming from the fact that he had earned a degree in graphic design and that he felt capable of discarding one of Lachine's sought-after "good jobs." Bélanger's abandonment of *La Ville* for a personally more meaningful trajectory is not something that many of my young coworkers are willing to entertain, especially when considering that the new salary has become a great source of prestige. It has also proven fascinating to be present while the primary rationale for working *pour La Ville* has undergone a structural readjustment: under the meritocratic system, one worked because one was surrounded with long time friends and informal groups (Dunk 1991, Willis 1977). Under the seniority system, one works because of the superior paycheck. One version supports

camaraderie and personal work ethics to accelerate one's career while the other contemporary system of relations supports multi-directional antagonism (hostility aimed towards figures of authority and elements of meritocracy) and work ethics that are often punctuated by prolonged usage of pressure tactics even though a round of collective bargaining is far from sight.

The meritocratic system that Bélanger describes represents a set of oppositional values towards what is now seniority. Bélanger was able to secure certain advantageous positions during the Bourgeois Period that would prove unachievable within the set of conditions currently active. Bélanger was able to become *un conducteur* during his second year and benefit from a considerably higher wage bracket (\$18/hr. versus \$10/hr. for regular/auxiliary workers or *les journaliers*). This newly acquired promotion fast tracked him to permanency within an unusually short period of time, both being concrete rewards possible under, and representative of, the meritocracy system. He was thus able to demarcate himself as a trustworthy worker and gained mobility for doing so. Bélanger was also given enough leeway to be able to create a new department, one that reflected his educational training and that enabled him to create an egress from *Les Espaces Verts*. This development is not insignificant for *le Département de Graphisme* (now defunct after Bélanger's departure) represented a very different world than that of *Les Espaces Verts*. The former involves a quasi-artistic process, is indoors, one can wear comfortable urbane clothing (Bélanger was always well dressed during my first year and his last year) and is closer to mental labour, while the latter is widely recognized as the most physically demanding of departments, in other words manual labour of a particularly taxing quality. The considerable \$8.00 wage gap between auxiliary workers and drivers during the

Bourgeois Period is a revealing indicator that reinforces meritocracy's system of rewards via recognition of an employee's performance and networking capabilities. The wage difference between auxiliary workers and drivers is now a slim margin. In fact many *cols bleus* find that the reward is not commensurate with the effort that driver status demands of the participant (see chapter 5). There was a significant incentive in the form of a higher salary cap to procure (or at least to get one's hands on a steering wheel once in awhile in order to net an \$18/hr. day) driver status during the meritocratic pre-merger years, however as things now stand many *cols bleus* actually attempt to avoid this type of promotion and the responsibilities (along with other more subtle complications) that it entails. The attitudinal stance concerning the desirability of obtaining driver or *chauffeur/conducteur* standing during the meritocratic years and the current seniority driven workplace configuration produces a surprising contrast—especially when certain aspects of the milieu are considered such as the unwavering rationale behind earning wages and even selling narcotics in a bid to supplement income sources. It would seem only logical that to become a driver would represent a desirable station to ascend to, and it is; however, there are exceptions (see chapter 5).

“The reign of terror” and its partisans that my informant has alluded to may appear to be sensationalist, however it is not inaccurate. Bullying, intimidation and ostracization are workplace realities that I have observed and experienced personally and “terror” in the form of a mounting concern for one's career and quality of life in *La Ville* is not to be taken lightly. Many of these young French-Canadian males possess a level of education that would not permit them to compete effectively in the global market economy. For many, such as Arsenault, working *pour La Ville* represented not only a

prestigious job but also a future. To have this future threatened by a structural shift that encourages and perpetuates lackadaisical work ethics because one need not perform when one has achieved a safe degree of seniority, is a bitter pill to swallow for those who perceive *La Ville* as having been a career choice for which they have “worked hard.” It is, however, deceiving to attempt to lay the blame upon “les nouveaux jeunes.”

Winter Work

During my first year working with *les cols bleus* I was paired up with Arsenault, a bright faced young man full of initiative who perceived working for *La Ville* as a strategy for a sound future. He had once told me with what seemed to be not a small amount of pride: “With me you’ll get good little jobs [*des belles p’tites jobines*]. Honorine treats me well [*elle est correct avec moi*] because she knows that I am a good worker”. Arsenault’s statement was not far off the mark. Throughout my 2004 season of work (6 months) with Arsenault it was a rarity for us to be issued unprestigious labour during rainy weather. Labour deemed undesirable during a drizzle or downpour usually revolves around the different stages of preparing *des plates-bandes* (ornamental earthworks, see chapter 6). This type of labour does not provide the same physical mobility as cutting grass (the former is a largely sedentary type of labour while the latter affords a high degree of movement: both bodily and vehicular) nor does it possess the same degree of masculinity for it is perceived by many young *cols bleus* as being an effeminate job that is to be conducted “on all fours” or *à quatre pattes*, a pejorative image employing sexual submission to describe the pulling of weeds. What is meaningful is that our benefits and exemptions from dull labour during rainy days were being distributed to us by the head of our department and this was largely due to a meritocratic system of organizing work.

When Arsenault and I were working together, seniority had not yet been fully integrated into the workplace (although many workers had already stopped caring about performance); rewards and recognition were still important. The union had already started to give orders for pressure tactics and our first three days together were spent mucking about in the morning and taking as much time as possible in readying the pickup truck. Late starts and slowing production were part of the union's bid in gaining leverage with the City of Montréal, since a new round of collective bargaining was a few months away. Many *cols bleus* had already started to speak about seniority replacing meritocracy and workers often described the current system as a nepotistic regime that favored some labourers over others. One co-worker, Meloche, would also often refer to Arsenault as a prime example of a worker who did not understand how to "really work well" (*comment vraiment bien travailler*) and as a recipient of Honorine's praise. During the first few months Meloche would sometimes visit me on the worksite (he drove a Toro tractor and therefore was afforded with a high degree of independence) and have talks with me regarding "proper" work ethics. Arsenault, however, was not the only one being scrutinized; I was also receiving a psychological frisking. During these bouts of gossip, when Arsenault was absent, Meloche depicted him as a guy who lacked control and vision.

In regards to the union's call for slowdowns, Arsenault appeared to be proud and happy to be a unionized *col bleu* and to be able to take part in (as well as teach me) these foot dragging strategies. Morning slowdowns did not last long however (a few days at the start of the season), for one balmy morning Arsenault stated that he found these tactics tiring and a waste of time. A few months later we also took part in the infamous vehicle

switch in Verdun. Lachine's pickup trucks and tractors were swapped for *La Ville de Montréal's* vehicles for a two week period. Arsenault was excited to be able to play a part in the union's efforts and was in high spirits that morning, singing and joking—looking for all the world like a young boy about to play a particularly wicked prank on a crotchety headmaster. Arsenault, in the year of 2004, was a firm believer in the union cause and when I would ask him what was “going on” (I, being completely ignorant of the issues and still struggling with the fact that Arsenault and I seemed to be the only ones “working hard” among the grass cutting team in 2004) he would often answer: “Ah! Me I don't ask any questions! I do my job and keep my mouth shut”. This response was emblematic of what I have come to call “the culture of silence”—a powerful mechanism or code of conduct that was most likely founded upon a pre-existing attitude of manual labour vis-à-vis mental labour's executive power (see chapter 5). The culture of silence can manifest itself as a strict unspoken code against divulging information to figures of authority, what is essentially perceived as “stooling” or “ratting somebody out/snitching”, and the repercussions for doing so include ostracizing, a considerably lethal form of social sabotage within a workplace that many workers describe as supplying them with a career and a solid future. A future career *pour La Ville* tainted by charges of informing a figure of authority is a terrible prospect to face, especially when one may not possess other options that produce an equivalent index of prestige and purchasing power. This stockpiling of threats-as-possibility is what structures the culture of silence as an efficient mechanism for deterring voices from attempting to create an alternative definition of their environment (see chapter 5). The culture of silence maintains hegemonic power and produces depression and deep anxieties within the workplace in Lachine.

Arsenault may have been willing to “do his part for the union” and to act his part as “*un bon col bleu*” however he was also an energetic worker and a stickler for quality (cutting grass requires a special eye for detail) and he became one of Meloche’s main targets for intimidation and character assassination. Meloche had once candidly divulged to me that the reason why he disliked Arsenault so much was because he had access to prestigious winter work (*d’la job d’hiver*) while his own tenure was largely disregarded. Even though Meloche may have been “older” (“*plus vieux*” is the correct cultural expression denoting tenure and seniority) than Arsenault, he had not been granted “good” winter work. While Arsenault was able to drive *un bombardier* (a small tractor on treads with a snow plough) equipped with a heater, Meloche had been made *un flag man*. A flag man is exposed to the cold winter weather and conducts his work on foot.

Bessette, a young *col bleu* in my department who had been working *pour La Ville* for 11 years took the time to explain to me how winter work was allocated under the meritocratic system. Given his considerably longer career he had been exposed to winter work more than Arsenault and offered a detailed account of this type of labour. It was impossible to record this discussion, however Bessette allowed me to take notes and was patient with my questions and writing.

BESSETTE: During the merit years all of the guys that worked on the ice rinks [*sur les glaces*, literally on the ice or *les patinoires*, ice rinks] or on the snow were good workers since Honorine kept all of the workers that she thought to be productive and responsible.

[*The outdoor variety of ice rinks is part of winter work while the indoor variety represents a kind of very prestigious job to gain access to. Indoor ice rinks are active throughout the year and offer a workplace reputed for being calm (it is far removed from the tensions and collusions of Le Centre Technique) as well as enjoying a high index of masculinity given the cultural value accorded to ice hockey and its pantheon of Québécois sports heroes. In other words this type of work regroups culturally valued elements such as freedom from surveillance, indoor amenities and respect*]

EXAN: Did guys like Meloche get winter work?

BESSETTE: Yeah. Meloche and his brother [who also works as *un col bleu* in Lachine] were very good workers back in the day...he started to change when *La Ville* started to cut grass and with the collective agreement of 2004.

EXAN: What were the salaries like when you started working?

BESSETTE: Back in the day *un chauffeur* earned \$14.86/hr., \$370/wk. and about \$27,000/yr. *Un'elper* [a helper, meaning a subordinate worker such as an auxiliary that does not drive] made \$11.56/hr., \$320/wk. and from \$18,000 to \$20,000 /yr. Since then these figures have nearly doubled, however overtime has been reduced by about three quarters.

EXAN: What made winter work a desirable prospect?

BESSETTE: What made winter work good was the amount of work available and overtime. Sometimes I could make over \$1000/wk. [*j'pouvais toucher à une paye de mille que' piasses*]. During this period overtime was plentiful and it was double time [*temps double*] instead of the current time-and-a-half [*temps et demi*].

EXAN: I guess a driver could make a lot of money...

BESSETTE: Christ yes. One winter I made so much money that I bought myself the PS2 [the Play Station 2 videogame console] when it came out. Back then it was pretty expensive. I paid \$800 for the special package deal that included the console with two control pads and a few games...

EXAN: Nice. When there was overtime was a guy obligated to take it up?

BESSETTE: You could either say yes or no to overtime when it was offered, but it was not well seen to reject it since those who were asked had a bit of a reputation to keep up...you know, like the guy was known to be a good worker so... overtime is now pretty rare: a bit at the start of the season when there is a rush, *Les fêtes de Lachine, La St. Jean* and bit at winter if there are bad storms...

EXAN: Right. So if you got winter work in the first place for being a good worker you had to keep on proving yourself with overtime...

BESSETTE: Yeah. It wasn't easy man. Overtime back in the day [*dans l'temps*] was based on a lot of hard work and only the best workers had access to it...they [management] ran it in the manner of private companies [*ça marchait à la manière du privé*].

EXAN: Like contractors?

BESSETTE: Yeah. Work was intense and physically demanding...it had a different character altogether because one's effort was recompensed with preferential treatment...Some guys would ask me why was it that I had winter work and not they. Some were mad about that for sure...there was a lot of jealousy.

EXAN: I guess so...all that money.

BESSETTE: Plus we got bonuses. If you worked evenings (3pm-11pm) you got \$1 added to your salary base and if you worked nights (11pm-7am) you got \$1.75 more...And if you worked 8 hours of overtime you would get a free lunch of a \$10 value every 4 hours and be allowed to take 1 hour to eat it...

EXAN: Any good jobs and bad jobs?

BESSETTE: Flagman was worst since you had to walk backwards, always keeping an eye on the snow plough [*la souffleuse*] and make certain that the chute wasn't jammed and you had to do this 4 hours straight without stopping...Now one doesn't need to walk backwards and one can take alternating 1 hour shifts with a secondary flagman and get warmed up...The ice rinks were the best job you could get and that goes the same for now...tractors aren't bad either but it is very stressful especially when you get close to parked cars or hit a big piece of ice and smash your head on the ceiling...

EXAN: What's it like now pay wise?

BESSETTE: Well you can forget about the food and now with seniority it is \$0 for evenings and \$0.75 for nights...

In this account of winter work it paid well to be recognized as a “good worker.” *Un col bleu* who was able to demarcate himself would be granted access to winter work, thus extending his participation. A prolonged season meant that the worker could further his career by continuing to interact with figures of authority (such as *contre-mâîtres* and department bosses), thus enabling him to continue to build networks and beneficial relations—to maintain the “courtesan's trade” as depicted by Leclerc. Achieving recognition was also key in gaining admission to overtime's lucrative configuration including the possibility of effectively doubling one's salary as well as enjoying advantageous bonuses. For Bessette this welcomed influx of cash allowed him to

purchase prestige items (an expensive and culturally valued videogame console) and his labour secured his place within the administration's imagination as a worker who had not only been handpicked for winter work but who was also ready and willing to take on the arduous demands of overtime. Bessette describes overtime under the meritocratic system as "a lot of hard work" and that *La Ville* oversaw its organization in a similar fashion to private companies or contractors. This statement is not to be taken lightly and a few young *cols bleus* (such as Arsenault for instance) who have worked for contractors can vouch for the feverish level of labour and concern for quality that is held at a constant in order to establish a clientele and to compete with other privately owned companies.

Bessette also mentions that winter work was a source of jealousy among *cols bleus* within *Les Espaces Verts*, a seasonal department that ceases its operations for most cases in December. Although being chosen for winter work due to one's performance and capabilities was the meritocratic way, one cannot help but imagine how a young worker might feel upon hearing that a childhood pal or an acquaintance who lives on the same street was given the opportunity to continue working. Or when one friend receives the keys to the heated tractor and the other receives the flagman's tough duty. One must remember that this job was a career move for many *cols bleus* and the prospect of having one's wings clipped at an early stage must have been understandably worrisome as well as frustrating.

A sense of vulnerability and betrayal is often articulated by the younger workers even during the current period of seniority. Meloche, visibly upset one brisk autumn day, shared the following: "I gave my fucking life to *La Ville* (*J'leur ai donné ma câlisse de vie*). I worked hard and I didn't get anything back. So now I do my thing and, if they give

me problems, *Local 301* is never too far away.” Desnoyers, another young male, most of the time boisterous, an avid patron of exotic cabarets and often questioning the masculinity of other workers during gossip rounds, appeared stricken with grief when he received his end-of-season notice. When I gently asked him what was wrong he answered:

DESNOYERS: I thought they would keep me a bit longer you know...

EXAN: Yeah but you knew that letter was coming, we all did...

DESNOYERS: You always have a little bit of hope... [*t’espère toujours un peut*]

[“la lettre”, the letter, is a cultural term that can denote the end-of-season notice signed by the administration’s director as well as the documentation that can end un cols bleus’ career if certain conditions are met such as physically attacking un contre-maître or theft]

These brief and rare forays into an articulation of naked vulnerability are of consequence considering that they have not only been expressed within a milieu at times demonstrating a casual and aggressive style of masculinity but also during seniority and *not* meritocracy. Meloche as well as Desnoyers are communicating sentiments of disappointment and these emotional critiques are not aimed at meritocracy’s system that many have described as nepotistic and unjust, they are applied to the current workplace experience—seniority. Everybody in *Le Centre Technique* becomes concerned and agitated when the season’s final days of labour approach. Gossip is rampant as a firm date for *le slackage* (the period of layoff) is sought, at times with very little success and at other times with a pinpoint accuracy that reflects many of these young males’ ability to analyze sport related statistics. To gain access to *La Ville* is half of the battle, however to gain permanency, or at least to work beyond *le slackage* can become a protracted war of

patience as one's seniority slowly builds up over time. Working is meaningful because, for many, *La Ville* equates security and a prestigious life trajectory. I was reminded a few times by coworkers during our overtime travails that not many students with university degrees could hope to be earning "this kind of money" ("*temps et demi*", time-and-a-half under seniority is valued at \$30.54/hr.). There are complications related to not being able to continue to work due to layoffs. Most gravitate towards *le chômage* (unemployment insurance or "pogey"), a term that has made its place within French-Canadian cultural lore. For instance *le pudding chômeur* ("pogey pudding") is a popular dessert made with bread crusts, eggs and brown sugar and the word itself has become a verb. *Le chômage* is a rational option made relatively painless owing to the fact that municipal workers fall under the provincial government's jurisdiction thus facilitating processing. Within *La Ville*, 910 hours of work (6 months of work more or less) are needed to open first time dossiers and 520 hours of labour must have been completed in order to re-access unemployment insurance in subsequent years. In both cases a wait involving 3-4 weeks for a pink slip (*le p'tit papier rose*) is in order before biweekly paychecks (roughly amounting to \$750 or \$1500/month) start coming in. Now that salaries have exponentially increased *chômage* payments have also followed in good stead making for a significantly more lucrative prospect. Some welcome *le slackage* for various reasons. Some procure external jobs that feature "under the table" wages (i.e. cash free of taxation) while others secure positions with contractors who specialize in snow removal.

Monetarily, the winter can represent a bounty, however most young *cols bleus* also depict it as an anxious period of scrounging for work and shoveling snow is no simple task: shifts are usually nocturnal and labour is intensive. Furthermore, although

receiving unemployment insurance possesses advantageous features, many would choose to continue to work *pour La Ville* in a bid to advance their careers—to be out of sight is to be out of mind and, if a worker can maintain a presence, all the better. This effectively demonstrates that although the 2002 mergers (creating a mega-union with more clout) along with the 2004 collective bargaining round that initiated seniority, it would be misleading to conclude that meritocracy has been phased out indefinitely. Proponents of seniority within the workplace tend to depict seniority as being a fair organizational mechanism that circumvents nepotistic tendencies, however partisans of *l'ancienneté* are also expressing feelings of alienation and unhappiness. To gain one's permanency is now a lengthy affair (consider Bélanger's quick ascension during the Bourgeois Period) and management may have understood recognition as a method of valorizing a worker as no longer having a place within a system that encourages production slowdowns, antagonism towards figures of authority and that has reduced ambition to a matter of waiting.

Meritocracy may have accelerated permanency and winter work was perceived as being a reward. Although this reward necessitated “a lot of hard work”, benefits in the concrete forms of momentarily increased purchasing power (through winter work itself, plentiful overtime and applicable bonuses), extended networking possibilities (to receive and accept overtime and to continue performative excellence in proximity to figures of authority in order to be known as a “good worker”) and developing one's career. Monetary rewards, intensive manual work and networking are all highly regarded within the cultural matrix of these young French-Canadian males and furthermore a high index of masculinity is contingent upon these positive values. In meritocracy's regime a field of

relations and principles outlining a common sense knowledge in which the notions about manliness are central. It is a remarkable change of events that “hard work” or being a “good worker” among the grass cutters of the department of green spaces, as well as the other departmental branches some would argue, has been relegated to the realm of the effeminate, a negatively perceived value within the cultural world in question. It becomes necessary to take a closer look at how the grass cutting crew operated under meritocracy and to observe the impacts of the structural shift to seniority.

The Grass Cutters *before* Seniority

The grass cutting crew (*l'équipe du gazon*) is a recent addition to *La Ville*'s workforce. The Department of Green Spaces is responsible for cutting grass with lawnmowers, tractors and weed eaters or *des whips*. Grass cutting started in the spring of 2001 and many young males were hired at that precise time in order to fill its ranks. Until the spring of 2001, grass cutting had been outsourced to privately owned companies—contractors. The first grass cutting crew in 2001 was significantly larger than the one that operated in 2007. A member of the new generation who started his career *pour La Ville* as *un whipeur* (one who manipulates a weed eater) in the Department of Green Spaces recalls that the initial team was comprised of 8 *whipeurs* and 4 tractors. In 2007 the number of *whipeurs* fell to 4 and in the intervening years there were often only 3, a significant drop, but perhaps not a remarkable one considering the physical nature of the department and the taxing labour of the grass cutting branch. If there is veracity to the accounts that were given, *all* of the young working class males gained access to *La Ville* through networks. Fathers, uncles, brothers, friends, political figures and mothers have all lent their hand in creating apertures that reproduce and maintain *col bleu* culture and

presence in Lachine. In other words, the networks that were exploited in order to produce mobility (gaining access to a prestigious job, *une bonne job*) are those that were also mobilized under the prior regime of meritocracy.

The early years of grass cutting are often described in terms similar to winter work during meritocracy: “hard work.” The work was physical and is depicted as having been a difficult medium from which to advertise one’s capacity to labour. Considering that grass cutting represented a first employment opportunity for most of these young males it is not unanticipated that they became very involved in the nature of the labour and “did their best.” Two elements are of interest during the early years of grass cutting: the position of crew leader and camaraderie.

The crew leader or *le chef d’équipe* (the word *chef*, “chief” being a form of friendly greeting like “man”, “bro” or “dude”) was a position that only lasted 3 years—from the grass cutting branch’s creation in 2001 to the end-of-season in 2003. By the time I had joined the grass cutter ranks the notion of *un chef d’équipe* seemed to be treated with an attitude reserved for taboos. The crew leader’s duty was based upon authority and prestige. There was a single crew leader who drove the #46 pickup (a large, white pickup truck with the capacity to carry 5 passengers, the other 3 workers being ferried by a smaller truck) and the smallest tractor (*La Gravelly*) that is used cut perimeters, which added an extra dollar to his hourly earnings. The crew leader received the day’s list of areas that needed to be cut; however there seems to have been an interesting dynamic involving the organization of labour. It has been expressed that the *chef* and his crew had great knowledge pertaining to areas that needed immediate attention and that the administration gave them a considerable amount of elbow room for making judgment

calls based upon lived experience. It was the leader's responsibility to make certain that quality was maintained and he also possessed the role of procuring food and drink for the morning and afternoon unionized coffee-breaks. While he did so the rest of the crew continued to labour during the 15 minutes allocated for the completion of snack gathering. Finally, and most significantly, the *chef d'équipe* had to report to the administration any developments that might conflict with production, such as individuals who may have been causing slowdowns in productivity.

The crew leader earned more money (a single dollar perhaps does not represent an extreme gap but is still symbolic of rank), drove vehicles (the most prestigious truck to have access to and a tractor that cancels the activity of walking all day while holding a piece of vibrating machinery), escaped from 30 minutes of labour everyday and also provided the top brass with reports pertaining to personnel. The latter constitutes what the young males of the department call "stooling" (an individual that does this is known as *un stooleux*): entering the bureaucratic realm of *Le Centre Technique*'s second floor and giving an account to a figure of authority that usually takes the shape of a grievance against another crew member's work ethics. A negative value is attached to *stooling* (essentially to "rat someone out") and it is culturally perceived as a traitorous act. *Stooling* is an important notion and I will return to it in the discussion of the culture of silence in chapter 5.

Arsenault has told me that some members of the crew grew jealous of the benefits that the *chef* received and an increasing tension punctuated the experience of cutting grass in the early years. In the spring of 2004 the position of *chef d'équipe* had been terminated indefinitely due to mounting in-fighting between crew members and also

because it was viewed as being an anachronism with the onset of seniority. However, perceiving *les chefs* as non-existent is a pitfall for this position still exists and hardships describe its experience (see chapter 5). Since 2003 there has been a steady decrease of *whipeurs* and *La Ville* has returned to contracting out some of its work load. It is interesting though that to experience proximity to one's childhood friends and hockey/softball teammates was still often cited as a primary rationale for working *pour La Ville*, even after the dissolution of crew leaders. The end of *les chefs d'équipe* demonstrates that the political economy surrounding tensions and power struggles was already at work before the seniority regime was initiated.

Camaraderie has also changed significantly and this is largely due to oppositional versions of work ethics that have solidified along with the lines produced by the structural shift. Arsenault, my first year partner in 2004, articulated a strong sense of belonging and camaraderie framed by the informal group that guided his entry into the cultural world of *La Ville*. Most had not finished the fifth and final year of high school (*le secondaire cinq*) and had instead turned to the job market as unskilled manual labourers. Arsenault recalls the first 3 years of the grass cutting branch as being positive but also as signifying a period of transformation. The following conversation was held in 2004 and was recorded with Arsenault's permission at his home.

ARSENAULT: Most of us were friends. Like Coutemanche and Moisang...we've known one another since kindergarten. It was special getting into *La Ville* with your friends and working together...

EXAN: Were you closer back then?

ARSENAULT: Things were different...It was a new job and we all wanted to look good [*paraître bien*] so we worked hard...it was a serious commitment [*un engagement sérieux*], leaving school to go work like that...but we were happy to be working together, a real gang.

EXAN: How did it make you feel to quit school and find work?

ARSENAULT: I use to skip classes to go play hockey with the older *col bleus*...One day my French class teacher told me that I had better make a choice—stay in school or go play hockey. I chose hockey and *les cols bleus*...

EXAN: Did you get into *La Ville* immediately after that?

ARSENAULT: For awhile I worked for a contractor doing construction...he ran me ragged, it was very stressful and I was working 60-70 hours a week...During that time I didn't even have time for a girlfriend and after a while I started to feel depressed, my life felt like it was falling apart, like I had nowhere to turn to...When Mehon [the *chef d'équipe* that was described above] called me and told me about the new grass cutting branch and that he wanted me to join I was very happy. *La Ville* saved my life, it gave me purpose...

EXAN: Did you see it as being a career move?

ARSENAULT: Yeah, for me it gave me a direction.

EXAN: Did you know Mehon?

ARSENAULT: We played hockey together and our fathers knew one another...

EXAN: What did you guys do differently from now?

ARSENAULT: Well, we went out together a lot [*en masse*]...especially when we got paid on Thursdays...we even went out on Fridays and Saturdays...

EXAN: What would you guys do?

ARSENAULT: [laughs] Everything! We would start by going out for a nice supper downtown and drinking wine...then we would hit the clubs and the afterhours...we'd drink, do speed, sometimes coke [*d'la poud'e*]...we'd get messed up big time! [*on s'pêtaient la gueule!*]

EXAN: How was the money holding up?

ARSENAULT: It wasn't rare to blow the entire paycheck during the weekend...it's an expensive lifestyle, especially when you're doing speed 'cause you can keep on going for a long time without sleep and you can drink a lot more than you usually can.

EXAN: And now things are a little different aren't they?

ARSENAULT: Yeah...we've stopped doing that. Well, we might get together but not like before. Working together changed things, some got jealous and bitter [*jaloux et amer*] 'cause others were being picked to do good jobs.

EXAN: Like winter work and stuff?

ARSENAULT: Winter work, some got easier jobs [*des p'tites jobines*], nicer trucks to drive, more praise [*des louanges*]...the kind of things that might get another guy wondering...

EXAN: How about this seniority that might be on its way? How do you feel about it?

ARSENAULT: A guy like me is going to get fucked over [*j'va m'faire fourrer*]...I probably won't get access to winter work now since the older guys'll be getting it now. I guess I'll have to figure something out...

[Although Arsenault was indeed able to "figure something out", his premonitions of being cut from winter work due to seniority's system of tenure became a reality in the month of January 2005. Arsenault was still able to secure work year-round by becoming one of the Centre Technique's janitors—a job he viewed as perhaps not being as masculine as grass cutting, but free of in-fighting among crew members. This provided him with peace of mind and he later informed me that getting out the department of green spaces had changed his life for the better (see chapter 5)]

Arsenault expresses in this brief recollection of the early years of grass cutting several important themes. Wage earning was perceived as representing a rational trajectory instead of continuing scholastic studies, a professional program or other formal training (Willis 1977). Insidership and personal networks helped Arsenault in gaining entry into a job that came to symbolize a beacon of hope. *La Ville* provided Arsenault with a viable career path and some of his close childhood friendships also followed suit. During the early years Arsenault expresses a distinct feeling of energy and movement as the informal group secures a prestigious job in a working-class deindustrialized town, experiences manual labour together as well as leisure time. As described by Arsenault, leisure time was a costly commitment in regards to one's resources and was characterized by a hedonistic quality. This celebratory mood (although interwoven with a kind of

acceptable self-destruction), which was activated at least three times a week, could perhaps be perceived as symbolizing an earnest happiness in having procured *une bonne job* that would supply the young participants with respect, a future and pocket money. Most notably, however, it indicated camaraderie away from work, a condition that changed as alliances within the workplace shifted. Enduring *col bleu* solidarity that is placed within a mythological zone that is beyond the ebb and flow of breakage and reorganization has become a popular, essentialist misconception often promulgated by media outlets as well as stereotypical discourse. Workplace alliances and *col bleu* relationships vis-à-vis the informal group, figures of authority, the union and perceptions concerning the future viability of *La Ville* as *une bonne job* undergo shifts, reconfigurations and reassessments. Scholars have also observed the nature of change within working-class cultural groups. Dunk has observed the reorganization of informal groups as factors such as education and marriage impact upon its membership (1991). Gutmann has examined redefinitions of so-called concrete gender categories (1996) and Sider, through a historical analysis of Newfoundland fishing communities challenges the popularly held view (within mainstream as well as in academic discourse) that class boundaries are rigid (1986).

In his historical ethnography Sider is concerned with the matter of culture in situations of change (1986:4). He states: "...in the Marxist analysis of history, it has usually been assumed that class systems can ultimately be delineated by fundamental cleavages between antagonistic elements: workers versus owners; labour versus capital" (1986:7). Sider suggests that this classic line of demarcation is useful however a more "subtle and complex appreciation" must be cultivated in order to render it more

productive (*Ibid*). The three classes (labourers, capitalists, and landowners), continues the author, cannot be understood as forming a hermetic system characterized by a single line of cleavage that divides the three categories into two antagonistic entities (1986:8). Class, therefore, must be looked at as a *matrix of events* (not simply a singular consciousness) that include internal dynamics within and oppositions and agreements between classes (*Ibid*). Fluidity and dynamism makes room for alliances and oppositions that are always shifting and rupturing and taking upon new formations (*Ibid*). Finally, culture is meaningful to the dynamism of class because it is produced where the lines of antagonism and alliance meet and divorce—culture defines complex ambiguities (1986:9). Sider’s perspectives are useful since they support a wider definition of class as multifaceted, within and without, in addition to identifying the ambiguities/contradictions that are present as cultural manifestations.

Merit and seniority are both cultural worlds encapsulated within their own common sense systems that are colliding, such as can be observed in the materialization of oppositional work ethics, yet they also experience collusions demonstrated by shared cultural symbols. It is within this communal grab-bag where racist, sexist and masculine discourses are shared. Arsenault may represent the stereotypical “good worker”, however this does not mean that he is beyond making racist remarks, intimidating people (both men and women, pedestrians and drivers) while behind the #46 pickup’s steering wheel or taking part in union activities that run contrary to the agenda of the City of Montréal’s council members. On the other hand, Meloche may also be emblematic of a type of worker that supports the ideas that seniority encourages (*la liste* that distributes benefits in regards to one’s tenure for example), however he also expresses feelings that

are indicative of meritocracy, such as wanting to receive praise (*des louanges*) from figures of authority. Therefore, meritocracy and seniority are not polar opposites—they are able to share certain meanings as the zone of conflict between the two systems of knowledge enters a dynamic interaction and permutations surface.

Due to these overlapping edges and dynamic relationships it is understandable that confusions arise. What represents *un bon col bleu* (“a good blue-collar”) is often related to proper work ethics. Is one working too fast? Too slow? Just right? Work ethics are related to merit and seniority, however echoing Sider’s cogent observations concerning facile class divisions, it becomes difficult and unproductive to attempt to cleave work ethics into two antagonistic camps: the “good workers” versus the “lackadaisical ones.” What does represent a reality within the grass cutting crew is that tensions are very present and do in fact rest upon oppositional notions of work ethics. Both oppositional common sense knowledges (merit and seniority) utilize what could be considered to be hyper masculine jargon to aggrandize what they stand for and to depreciate what the other side stands for. Thus *un fif* or a “faggot” becomes a term that applies a negative value judgement to either a *un bon travaillant* (“a good worker”) that is perceived to be maintaining an anachronistic work ethic during a period of union based protection or *un poigneux d’cul* (“a dog fucker”) that is perceived to be a sloth producing shoddy workmanship (*des jobs botchées*).

Getting “Bumped”

Seniority extends “protection” to all workers, be they Arsenault or Meloche. This kind of protection, as described above by the union delegate, creates a condition where it becomes difficult for the administration to rid itself of a particular worker (one that is

slowing down production in a crew or is often absent for example) when certain criteria are not met, namely physical attacks directed towards a member of the administration or theft. As Bessette (the young male with 11 years of experience that described aspects of winter work) once summarized the situation: “Now with seniority even the rotten apples (*les pourrits*) get access to winter work and to trucks. They are the guys that don’t do a good a job and that don’t care either...I can’t believe they’ve got the union backing them up now. The union doesn’t protect the right ones.” The protective measures that seniority offers has also had adverse effects upon the careers of workers, excluding the tensions experienced within the grass cutting crew. *Se faire bumpé* is a term designated to the seniority based process of displacing workers. To get “bumped” denotes a worker being promoted at the expense of another worker’s status during periods of personnel reorganization. These periods take place at the beginning of the winter season, following auxiliary layoffs, and because they are now overseen by norms stipulated by tenure instead of merit, a domino effect takes place where a series of rearrangements take place, changing the landscape of the workplace. This has also been compounded by permanency becoming rarer since *se faire bumpé* is usually a consequence of not being permanent. Older *cols bleus*, like Sarrazin who is in his forties, often stated that the round of collective bargaining that ushered in seniority and raised wages for auxiliary workers had unforeseen ramifications.

SARRAZIN: There are about 3,500 permanent workers too many in *La Ville* [meaning Montreal city and all of its boroughs]. It’ll take me a very long time before I can become a permanent and I’m already on my 7th year *pour La Ville*... it might take 15 years before I get that status and by that time I’ll be able to retire...But last year I got bumped from the roadwork department in winter and they put me on the outdoor ice rinks...I hated it because it was the night shift and it got real cold...Hey, I even got laid off for 3 weeks before getting called back for spring and ‘cause I couldn’t get *chômage* [unemployment

insurance takes 3-4 weeks before the first paychecks arrive] I ended up dipping into my savings [*Y'a fallu que j'pige dans mes réserves*]...

[*Sarrazin stated that a strategy that he would be willing to try in order to circumvent this bad experience would be to upgrade his conducteur license so that he will be able to drive the bigger vehicles, thus establishing a specialization. Another option would be to secure janitorial work so that he would be able to work year round and to avoid the winter's bitter cold*]

Besette was very concerned about his own situation when I spoke to him before I was laid off in the autumn of 2007. Besette was alarmed that Proulx from *la conciergerie* (the janitorial department) would be transferred to the Department of Green Spaces in mid October, a reorganization of personnel that would jeopardize his driver's position. Because Proulx has more seniority than Besette (13 years of tenure versus 11 years respectively) and given the structural shift's laws it is permissible for the former to succeed the latter's position as *conducteur*. Having been stripped of rank, Besette would then be made *un helpeur* (see chapter 3). Besette had intercepted this message on the grapevine—gossip fuelled by predictions travelling about le Centre Technique at a remarkable rate are very common throughout the season and more so when *le slackage* approaches. He was visibly upset.

BESSETTE: You know what I hate about all this goddamned fucking around? [*du fuckaillage*] It's the lack of respect. They are always messing around with the teams [*Y'sont toujours en train d'gosser avec les équipes*] and changing them even if things are fine, even if the guys get along and are productive [*y'sortent la job*]...They really don't give a shit in my opinion...

EXAN: If Proulx becomes the driver does that mean that your salary goes down too?

BESSETTE: Yup. It's gonna go down by \$2.30...and I'll be forced to teach him the ropes. He's a fucking janitor! He doesn't know how things work in green spaces!

[*Besette is not a grass cutter however his labour is still related to the aesthetic upkeep of Lachine's parks and vegetation. He possesses formal training in horticulture and is one of the few cols bleus that is allowed to trim hedges, shrubs and small trees*]

EXAN: How long will that last?

BESSETTE: It'll last until winter work starts up...

EXAN: So like in a couple of months?

BESSETTE: It's a couple of months but still...it pisses me off! [*ça m'pousse!*] I'll tell you one thing though, I ain't saying shit when he becomes driver...I'm just gonna sit there and he can figure out the rest...

The future development within the workplace that Bessette is facing has the power to affect his quality of life for a few months until the first snowfall. Experiencing a demotion that is carried through the new seniority system means that he will be earning less money, going from \$22.86/hr. as *un conducteur* to \$20.54/hr. as a regular auxiliary or *helpneur*—not an insignificant drop considering that he is a newlywed homeowner in Vaudreuil, has recently purchased a new truck and also wishes to be free of *La Ville* by starting his own business. Proulx, as a recipient of status through seniority, does not necessarily possess the required skills and experience to do the job appropriately. That Proulx is a “fucking janitor” is not only meant in a pejorative sense, it is also meant in a way that decries the lack of logic involving an inexperienced worker supplanting *un col bleu* who has been doing that type of labour (horticulture) for more than a decade. Nepotism is a popular charge levied against meritocracy; however inefficiency and illogical management of labour are often cited as fitting seniority's profile. For Bessette, *se faire bumpé* does not only signify a hiatus from the purchasing power he has grown accustomed to, it also encapsulates feelings of being insignificant or a disposable asset. Bessette will not only take a pay cut but he will also be forced “to teach him the ropes”, the cultural term being *un formateur*—one who teaches another from experience and

knowledge. One does not receive compensation for having the role of *formateur* thrust upon one's shoulders during work hours. As a strategy for dismantling this responsibility brought about the rules of tenure, Bessette plans to "just sit there" and let Proulx earn his new found position through a process of trial and error. It is also important to note the quality of Bessette's feelings in regards to the relationship that management or *l'administration* has vis-à-vis crew dynamics. He appears to be incensed that more "fucking around" in the form of tampering with crew dynamics will be taking place. It is an important reaction involving seniority's ability to override previously established formats that may have become comfortable and routine. In other words the particulars of the crew's daily labour are treated as being inconsequential. The dynamics are not respected and there is a distinct feeling of one's world being painfully manipulated as routines and knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of one's coworkers are turned topsy-turvy at an unnervingly whimsical frequency. Getting bumped is usually born with stoic nonchalance however it is misleading to believe that crew members do not care about the relationships they have built. As proves Bessette's diatribe, male *cols bleus* construct bonds with one another through the mediation of labour. In this instance seniority becomes an upsetting presence that is perceived as promoting individuals who do not possess knowledge of the labour at the expense of those who have made it their profession.

In regards to janitorial work, a few points are noteworthy. Janitorial work is not perceived as being prestigious labour (hence Bessette's disparaging comment) since it carries the stigma of feminized housework, yet it is also viewed as an effective method of procuring year-round work (wage earning enjoying close proximity to a discourse of

rationality and masculinity) since it is indoor. I have spoken to all the janitors, which are all young males, and many have supplied a reason why they view their own labour as being unprestigious and unrewarding (*c'est dévalorisant comme job*). *Les concierges* perhaps view their labour as being unappealing (*on a l'nez dans 'marde à 'journée longue*, "our noses are in shit all day long") however they do not view their labour as being effeminate. *Other cols bleus* do perceive janitorial work as effeminate and articulate this view through actions (utter disregard for cleanliness for instance) as well as discursive male chauvinism that sets constraints for that type of work to be possibly recognized and experienced as valorizing. Proulx, a concierge and Bessette's agent of demotion, briefly shared his thoughts about what it meant to be a janitor in *Le Centre Technique*.

PROULX: *Le Centre Technique* is the dirtiest place in Lachine. A bit funny if you think about it...we've got to clean up after blue collar workers. Not even the public washrooms in René Levesque Park are that bad and that place gets plenty of visitors.

EXAN: What makes it bad here? (i.e. a chore to clean up *Le Centre Technique*)

PROULX: It's the attitude! Guys here don't really care. Some guys don't even flush the toilet and leave behind big piles of shit...piss on the floor. I asked a bunch in the cantina to be a bit more considerate, like kicking the dirt off their boots outside...they couldn't have cared less. So I ask them "Do you act like that at home?" and then one goes: "At home I've got a woman who takes care of that"...what a caveman [*un vrai homme des cavernes*].

In this short exchange Proulx's efforts to generate some respect for his labour was met with opposition. Bessette's pejoratively intonated remark is echoed by Proulx's fellow *col bleu* who pays no attention to his plea and as a method of displaying an accepted chauvinistic discourse in an area of *Le Centre Technique* that is transformed into a theatre of sorts (see chapter 6). Proulx's reasonable request had to contend with a discourse that possesses a wide audience partial to its narrow gender perspectives. Here, janitorial work conducted by males is likened to housework conducted by (and only by,

as the col bleu's description of a proper household seems to insinuate) females. Thus, not only will the col bleu not cooperate with Proulx's request regarding tidiness, janitorial work undergoes feminization. What is ironic is that although Bessette may also subscribe to a masculine perspective ("he's a fucking janitor!") regarding Proulx's work, he will nonetheless assume a submissive position to Proulx when the latter bumps the former down a notch. Seniority is a workplace reality and it can paradoxically provide protection for those teetering on the edge of job loss as well as produce vulnerability in those who viewed *La Ville* as a viable career and continue to do so.

Chapter 5. Hegemony and Recalcitrance

The culture of silence is a powerful method of control that is closely connected to what the structural shift has produced within the workplace: oppositional forms of common sense knowledge related to work ethics that collide with one another often creating volatile encounters. This tug-o-war is not an equal match within the scope of the grass cutters' experiences (and possibly other departmental branches) because although meritocracy may still be an important aspect, due to union protocol seniority certainly represents a hegemonic presence that everybody must acquiesce to, be they *contre-mâîtres* or employees. The seniority list that has standardized the order in which privileges are distributed and calls back to work given is an example of this newly implemented protocol that bypasses merit altogether. To understand the culture of silence hegemony must be looked at as well as hegemonic masculinity.

In Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration, the discussion Sider supplies concerning Gramsci's notion of hegemony is useful when applied to the current development within *Le Centre Technique's* workplace. Sider suggests, through an analysis of Gramsci's work, that hegemony becomes more complex and nuanced when not viewing it solely as "...the simple expression of the culture of the dominant class through the institutions of civil society but rather as the particular way elite culture is conjoined with the organization of appropriation..." (1986:127-128). Here "civil society" is to be understood as representing a particular material base representative of institutions, public edifices and symbols of prestige, for instance, that support articulations related to the cultural dominance of a particular class (Sider 1986:119). Considering that Newfoundland's material base was underdeveloped yet the

geographic local embodied a site where hegemony (in this case mercantile capitalism) was contested fiercely by the fisherfolk, Sider argues that the analysis of production (labour) conjoined with appropriation is an important relationship to look at when analysing aspects of hegemony (1986:121).

The fashion in which seniority dramatically played out among *La Ville*'s grass cutters reflects Sider's focus upon what he classifies as being an elitist and unequally organized appropriation of production (1986:122). Recent ethnography, also based upon the Newfoundland experience, that draws attention to structural shifts, engenders the notion of hegemony. In her book entitled What do they Call a Fisherman?: Men, Gender, and Restructuring in the Newfoundland Fishery (2005), Nicole Power suggests that it is important to employ a perspective that accounts for a plurality and complexity of masculinity (2005:15), a concern that is shared by Gutmann (1996, 1997). Power argues that not all masculinities are equal and that hierarchies of masculinity exist: "Each society, region, or nation has a hegemonic model of masculinity...the version of masculinity that appears natural or is most highly valued...and serves for the standard of all men" (*Ibid*). The concept of hegemonic masculinity presents a discourse that permits a distinction to be made between men and "masculine ways of doing, behaving and thinking" (Power 2005:16). Herzfeld has also observed this hierarchical ordering of masculinity among the Cretan Glendiot shepherd males (a predominantly pastoral community within a national society) that raid one another as a cultural manifestation of masculinity and prestige (1985). In the mountain village of Glendi, there is a difference between being a good man and "being good at being a man", thus a definition of male performative excellence is drawn (Herzfeld 1985)— resonating with the notion of

hegemonic masculinity. The discursive nature of hegemonic masculinity, Power writes, supports an ideology that helps to produce and maintain systems of inequality and the more marginally defined versions of masculinity face consequences when not subscribing to the hegemonic values or when contesting them (2005:16).

In addition, it is productive to call attention to Power's discussion of the two oppositional or competing types of masculinity that she observed during the structural shift Newfoundland fisheries were experiencing. The local (Newfoundland) hegemonic version of masculinity was constructed around the "traditional male fisher" discourse in contrast to a version of masculinity supported by wider mainland Canadian culture (Power 2005:98). The former version of masculinity that enjoys hegemonic status among fishers pertains to a system of knowledge that can only be produced through "bodily" manual experience and a "patrilineal learning process" (*Ibid*). In this definition of masculinity, the activity of fishing "is in the blood" and not learned through formal education (Power 2005:113). The other version of masculinity, that also represents hegemonic status, defines the ideal fisherman as someone who is rational, educated, makes use of modern technology and is integrated in the capitalist system of production (*Ibid*). Power argues that it is this latter model which is assuming hegemony during the structural shift changing the face of the fisheries for the men and women of Newfoundland (2005:100-101). A final meaningful observation that Power makes is that the traditional male fisher possesses common sense knowledge whereas federal/provincial politicians as well as the Department of Fisheries and Ocean observers are constructed as being completely bereft of it (2005:99-119). Similar to Willis' notion of experiential practice versus theoretical knowledge (1977:56-57) and Dunk's notion of

manual labour versus mental labour combined with common sense knowledge and anti-intellectualism (1991:132-151), Power discusses the local ideological construct of fishing (which represents local hegemonic masculinity) as reversing the dominant hierarchy of knowledge: formalized ways of knowing the marine environment are placed at the bottom and experiential knowledge is celebrated and treated as being more manly (2005:118-119).

Re-thinking the Manual/Mental Dichotomy

It becomes important to illustrate in what ways seniority's proponents within the grass cutting crew believe that the new way of doing things provides its participants with a configuration that allows for a greater store of masculinity to be accessed. Seniority has supplied all *cols bleus* with a high degree of job protection generated by the union and making it very difficult for the employers (*La Ville's* administration) to pose a threat to an individual's continued participation within the workplace. This tenacious protection, enables, and even encourages it would seem, a system of common sense knowledge that attaches a positive value to indifference vis-à-vis production. This was certainly the case among the grass cutting crew however other older *cols bleus* (in their forties and fifties) whom I have spoken to concerning my research paint a similar picture in their departments. Thus, to allocate blame to the "young generation" is disingenuous. The emerging seniority system has created a new version of masculinity that represents a hegemonic model (Power 2005). What is perhaps a startling side effect from increased protection and purchasing power made possible through seniority, is a reversal of the manual and mental dichotomy. Scholars studying working-class experiences, such as Willis (1977), Halle (1984), Dunk (1991), Limón (1997) and Power (2005), often discuss

the important ideological role that manual labour possesses. Dunk states that the division between mental (conception) and manual labour (execution) is based upon cultural practices and rituals that serve to separate those who have a certain kind of training and its accompanying credentials between those who do not: “Mental labour is about an ideological encasement of science in rituals where knowledge is made, and from which the working-class is excluded” (1991:137). Thus, formal education and mental labour are able to claim a specific “savoir-faire” and have greater access to “cultural capital” (*Ibid*). In a bid to circumvent the injuries that the division of mental and manual produce within the working-class experience, the manual side of the dichotomy is celebrated and what is considered mediocre and for the masses becomes a source of cultural celebration (Willis 1977, Dunk 1991, Limón 1997). Power has also observed this ideological phenomenon among Newfoundland fishers during the structural shift. The ideological content of the traditional male fisher model was extolled as representing the “real” definitions of work: “high-quality fish”, it was believed, were produced through the experiential and the physical (Power 2005:106). Newfoundland fishers felt as if their knowledge was not respected by the professionals who were equipped with formal qualifications (Power 2005:108). What is also noteworthy in many working-class studies is that the manual side of the dichotomy is often portrayed as possessing a higher index of masculinity than mental labourers who are defined as being weak, over-analytical (unable to arrive at quick and effective conclusions that identify the exact cause of complex phenomena) and effete (Herzfeld 1985, Dunk 1991, Power 2005).

The reversal or inversion of the mental and manual dichotomy signifies that *les cols bleus* who are espousing an indifferent position towards production, figures of

authority and other coworkers have not changed classes. The working-class cultural values, rituals and symbolic cosmology have remained intact, and if anything else they have been given the opportunity to be articulated with more force as the procurement of prestigious commodities are enabled through wage raises. What has changed is the attitude in regards to work ethics. No longer must one perform, excel, “court” members of Lachine’s political enclave in order to secure work and to secure winter labour or better vehicles. A list based upon tenure and union policy now distributes advantages and benefits. Leclerc discusses the aspect of what he calls “mediocrity” in the following continuation of our interview.

EXAN: So seniority is in and meritocracy is out...

LECLERC: What happens is that there is less intimacy between employees and authority...one can avoid having to flirt as much...for certain people it is a matter of being secure with one’s seniority, with one’s qualifications [*cartes de compétences*], with one’s status within the union and all of this is mighty reassuring...there’s no more brown nosing, but the door is wide open for mediocrity...

EXAN: What’s your vision of this seniority-based mediocrity?

LECLERC: The mediocrity that I observed the most in *La Ville*...and this I repeatedly saw...guys that were very good workers and that pulled their weight everyday [*des gars travaillant au bout qui tiraient leur partie de travail à tout les jours*], as soon as they got their permanence they started to watch the clock!

EXAN: You’re talking about after the mergers here right?

LECLERC: Before or after the mergers...it doesn’t matter! Permanence automatically creates a situation where you get to sit on your thumbs. I agree though 100 percent that seniority recreated this situation in an extreme manner...

EXAN: Ok, so what you’re saying is that mediocre work ethics have existed before?

LECLERC: Sure. But the new seniority system made it much worst. The same thing happened...here’s a parallel we could make...when Jérôme Choquette, the provincial justice minister in the 80’s integrated the police force...he opened the door in an irremediable way to negotiations. Now, as soon as a cop wants a raise the whole province is on strike...he put all of them in the same union, they did the same thing to us you

know...all of us in one big union. The public works of different communities had different profiles, different interests... Ville St. Pierre has certain advantages that were taken away when they merged with Lachine.

EXAN: In regards to seniority, do you find that mediocre work ethics have become popular? The guys in my department aren't permanent like the guys in your department but they do benefit from having the union up their asses.

LECLERC: Well, there certainly aren't many guys like Arsenault around...guys with energy and initiative. I suppose that seniority made an allowance for that...it's complicated now to fire an incompetent worker [*de faire chopper un grand slack*] and many guys have an attitude problem...it's due to society, they are spoiled and cannot tolerate frustrations at all. I'm against that...

EXAN: It's not seniority anymore?

LECLERC: Well, it is but these guys in your department they are people with all the rights in the world...the Charter of Rights and of Liberties didn't only bring about advantages...duty is also part of it. But everybody forgets the duties and they only want rights...you gotta pull your weight too...These guys are complaining with a full belly [*ils se plaignent avec le bec plein*, literally meaning complaining with a beak full of food].

Leclerc describes the structural shift towards mediocrity. Here, mediocrity is generated when security is introduced. Be it through the coveted status of permanence that was bestowed upon workers with greater frequency *before* the mergers and was possibly due to a promulgation of networking or the defensive measures available to the mostly young, male auxiliary *cols bleus* of Lachine through a legislated union structure *after* the mergers. It is intellectually stimulating to ponder the forms that mediocrity may have taken throughout *La Ville's* existence or the probability of there having been numerous structural shifts that have made *Le Centre Technique* what it is today (not part of the scope of this thesis) however what is of immediate interest is that seniority exacerbated the "clock watching" phenomenon. Clock watching, "fucking the dog" or creative and subtle tactics that involve the avoidance of work and of authorities becomes more feasible when a union is there to contest management's executive decisions and to

curb its power. *Un col bleu* who started to work *pour La Ville* at the age of 19 and who is now in his tenth year informed me that, before the mergers, *les cols bleus* would receive more “chances” (the extension of amnesties) from the administration; however, if they proved to be “trouble” they would be fired faster too. This is not the case under the new system: a long shelf life is granted to undesirable workers. Perhaps in a way to explicate the indifference that Leclerc views as plaguing the young males of the Department of Green Spaces he allocates blame to society and draws attention to the apparent lack of civic duty that the grass cutters demonstrate. Indeed there may not be many “Arsenaults” but even a youthful initiative like his eventually sought an exit from the department and used strategies that would allow him to seek *une meilleure job à l’interieur d’une bonne job* (a better job within *La Ville*).

Mediocrity being observed within older groups of *cols bleus* (Leclerc uses his own department as an example) is very meaningful for it is indicative of a strategic position that predates the new generation of the Department of Green Spaces. Instead of seeking to ascribe culpability to a single group often pejoratively described (young, male, “spoiled” with democratic rights, hedonistic, lackadaisical, etc) it is more instructive to take into consideration the production and maintenance of such ideologies as having roots in the past and not simply as the result of a sudden historical rupture wherein youth and gender become aligned with mediocrity. If “clock watching” becomes a *possibility* through the security of permanency facilitated by status within the union and “qualifications” (cards that attest that the holder has reached a certain level of professionalism) that grant access to more skilled and varied manual labour (Halle 1984), then I argue that an established common sense knowledge can be observed. *La Ville* is

perceived by many as being *une bonne job* that can supply security, a prospect that would be appealing to working-class folks living in any era. The following interview segment with Leclerc is revealing in this regard.

EXAN: Many Lachinois people who were born in the 30's and 40's, like my mother and her brothers, depict *les cols bleus* as having a reputation as being mediocre manual labourers yet having access to special networks...

LECLERC: Lachine is a very special case and it is a very old suburb with established powers. I think that it is accurate and a historical characteristic...maybe it was different back then. There were big problems relating to alcoholism...there was drunkenness in the workplace all the time...

EXAN: There are still problems like that...

LECLERC: Yeah, I know there are! I remember when I was a child that to go work with a shovel in the streets was the lowest one could go in social standings...

EXAN: But didn't the citizens that say stuff like that realize that *les cols bleus* were close to municipal power?

LECLERC: It was a much more corrupt machine back then I think...But you have to remember that back then to work *pour La Ville* was not monetarily rewarding, plus there was no unemployment insurance...it was a miserable wage with no benefits.

EXAN: Could we imagine that the unemployment insurance of the past was in fact the patronage of power? If there was a worker with a sick child at home he could go see a Bourgeois-like figure and get \$100 bucks to help him out...

LECLERC: Yes, yes, yes...that's well thought out...very well thought out, but times have changed now and we are maybe far from this because it [*La Ville*] has become a place where the young can take refuge and do nothing and take advantage of the privileges that unionization brings...

Indeed the times have changed and nothing remains static, however the common thread of security, as well as hedonism, emerges between the past and the present.

Certain stories that are told and re-told in the workplace over the years have proven to be so popular that they have entered into what could be described as being *col bleu* folklore.

Within their structure can be seen the commonalities that have been mentioned above and

it is interesting to observe that “hard work” does not appear in these narratives most likely due to its lack of humor. These infamous stories include a group of young *cols bleus* who would punch into work at 3:00 am in order to play ping pong and smoke marijuana for a few hours before starting the workday exhausted and listless; a young man who was hired and immediately accrued six absences during his first two weeks of work; and, an older male that was caught filling jerry cans of gas from *Le Centre Technique*'s pumps for personal use and was later arrested for stealing a lighter and a two chocolate bars from a corner store. There are others of course: drug addled *conducteurs* backing into garage doors or workers parking city vehicles in alleys in order to go take naps at home during work hours. All participants in these legendary exploits lost their jobs due to their activities and during my fourth year of work (2007) I was able to witness the development of one such tale that would enter into the collective imagination of *les cols bleus* of my department. A young male owning an expensive modified car was hired to pull weeds and it was reported that he complained so much about the labour that he was eventually fired within two weeks. His nickname was “Kid Corolla” (*p'tit cul Corolla*, “Corolla” being a type of car designed by Toyota, a Japanese automaker company).

These narratives, which are often told while chuckling and casting the perpetrators in the role of jesters doomed for the chopping block, contain within them what can be understood as being caricatures of what is perceived as being permissible behavior. Workplace mornings transforming into ping pong tournaments, absenteeism taken to a satirical level and gas theft occurring in broad day light demonstrate what could be defined as being predetermined attitudes of what it means to be a public worker

in Lachine. In these narratives a blurring of the lines between leisure (what usually takes place outside of the workplace), deviant behavior and labour, underscore sentiments of immunity or of being “above the law.” A feeling of having acquired security and of having been admitted into a carnival of opportunities is not a unique theme that is the preserve of especially daring individuals such as the gas thief or the ping pong champions. Arsenault has also described weeknight drinking binges that cost most, if not all, of one’s paycheck during the first years of labour. I once overheard Honorine, the head of my department, declare in pithy candor to a group of *cols bleus* that “If you work for the city you either have a criminal record (*un dossier judiciaire*) or you sell drugs”. The statement was met with appreciative grins and knowing looks.

All of these examples, be they amusing, worrisome or a mixture of both, aid in sketching a cultural matrix of established, acceptable and unacceptable blue collar behavior. Perhaps what is most fascinating is that the acceptable and unacceptable (leading to job loss) at times tend to co-mingle. Having gained access to *une bonne job* that many people currently want in contemporary Lachine, why would an individual tempt fate? The brief historical aspects that I have illustrated in Leclerc’s interview hint at a common sense knowledge that *La Ville* inspires, where turning one’s nose up to conventions seems acceptable but really is not. There is a fine line to walk here and the demarcations are unclear. Absenteeism, late morning and afternoon punches, theft and drunkenness have mostly been met with job loss, however the multitudinous narratives serving as cultural canons have often described the attitude of the culprits as if their activities had been within their rights. Also, one need not ponder the veracity of *col bleu* folklore since one can often observe it firsthand, and here also activities that prove to be

detrimental to one's career are enacted with what seems to be impunity, disinterest or unaccountability. One of *Le Centre Technique*'s union delegates extolled the virtues of an improved seniority-based protection that would now provide protection for repeated drunkenness and the consumption of narcotics during work hours. It is a complex phenomenon that is rendered more complex by recent structural shifts and mergers that seem to have displaced or forcefully reorganized the public works of Montréal's cities, many having become boroughs (*arrondissements*). As Leclerc stated above: "...all of us in one big union. The public works of different communities had different profiles, different interests..." If seniority has facilitated the possibility of expressing certain aspects of the "carnavalesque" that may or may not have a historical background such as a hedonistic stance that subverts work into an arena of play, and less admirable qualities such as indifference and mediocrity that wound coworkers (which will be discussed in the upcoming section), the inversion of the manual and mental dichotomy that I have observed is not out of the question. It must not be forgotten that habits do not die easily and *La Ville* has been and still is perceived in Lachine by many as being a preserve of white males. There is much public debate about the need to increase the racial, ethnic and gender diversity of the City of Montréal employees. Some sectors that have been traditional enclaves of "whiteness", such as the Montréal police force, have been proactively responding. For example, seeking to improve its image following allegations of racial profiling by the media, the Montréal police department has responded by diversifying its force by way of targeted recruitment. New rhetoric is also being employed during the festivities of *La Saint Jean Baptiste* that also reflects efforts to incorporate racial and ethnic diversity and a desire to create an image of Montréal as a

cosmopolitan city. In many respects, concerning this topic, the Bourgeois Period should not be treated as a golden age of *La Ville* when “men were men” and “hard work” was rewarded by a kindly paternal figure of power. There is truth to the system of recognition and reward as well as the accessibility to figures of power that the pre-merger meritocratic period supplied, but it is equally important to view this time as part of *La Ville*’s historical fabric and I would tend to argue that it also served to reinforce certain values that are part of its contemporary common sense knowledge like the aspects discussed above. If gaining access to higher echelons within the municipal hierarchy, including prestigious positions within *La Ville*, once denoted mobility, it becomes equally possible that this system of including the “right people” could also be quickly transformed into a mechanism of exclusion. Leclerc briefly discussed that if one was unwilling to play “the role of the courtesan” avenues leading to resources could be cordoned off because rituals and practices were not respected. It is not difficult to imagine that this social triage would not extend the same chances for women and racial and ethnic minorities as it would to white males for instance and the tell tale lack of the latter attests to this. In Lachine there has been an increased hiring of women, however their presence within *Le Département des Espaces Verts* does not translate into a democratic experience within an environment made more masculine by seniority (see chapter 6).

Hegemonic Strategies: Appropriating Production and “Truck Time”

The grass cutting experience in Lachine offers interesting variations to Sider (1986) and Power’s (2005) discussions of class, culture and hegemonic masculinity. During my 20 months of fieldwork I was able to observe a process that resonates with

Sider's historical study of counterhegemonic strategies, culture and class dynamics in rural Newfoundland. During my first year, ideological cleavages could already be felt and an emerging discourse based upon the rationality of a soon-to-be implemented seniority system was often articulated by the young males of my department as well as some of the older workers from other departments. Arsenault and I provided most of the labour for the grass cutting crew while others rode around Lachine or whiled away the hours inside trucks hidden in the shade, comfortable knowing that the job was getting done without their participation. A worker in his late forties in *Le Département de la Voirie* (roadwork) in the transport branch once told me that it was now worthwhile to "push one's luck" or *de pousser sa luck*, in a bid to test the boundaries of the administration and the protection that seniority endowed its unionized workers with. This older *col bleu's* theory rested upon the extension of coffee-breaks by five minute increments every day and to continue if unchallenged. By my second year of work, in the spring of 2005, attitudes vis-à-vis two oppositional work ethics or two competing masculinities had hardened considerably and frictions intensified (Power 2005:98). During my second year I was no longer paired up with Arsenault since he had succeeded in securing a position as one of *Le Centre Technique's* janitors. Arsenault was considerably happier working by himself and he could now conduct his labour as he saw fit. Arsenault had left *Les Espaces Verts* and had gained control of his own labour, not an insignificant victory in a time of constraints and appropriation. I now found myself in the company of Taillefer—a twenty year old male who had once worked with Arsenault from 2001 (the year that *La Ville* had hired many members of the cohort I was now studying to fill the ranks of the grass cutting crew) to the end of the 2003 grass season.

Taillefer was reputed to be one of Lachine's top grossing lower-echelon drug dealers (a hierarchy exists among dealers or *les pusheux* that differentiates between the amount of product that is moved and the size of the territory that one is allowed to operate within) nicknamed *le Roi du Chimique* or the "Chemical King." Taillefer's expertise lay in drugs that came in pill form that included ecstasy or *d'la E* (retaining the English pronunciation of the letter "e") and speed. Taillefer had *une blonde*, a "girl friend", who was considered by the guys of the department as being very attractive (tall, blonde and visited the tanning salon three times a week) and they rented the ground level of a duplex a stone's throw away from the prestigious *bord de l'eau* (the waterside of Lac St. Louis). Due to his double income, Taillefer was able to invest in a slightly used 4 door Honda civic that he had had modified at great expense. The modifications included high performance tires with a set of expensive "mags" (a term designated for magnesium alloy metal wheels which are culturally valued as being more attractive than hubcaps), a fibreglass sports kit giving his car an aggressive look and custom leather seats. Taillefer's income also allowed him to purchase expensive hip hop type clothing and many young *cols bleus* of the department described his fighting skills as being above average. In other words, Taillefer's life was configured in a way that allowed him to access a respectable store of prestige, respect and masculinity. Although that may be the case, Taillefer, who is also considered a "hard worker" in *La Ville*, shared a similar experience to Arsenault's and he was not spared from the workplace tensions. Arsenault and Taillefer's labour were appropriated by their own friends and informal group members. Those who did the appropriating within the grass cutting crew were apologists of the new seniority system, thus their position was legitimated by the newly appointed hegemony. The Department of

Green Spaces has historically been perceived as a department involving difficult labour and the grass cutting branch, a very recent addition, as the most unprestigious job type. Cutting grass is loud, dirty, sweaty, hard work; if one can get someone else to do it in one's stead then it becomes a bit more tolerable. Seniority not only made that possible but it also encouraged it, affecting the quality of life of those who described themselves, and were described by other *cols bleus* and figures of authority, as being "good" meritocratic workers.

Unequal appropriation of labour is described by Sider as being carried out by an elite whose power is hegemonically maintained (1986:119-122). The childhood friends of Arsenault and Taillefer share a working-class background and similar leisure activities, most having decided against the pursuit of formal education (Willis 1977). In the case of *La Ville*, I would not argue that the appropriators of labour represent a "dominant class", however, considering that they are supporters of seniority's discourse, a hegemonic system shaping and dominating the workplace experience, I do treat them as members of an elite culture. By being part of seniority's structure, workers who espoused lackadaisical work ethics were able to have "hard workers" produce three important resources through their appropriated labour: 1) a weekly paycheck was procured through minimal efforts, 2) *le pad's* (a thin, black binder containing the day's projected amount of work) daily list of objectives was reached and finally, 3) their continuing involvement *pour La Ville* was assured. The final benefit in respect to the unequally organized appropriation of other human beings' production was obviously based upon satisfactory labour. If the quality of labour or the frequency of production had been unacceptable, then questions would have been asked. However a probe of the grass crew's dynamics

was never necessary since levels of productivity were spectacular, and perhaps more importantly, the seniority dividend had not been divulged to figures of authority. In addition to this appropriation, seniority was also culturally constructed as representing a superior version of masculinity. The groundwork pertaining to an augmented store of masculinity residing in seniority had already been prepared in 2004, precluding the salary raises of auxiliary workers.

The appropriation of production was not only enabled but also made into a tempting option through the culture of silence. The two oppositional systems of common sense knowledge pertaining to work ethics (“good” workers and lackadaisical ones) bundled with competing definitions of masculinity interacted in volatile, albeit fascinating ways. Of course, “fascinating” was very far from my thoughts when experiencing these tensions first hand. I could not extricate myself from the fieldwork site—*La Ville* symbolized my academic future as well as my livelihood and the face of struggle and contention was intimately felt. I decided that my allegiance was with meritocracy. The fieldwork site and my chance to be rehired had to be secured and I did not have time to indulge in seniority’s risqué behavior, i.e. antagonism towards figures of authority, utilizing sick hours with impunity, absenteeism, drunkenness, etc. I am not ashamed to say that choosing meritocracy was perhaps the most natural selection for me because this represented a common sense that I had been most exposed to during my experiences of manual labour. This does not mean that I did not befriend proponents of seniority or that I did not listen to what they had to say, however it does mean that I also suffered under the hegemonic reign that made it possible for my labour to be used to benefit coworkers whose participation was limited at best.

One morning in during my third year in 2006 I killed a bit of time by having a chat with Meloche and Coutemanche about work ethics. It should be noted that Courtemanche is one of Arsenault's close childhood friends.

MELOCHE: Working *pour La Ville* is a game. A smart guy [*un gars s'amat*] knows this...guys like Arsenault haven't figured it out yet and that's their problem.

EXAN: But when there is a guy doing all the work while others take it easy what should he do?

MELOCHE: They're not forced to work you know. They can stop when they want too...they're not blind.

EXAN: But how about guys like Arsenault and Taillefer that work hard and want a career? [*faire carrière à La Ville*]

MELOCHE: There's a balance to achieve, a rhythm [*faut poigner l'beat*]...working hard all the time doesn't prove anything anymore, times have changed...

COURTEMANCHE: There's a way to do things and there's a way not to do things. When you start you don't know how things work in *La Ville*, but the older workers [*les vieux permanents*] tell you to slow down and take your time.

To take one's time and to slowdown production is a part of being a proponent of seniority and it is part of achieving manliness. Manliness is about "figuring things out" and making rational decisions. This grants proximity to union discourse and policy which represents the current workplace hegemony. To subscribe to an ethic of outsmarting and out maneuvering versus an ethic of what is perceived as being passive labour is what counts. It becomes about being a young working-class *col bleu* who expresses creativity through mental labour instead of expressing it through productivity, the result of one's physical or manual efforts, thus effectively reversing the roles of muscle and mind in the classic dichotomy. I have been able to experience this strategy both as an excluded observer as well as an included participant. When excluded I have been working and

participating in what are considered to be meritocratic work ethics with “good” workers and when I have been included I have been cooperating with seniority and lackadaisical workers.

Among the grass cutters a great amount of masculinity is invested within strategies that consume time and reorganize the workday. It is not something that can be indulged in all day long however it is very possible to enact its principles every day. Strategies include repeatedly returning to *Le Centre Technique* to visit the men’s washroom and to play a quick game of ping pong or to go retrieve tools that are indispensable for the completion of a job and which have been conveniently forgotten during the morning’s prep work. The extension of coffee-breaks also represents a popular tactic. If handled skillfully, unionized breaks of 15 minutes undergo a metamorphosis that leads to significantly longer breaks, sometimes nearing the one hour mark. There are two 15 minute breaks in the day that are easily transformed into two half hour breaks (one at 9:00am and one at 2:30pm and individuals are allowed 15 minutes prior to the start of the break to go get food at restaurants or corner stores) including 45 minutes for lunch at noon. All personnel must be at the base for 11:40am when waiting for the lunch bell and at 3:40pm when waiting to punch out for the day meaning that each waiting period is composed of 20 minutes each. All of these minutes almost add up to 2 hours within 8 hour days. Once “extended” coffee breaks, visits to the washroom and other impromptu activities are factored in, it is quite possible to significantly reduce the hours of work involved in the day. There are many other opportunities throughout the day where time can be manipulated in one’s favor like when it is time to dump the contents of a pickup after pulling weeds or filling up water bottles and while most of these strategies are very

easy to pull off, surveillance has also increased since the newspaper exposés and increased tension between the union and borough management.

This increased surveillance has jeopardized perhaps the greatest achievement possible in the arsenal of mediocrity, that I argue is intensifying under the seniority system and that I have come to call this special foot-dragging weapon “Truck Time.” The appropriate local cultural term is “TDV” an acronym meaning *tour de ville* or “a drive around the city.” This is an accurate description of what Truck Time is meant to do: its primary function serves as a method of appearing a certain way while riding and of being able to interact with the Lachinois environment in a certain way. There exist many other terms of endearment for this enjoyable activity such as *faire un tour de piste* (a run around the track) or *faire une parade* (to be on parade). The latter even possesses its own theme song called *c’est la parade des cols bleus* (it’s the blue-collar parade) and the truck passengers can sing and hum along while ogling females of all walk of life and producing critiques judging their aesthetic attributes.

Breasts that are deemed to be desirable (i.e. very large, round and firm) are called *des plombs* (literally meaning “leads”). The criteria that breasts and their owners are judged by are very stringent and are mostly influenced by the ubiquitous presence of silicone implants in pornography (both in film and magazines) as well as exotic cabarets. *Une blonde avec les plombs refaits* (a “girlfriend” with remade breasts) is perceived as being very prestigious and treated like a sexual trophy. Thinness is also highly regarded and there are several legal supplements on the market that promote weight loss by accelerating a human being’s normal metabolic rate. When large, firm breasts are combined with a slender waist and a deep tan, a young woman is classified as *une solide*

(a solid one), *une sale plotte* (“built like a brick shithouse”) or *une doune* (a looker)—all signifying physical attractiveness. When this expensive and time consuming aesthetic configuration is achieved in a female thought not to be of legal age she is called *une future prospect*, pronounced in English. If a young woman is spotted during Truck Time there is a good chance that she will be followed for a short ways or the crew will decide to turn around the block a few times so that studying can be sustained for a while longer. It is misleading to think that this physical scrutiny is reserved solely for *les belles filles*—other male pedestrians are also judged, as are other male *cols bleus* be they fellow coworkers or the workers in other departments. *Y’a pas d’shape* (“he has no shape” signifies that a male’s physical appearance is deemed as being unremarkable, plain or “dumpy”) is often applied to males as a marker of incongruity within canons of “male beauty”. Jokingly, Arsenault once told me that when he “feels a bit fat” he consumes a cocktail of speed, cocaine and ecstasy and proceeds to the clubs.

The surveillance that figures of authority impose throughout the day is often incapable of assessing what exactly is happening at all times: was the work crew that just passed by heading towards a new worksite or are they up to something else? Smaller pickup trucks crewed by a driver and a passenger have the possibility of organizing their entire work week to their own taste because their mobility allows them to travel where they want and when they want. Good excuses are needed if their trajectory is intercepted by a roaming boss. Many things happen within the cultural marker of Truck Time. The workday is whittled away by taking circuitous paths to the next worksite, picking up superfluous equipment or simply meandering throughout Lachine attempting to escape detection and to gawk at the pretty girls (*les belles filles*). The “*raconteurs*” (see next

chapter) get to ply their trade while strategies of intimidation may be activated. Young girls are stared at and called to and when a visible minority is spotted a pejorative comment or heated tirade is produced, however never loud enough so that the victim hears the obscenities. It is in this way that Truck Time signifies more than simply a way to “kill time”, it is a veritable *locus of ideology* (see chapter 6) and way of acting, a promotion of what it means to be a proper *col bleu* during the seniority regime in Lachine.

Much jealousy was produced when Arsenault received access to the #46 pickup truck. He was the *conducteur* and I was the only passenger and we benefited from an empty crew cab to store our lunches and equipment without being cluttered. If this luxurious pre-seniority configuration was received with much gossip and hostile stares it is not surprising to observe that the sitting space of pickup trucks during the post-merger days is partitioned by tenure. The oldest workers get the best seats and I have witnessed some workers take great offence if one feels as if his rightful place as *navigateur* (riding shotgun up front) has been commandeered by an overzealous individual who is not aware of the proper decorum. When everyone has found their properly designated spots, Truck Time can commence in earnest. In the hands of an expert, the pickup can take 10 to 20 minutes before reaching the first morning work site. The Truck then is also a vehicle for establishing control over production, more so than the extension of coffee-breaks and the forgetting of tools since these tactics—although useful and simple to employ—rely on immobility. While the Truck supplies the participants with constant mobility, hindering the surveillance of bosses, one must eventually “go to work” or else suspicion will arise when parks are devoid of its grass cutters. The Truck is also a site for the exposition of

largess between *cols bleus* as “rounds” of soft drinks, sun flower seeds, ice cream bars and cigarettes are purchased and distributed to the crew, later to be reciprocated by another member.

If the pickup is equipped with a radio, the volume is often turned up and a station featuring the latest American pop music is chosen. In the summer, windows are rolled down, arms dangle out, speakers blare and accelerations are sudden and energetic, depending upon the *conducteur*'s taste. It must be said though that a masculine posture can be transferred through the vehicle (something that is not difficult to do behind the steering wheel of large trucks) and this can include squealing tires at intersections, driving in such a way as to convey impatience to the driver in front and cranking the bass level high enough so that the rear view mirror trembles, transforming the vehicle into a roaring predator. Considering that parks and Lachine's green spaces are the work sites of all employees of the department its *cols bleus* are allowed to drive within areas usually reserved for cyclists and pedestrians. The calm is shattered into fragments as the truck rumbles across parks with impunity, radio belching and the rakes, shovels and other implements in the tool rack welded behind the cab, tearing off low branches in cascades of leaves as the crew passes by, an intimidating site for many and a source of civilian complaints to *Le Centre Technique*. This is part of the Truck's appeal though: its powerful size, its loudness and the fact that it is allowed to go where others cannot go lending it and its human cargo an aura of being immune from the local constraints. The CB radio is also an important asset to Truck Time. In 2005 and 2006, my second and third years working *pour La Ville*, the radio was rarely used to communicate “helpful” information. A preferred method of utilizing the CB radio was to break up the

communications of older *cols bleus* that were deemed to be “yakking like old hens” (*y’sont en train de jasser comme des vieilles poules*) by pressing the talkie’s trigger surreptitiously. In 2006 this strategy to annoy the older generation of workers became so popular that an impromptu meeting was held in the cantina where the top brass of Lachine’s public works threatened to call in a firm that specialized in radio transmissions to track down the truck these interferences were coming from. However, the CB radio continued to be used as a faceless tool of distraction and the company was never called in, to the disappointment of many older workers.

It takes considerable skill to maneuver a large pickup, especially #46 that hauls a long trailer weighed down by a tractor and grass cutting equipment. Good working knowledge of Lachine’s streets and best routes are necessary when engaging in Truck Time or when simply attempting to get from one work site to another without getting bogged down in overly complicated paths, something that a driver wishes to achieve when it is common knowledge that Honorine is “on the road” and checking for straggling crews. Another important source of knowledge that is displayed during Truck Time pertains to personal social networks. Waving, nodding, calling out or making ad hoc plans for after work leisure with friends and acquaintances is part of showing off one’s presence within Lachine, preferable a presence that matters in the borough, that has impact and a quality that underscores sociability. Cutting critiques of certain passersby verbalized with flourish, creativity and humor are also part of this. There can also be a combination of amiability and hostility: waving to someone or smiling and then divulging to the truck’s occupants that he actually “can’t stand that person.” It is a fusion of identifying an acquaintance or an individual, placing this recognition within a cultural

framework of solidarity (a nod, a wave, a verbalized compliment, a shouted nickname, a jest or combinations of all of these) and within the blink of an eye systematically destroying this person's credibility with the occupants of the truck as audience. Those who are not skilled at creatively expressing variants of *col bleu* masculinity and culture, who possess poor knowledge of the goings on in Lachine and who do not know the good places to park the truck in order to have a pleasantly long coffee break are generally recognized as not being good *conducteurs*. The *navigateur*, the individual seated up front, must also possess these culturally valued skills for he becomes the driver's wing man, a position that enables the participant to extend the novelty of the plays. At times the *navigateur* is even better than the *conducteur* at producing humorous banter, remarks that encapsulate the mastery of common sense knowledge in all of its entirety and the ability to supply hermetic alibis if Truck Time is disrupted by a figure of authority. To indulge in Truck Time's prestige can prove to be a perilous fruit to pick, yet this still does not detract from its potential.

Truck Time is embedded within an economy of power and control, not only in relation to the cultural matter that is acquired, utilized and strengthened but also in regards to labour. Truck Time is by no means a democratic structure that is inclusive to all. Although the position of *chef d'équipe* (crew leader) may have been dissolved following union developments and crew in-fighting, it is misleading to believe that it is no longer existent—this job simply carries a new mask which is that of the *conducteur*. The *conducteur* as a new appellation for crew leader possesses all of its precursor's responsibilities. Productivity, organization of labour as well as crew dynamics (who

works and who does not) all fall upon the *conducteur*'s shoulders, that may become very weary during the process.

The morning's orders are received through the distribution of *le pad* and the *conducteur* is responsible for checking off the completed areas and supplying brief written content concerning the starting and finishing time of an area and any additional details that may be of import. An insertion may read as the following: Parc Lasalle, start 7:40am, 90% complete (this is a large park and can often take a day and a half to complete), dredged the pond for trash, "star" is complete (a big ornamental floral arrangement in the shape of a compass upon a grass field that requires careful "whipping", meticulous lawn mowing, raking and the removal of any clumps of cut grass) and the two "islands" are also complete (two cement islands in the pond that are cut perhaps once a month therefore they are usually overgrown with tall tufts of grass and a pair of long "fireman's boots" [*des bottes de pompier*] must be worn to cross the water). The *conducteur* must sign his name at the bottom of the "to do list" and also write the initials of crew members who are present that day in the columns assigned to each worker. At the end of the day *le pad* is then left on a small podium inside of the cantina to be collected and read by the department's bosses. *Le pad* thus becomes a symbolic summary of the *conducteur*'s capacity to organize the crew's labour and to make certain that the completed areas reflect a certain level of quality. If there are problems, such as forgotten trees or the length of a fence that was left uncut, a *contre-maître* rarely takes this up with *un journalier* (a regular seasonal worker who does to drive any vehicles), it is the new version of *le chef d'équipe* that must bear the brunt and the consequences of any slip ups.

The politics of the pad are invisible and they fail to reproduce an exact report of the workday's division of labour and appropriation of production. If there are three workers out of four who produce episodic rather than sustained participatory efforts vis-à-vis a task that is strenuous and prone to inflict injuries upon its membership, this reality is not explored through the pad's content. An interesting paradox arises: the *conducteur*'s position is perceived as being prestigious; however, not everybody actually wants to be one. Similar to the culturally high-status symbols found within the position that the *chef d'équipe*, the *conducteur* receives a higher wage, gets access to a vehicle and must face a wider range of responsibilities, namely the same ones that imperiled the pre-merger configuration of crew leader: keeping an eye on productivity, quality and reporting back to a figure of authority if these are threatened. One's reputation is rendered vulnerable by taking on this type of position since the *conducteur* becomes answerable to the formal structure of *contre-mâîtres* and departmental heads as well as the informal structure of union discourse that is represented by the current seniority system and which is supported by its *col bleu* proponents and union delegates. Thus, it could be surmised that the *conducteur* is answerable to two types of oppositional authorities: the bosses who must make certain that the job gets done and collect this information through the daily analysis of what the pad reports and the lackadaisical workers who are indifferent towards productivity. It is a very difficult balance to achieve, a problem compounded by an aggressive *navigateur*. This brings us to the ill-fated partnership of Normandeu and JP.

During my fourth year in 2007 a young *col bleu* with a learning disability (he [Normandeu] had once told me that secondary school had been marked by an endless series of yearly failures and forced participation in special needs classes) and the wish to

stay out of trouble during a period of increased surveillance was being coerced by a co-worker (JP) who had commandeered the front passenger seat and who had decided to become *navigateur*. This was a detrimental outcome for the young Normandeu, who as acting crew leader was responsible for productivity. JP, a highschool dropout and an ex coke dealer that had acquired a taste for his product, would effectively tell Normandeu what to do and when to do it, even though this often meant putting the *conducteur* into the firing lane. JP supplied the alibis and Normandeu repeated them when our Truck Time was interrupted. After two consecutive weeks taking the *navigateur*'s orders and risking his neck on a daily basis for JP's complicated schemes of labour evasion, Normandeu was finally granted a tractor that Taillefer the "Chemical King" of Lachine had been previously driving. As a drug dealer and hard working *col bleu* Taillefer was easily able to shrug off JP's dangerous council, his mouth full of cunning and barbed ripostes serving him well. The "Chemical King" was very upset to have lost one of the department's "best jobs" to someone he described as being a "mentally retarded cry baby" (*un mongol qui fait l'bébé*) who had failed to deal with his position's pressures and responsibilities. Two months later JP was given a tractor to drive so that management could track his productivity. A tractor driver benefits from the same pay as *un conducteur*, however the fog of the pad's politics are lifted by the fact that he becomes directly linked to his own labour and productivity, thus rendered accountable—indifference no longer representing a viable tactic. One month after JP was placed under a strategic method of surveillance, he landed himself a stint in a hospital following a drug-induced seizure while cutting grass in Park Lasalle Ouest. It was reported that the infamous JP's drug problem had become so acute that an intervention engineered by his

parents led him to a detoxification center and he was no longer seen shuffling down *Le Centre Technique*'s halls. JP's decline and seizure became the stuff of legend and numerous caricatures of a convulsing cocaine addict in Lasalle Parc lying prone next to a bright red tractor was repeatedly acted out to the raucous sound of laughter and the fierce stomping of feet in the cantina. Normandeau, on the other hand, appeared to be doing quite well now that he was free from a stressful situation and was becoming an accomplished tractor driver. Depression among *les cols bleus* is not unusual, neither are trips to detoxification centers and job loss related to drug addiction or alcoholism.

Truck Time reproduces and maintains *col bleu* values, beliefs and practices however it is not a democratic system nor does it symbolize an activity that is only enjoyed by the less meritocratic. Truck Time represents, like discourses of masculinity, a cultural resource that both "good workers" and "mediocre workers" indulge in, albeit with a difference in frequency. For example, Truck Time is often accepted by the administration during very hot summer days (or during cold rainy days where good crews will be given the ok to get warmed up inside the truck for awhile during work hours) at the end of a productive workday as a kind of reward. This kind of Truck Time is a recognition of a crew's efforts and can be enjoyed in peace and without the foreboding that other times may induce. It therefore becomes a manifestation of meritocracy's system of recognition and reward. Even when the pickup is immobile and the crew has debarked in order to cut grass Truck Time need not be terminated: it only changes shape. And, it is here that the invisible politics of the pad are played out on a dramatic stage of inequality. Strategies that involve evading labour on actual worksite grounds are almost too numerous to list, however they can be more effective than Truck Time since a façade

of productivity is presented and the areas where grass cutters work tend to be large and afford many blind spots. What is important to these tactics is that the Truck remains an important resource for whittling away time. Although one may be able to go into hiding for extended periods of time or even take a solitary trip to the local corner store to buy a soft drink, these strategies are blatant and lack polish. The sounder subterfuge will entail *un whippeur* trudging all the way back to the pickup to refill the whip's fuel cell when it is only half or even one quarter empty or to fiddle with the whip's motor in order to feign mechanical malfunction. The Truck is used as a legitimate refueling depot, an improvised washroom (one can urinate behind an open door) or a tiny cantina where drinks of water and bites of food can be had. If Truck Time is impossible then the pickup is often transformed into a smaller version of *Le Centre Technique* and a *contre-maître* passing by will be none the wiser, unless he or she decides to take a closer look. What is important about these "legitimate pauses" is that getting fuel for the whip or retrieving a length of wire creates an opening for longer séances of chatting and gossiping as one *col bleu*'s maintained presence by the Truck often encourages others to join him, somewhat acting like a silent signal. These quietly organized gatherings around the Truck, where twenty minutes can be blown away like a fistful of sand, are important to attend for a few reasons. These huddles are not advertised and to participate means that one's eyes are sharp enough to pick up any activity surrounding the Truck, not always an obvious task considering the vastness of some parks and the twisting paths of locales such as *La Prével*. Missed opportunities for reprieve from the unpleasantness that cutting grass entails (see chapter 2) signifies that one has failed to take advantage of an exploitable situation and perhaps more importantly, one has failed to recognize these dynamic

forums. Unskillful treatment of these moments because one is “too busy working” means that one will be left out and it is not rare for someone, during these forums, to note who is present and who is not, their absence acting as an index of their failure. Those who are “left out” continue to labour, oblivious of what is happening, or perhaps very much aware. At either rate, labour is being carried out while it could easily be put aside for awhile and a mouthful of water swallowed while listening to the *raconteurs* ply their trade. It is quite common for someone to humorously tally up the taxpayer’s money that is kindly sponsoring this variance of Truck Time, and at times this figure can be impressive if most *whipeurs* and tractor drivers decide to attend the informal meeting that might act as a prelude to a “real” unionized coffee-break. *Les cols bleus* are aware of the relationship between that of their wages and the taxpayers’ money, the culmination of masculine ability being that these forums are costing dearly, therefore making their appeal even greater and imbuing their existence with a good deal of flair.

Other ways of escaping from harm’s way while remaining “at work” is to target areas that do not require much effort and that maximize the illusion of productivity. Parks, sport fields and playgrounds all possess their “sweet spots” and bitter wars of attrition. It simply becomes a matter of cutting where the easiest parts are. Because the job of *chef d’équipe* has been abolished only to be repositioned as the *conducteur*, organizing labour has also been changed. Theoretically, *un conducteur* can decide which park to cut and when to do it, often with the crew’s consent, however the actual distribution of labour among the crew (i.e. Tom gets the fence, Dick cuts the trees and Jim does the edge of the sidewalk) is not condoned by the seniority system because it is perceived as a way of pulling rank and as enacting the power that a boss possesses and

uses. Instead, labour becomes a free for all and the laziest workers usually gravitate towards what is easiest to complete leaving difficult terrain for the meritocratic.

Truck Time certainly solicits the display of great stores of creativity from its participants, however it becomes crucial to understand how these tactics not only produce a service and way of doing things for its members but also a disservice for those who actually wish to work. The great irony is that it is much harder logistically to conduct these strategies of work evasion than it is to actually labour. The workday goes by much more slowly and the chances of being caught skulking about are always a reality. Subscribing to a laissez-faire attitude that discourages team efforts and that often oversees the unequal distribution of labour in a difficult job renown for producing injuries due to the repetitive motions of the whip and the incessant vibrations is hurtful physically as well as emotionally. Strategies including Truck Time with impunity and non-to-semi participatory work ethics existing within crew-based labour that functions best when cooperation is present, have both been enabled and encouraged by the recent development of seniority that tends to produce a division of labour. This division of labour differentiates between being a man and manly ways of behavior that reverse the manual and mental dichotomy. All divisions of labour can be perceived as being hierarchical with different values and status symbols being unequally distributed. Demonstrating a willingness to subscribe to seniority—the workplace hegemony since 2004—becomes an act of performative excellence in and of itself. It also becomes a manifestation of mental labour as complex tactics are concocted and as methods of control are asserted over other individuals. The *navigateur*, for instance, takes the role of the mental labourer who conceives and delegates to an overwhelmed *conducteur* who

then becomes the hand that acquiesces and executes. Cases like that of Normandeau and JP are not unique nor are they bound to disappear. Furthermore, the *conducteur* and *navigateur* relationship can also be inverted with the former becoming a tyrannical figure who controls labour and the latter, an unhappy but acquiescent figure. In both cases the dynamic boils down to the control of labour through coercion.

Thus seniority not only represents workplace hegemony as an organizational entity devised by union policy, but also corresponds to a hegemonic masculinity. Merit, signified by manual labour, recognition and reward, is perceived as being out of sync with the current workplace developments. It is portrayed as an anachronistic system that is best left to those who cannot seem to “figure things out” and that are not “smart enough” to take advantage of the protection that seniority supplies. Thus, merit becomes effeminate and this can be observed while certain young males complete the household chores while others enjoy significant amounts of free time to chat and ride around. Similar to the Flin Flon housewives studied by Meg Luxton (1980), merit-style labour is taken for granted and the comments that appear in the pad do not reflect the division of labour that has occurred during the day since they do not bear any relevance to the final end product. One cannot include one’s initials next to a park with the comment: “Did it all alone in forty-two degree weather. Light headed, left wrist on fire, others didn’t help.” Perceiving *La Ville* as a viable career and responding pro-actively to an objective that may include creating productive relationships with figures of authority and producing high quality work is to face great inequalities within the grass cutting crew (and in other departments) since thoughtfulness and responsibility will inevitably clash with

indifference and mediocrity wherein the current workplace hegemony will make the latter behaviours rational.

Counterhegemonic Strategies: Cooperation

Both sets of oppositional work ethics that represent common sense knowledge systems to then participants share notions of masculinity as a common point of reference. Paradoxically, both “good” workers and mediocre workers employ a masculine jargon to celebrate what they are and to depreciate what the other is not. Some of the strategies made possible by seniority among the grass cutters of the Department of Green Spaces have been explored, however they are also met by equally resilient “counterhegemonic strategies” that are used to contest the structural shift to positions of indifference and unaccountability (Sider 1986:126). Sider views the notion of agency (“...raising experience to the realm of knowledge, with a commitment to change...”) as a complex, and possibly difficult matter, and argues for the notion of “strategy” to describe the countering and contradiction of hegemonic systems in order to attempt the production of alternatives. I find “strategy” more appealing because a greater range of subtlety is allowed (1986:103-104). “Strategy”, similarly to “agency”, carries within it elements pertaining to experience, knowledge and the transformation of circumstances, however where agency tends to denote a movement in a positive direction, strategy is devoid of any guarantees. After all, a strategy is but a well conceived plan that may or may not produce change and mobility. Sider also draws attention to two different intensities of counterhegemonic articulation: the symbolic and the social-structurally based (1986:126-127). Symbolic counterhegemonic strategies are best described as being minimalist in nature and having little effect except to show one’s hostility towards the hegemonic

system. The social-structural represents a far more concerted effort that is harder to observe because it operates on a more clandestine level, embedded within the social structure, and thus possessing a greater potential for building a “culture of confrontation and claim” (Sider 1986:126). As an example of social-structural strategies Sider discusses how Newfoundland fisherfolk were at times able to bankrupt merchants through the overextension of credit (1986:127). In her book entitled Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil (1992), a detailed study of violence on the Alto do Cruzeiro, an impoverished area in Brazil where life is difficult and survival precarious, Scheper-Hughes makes sharp distinction between “strategies” and “tactics”, perhaps adding more depth to the current discussion. The strategic metaphor, writes the author—following Michel de Certeau’s logic—implies a “base of power” where winnings can be consolidated and a sufficient amount of knowledge pertaining to the forces that threaten is applied to the making of plans (1992:471). “Optimism” best characterizes a strategy’s potential, thus this base of power becomes a pocket of force within an antagonistic milieu (*Ibid*). While “strategy” tends to connote trappings of power, “tactic”, on the other hand, is “the art of the weak” (de Certeau as cited in Scheper-Hughes 1992:472). It is an isolated maneuver conducted within enemy territory and is employed when there is absence of real power. To keep in mind the differences between agency, strategy and tactic is important when discussing the grass cutting experience. There is an exception where agency and its connotations of success are suitable and this will be demonstrated at the end of the chapter.

What are perceived as mediocre workers are often described using pejoratives that essentially challenge the content of masculinity within seniority. This produces a critique

that attacks seniority's common sense knowledge as being effete and decadent. A "real man", among the young grass cutters and other male *cols bleus* of the department that subscribe to meritocracy, does not spend his time strategizing methods of evading manual labour and when a "real man" works he produces quality and takes pride in his effort. Descriptors such as *fif*, *tappette* ("faggot" or "gay") and *sans coeur* (literally meaning "without heart" and contextually signifying a lack of courage or determination) are more than flung insults, they are assessments of the current workplace organization as well as belonging to a common pool of cultural values shared by proponents of seniority and meritocracy. Homosexuality and lackluster work ethics are configured as possessing negative values within the male working-class world I have studied. *Un col bleu* who might decide to end his workday two hours before quitting time through judicious usage of Truck Time related tactics, is claiming a high degree of manliness within the seniority configuration of masculinity: he is demonstrating good knowledge of labour evasion and is aware of the protection accorded to him through the union. Furthermore, this *col bleu* may be an ace when it comes to building a summer deck or repairing cars, demonstrating a fondness for manual labour outside of the workplace. Thus, his masculinity, according to seniority's common sense, is twofold: he is good at being a man at work and he is also good at being a man outside of work. Counterhegemonic strategies question the former by continuing to celebrate manual labour "at work" and by defining the above-mentioned worker as a "faggot" or "weakling" or a lethal combination of both.

Pejoratives, however, do not make for very strong strategies (only symbolic in nature) and fail to accomplish much more than the apparent venting of frustrations due to unjust divisions of labour. More viable tactics are based upon cooperation between male

col bleus, an interesting workplace evolution considering society's widely held belief that "men should be competitive" and seniority's general indifference. "Good workers" collaborate together to form a rudimentary united front that serves as a response to hegemony. In many ways this cooperation becomes a revival of merit-driven worksite protocol that sees the re-emergence of detailed planning, high quality labour, productivity and Truck Time as reward. I became very much part of this informal control of labour since I had the reputation of being a good manual labourer because of my past that had been shaped by unusually difficult manual labour and because being *un col bleu* meant that I had to build a good reputation with figures of authority in order to have a fieldwork site-cum-job to return to. In fact, Honorine once told me that the reason for having me pair up with Arsenault (my first year in 2004) to form a two man crew that operated independently from the other grass cutters was due to my experience working for a contractor. Her gambit lay on the assumption that contractors produced "good workers" and Arsenault needed a good partner following the bitter crew in-fighting that had occurred during the grass cutting branch's early years. In subsequent years I was sought out by other "good workers" in order to form a crew-within-a-crew so to speak and Taillefer the "Chemical King" once confided to me that in 2005 and 2006 (my second and third years respectively) he was glad that we had the opportunity to work together and felt sore about losing Arsenault to the janitors. I discovered that this type of cooperation was not a unique defensive mechanism within *La Ville* since *cols bleus* who acquire winter work often differentiate between being part of *une bonne gang* (a good group or crew) or one that did not work well together. This can make the difference

between facing off against the onset of depression or experiencing a good season (*une bonne saison*).

Cooperation becomes a way to give meaning to one's labour and to safe guard it, to a certain degree, through a shared work ethic that readily embodies the culture of confrontation and claim that Sider attributes to counterhegemonic strategies (1986). Cooperation, in the midst of a sincerely felt mediocrity, produces an island of refuge where the rules of the game are clear: teamwork and participation attempt to render the workplace experience more manageable and egalitarian. By building a small crew-within-a-crew one is guaranteed that one need not labour alone, allowing for a portion of the work to be shared. This is not an insignificant strategy since the quality of life within the workplace can be greatly ameliorated yet it does not put a stop to the appropriation of production, it only serves to lessen the sting. This strategy does have a glaring weakness though. During my first three years as *un whippeur, cols bleus* like Arsenault, Taillefer and others would decide to conduct great feats of productivity that their efforts (and mine) imbued with considerable deposits of masculinity. "Tough talk" filled with bravado was used during these feverish exercises as we attempted to cram in one last park or the Lachine hockey arena into the waning hours of the day. Constantly walking while carrying the whip or pushing a lawnmower during humid summer days leaves one dripping with sweat and aching. Overtime has become a rarity following the structural shift to seniority, however it is still attainable when the grass is considered to be growing quickly during the months of May, June, July and even August if the summer has been a rainy one. Cooperative work ethics are also shared during these rare occurrences of overtime and participants will often only engage in it if their crew-within-a-crew

constituents are present: “If you do it, I’ll do it.” The night and day effect between an intensive articulation of meritocracy and masculinity (for it is defined as such and displayed through these physical efforts) and seniority’s hide-and-seek tactics represent the height of delineation. This increase in efficiency and movement made fieldwork physically challenging and it was not rare for me to be nodding off while writing field notes after work.

Cooperation can also lead to a more decisive counterhegemonic strategy, the strongest option involving reaching a consensus in regards to who is not pulling their weight and what kind of attempt can be made to have this person removed from the crew so that not a single agent of pollution will remain. Something strange occurs when meritocracy reaches this point. Although it is a very bad feeling to have one’s production appropriated by coworkers, I began to feel as if this was also occurring under this regime of intensive activity. The workplace became a strange world ruled by a panoptical surveillance: figures of authority passing by in their white jeeps or Honorine in her navy blue pickup, the proponents of seniority such as Meloche telling me to slow down and workers like Arsenault wanting to show how productive they could be, grinning wildly when we would arrive one or two minutes before quitting time, when most of the others had been playing ping pong in the locker room for three quarters of an hour (see chapter 6). There was a lack of middle ground and in both cases labour is controlled and masculine discourse is used: the included are manly and the excluded are effeminate. It is a difficult balancing act and attempting to excise an individual from the merit-driven effort is an act of commitment as well as a counterhegemonic strategy. To kick someone out from the crew is done by informing a figure of authority that *un col bleu* is spending

the morning inside of the truck reading a newspaper, for instance. This can be a meaningful catharsis and it is not only exclusive to the grass cutters, young males and the Department of Green Spaces—others also do it. It is a strategy very much committed to changing the workplace experience, much more so than blistering work ethic. Cooperation, however is the foundation of criticizing the work ethics of someone who has started to appropriate labour, since a consensus must be reached: “All Gingras does is sit on park benches while we bust our asses...Let’s get rid of him.” Because this counterhegemonic strategy is effective at challenging what the structural shift has made possible, a strong taboo is attached to it via the culture of silence.

The Culture of Silence and the Stoolpigeon

Silence is a precious resource when one’s paycheck and career depend upon it. It becomes a rational undertaking to reproduce and maintain a code of conduct that guarantees that workers who are being exploited will not question their lot or experience incertitude when weighing the pros and cons of ratting out a freebooter to a *contre-maître* or the head of the department. When I asked Arsenault how he felt knowing that our labour was producing a salary for others, his answer reflected the very mechanism that forbade him to speak much about it: “That’s how it works around here [*Icette c’est d’même qu’ça marche*]. I know it isn’t fair but I try not to think about it.” Here, it is timely to be reminded that there is sensible reason behind Arsenault’s response of acquiescence and it is chiefly based upon *La Ville* as symbolizing a career trajectory that is coterminous with security and prestige and one would not want to (or dream of it) compromise this position even if it meant bearing an uncomfortable weight such as supplying another with a free meal ticket. I would repeatedly ask the same question to

Arsenault during my first year following a few months of work together while the dynamics of the grass cutting crew were settling in and he began to share with me what appeared to be sincere feelings of depression, anxiety and sadness. My student status often proved to be of use (not only a drawback that produced suspicion and hostility) during these intimate moments when the cultural shield of masculinity was lowered and simple vulnerability was displayed through the armor's cracks without artifice and without the *raconteur's* colorful brouhaha. Arsenault was not the only one who was "trying not to think about it"—there were other workers who, upon ending a day of work, employed certain means to erase the day's injustices and frustrations. Medicating the weight of silence with narcotics was common for many young males struggling with the inequalities of the workplace. As my second year partner once explained candidly: "I don't want to crack you know [*pêter ma coche*]...I go home, for sure there's a little business to attend to [he personally oversees the administration of his drug selling operation which entails collecting bills and running errands] but I usually roll up a big joint and puff on that awhile...I create a bubble where no bullshit can reach me."

Silence becomes a guarantee against the possibility of exposure when the form that the repercussions take have the power to negatively affect one's standing among the group. The act of *stoolé* or *le stoolage* (deriving from "stoolpigeon") is a crucial part of the culture of silence for it is defined as a taboo par excellence and the treatment of *un stooleur* or *un stooleux* is the deterrent. The taboo that is imposed upon *le stoolage* is so powerful that there need only be a possibility or a rumour that one has committed this act for the webs of gossip to start spinning. There are culturally meaningful reasons for the

violent aversion towards *le stoolage* as there are for avoiding this particularly burdensome stigma.

Le stoolage, among the grass cutters as well as other jobs in *Le Département des Espaces Verts*, is based upon informing a figure of authority that another worker is not pulling his weight. Therefore, *de stoolé quelqu'un* or to “rat someone out” is closely linked to a critique of work ethics and concerning the current developments within the workplace, it is a critique aimed at seniority itself. In order to conduct this critique one must travel upwards through the spatial hierarchy of *Le Centre Technique*: below lies the locker room and ping pong table, the first floor comprises the cantina and various indoor departments (such as the mechanics and carpenters) and the topmost floor symbolizes the bureaucratic and executive realm. “To go upstairs” to the second floor is culturally understood as *aller en haut* and need not necessarily be depicted as possessing a negative value. For instance, to enter the bureaucratic realm may symbolize an act of carrying the battle to the enemy’s doorstep armed with Thursday’s paystub that contains errors or to make special demands concerning vacation time. If that is indeed the case, the individual who decides to go upstairs often makes a big show of it, a theatrical performance that casts the showman (for the *raconteur* model see chapter 6) as a daring figure who is willing to challenge management. However, most of the time *aller en haut* is not perceived as being overly positive under the hegemonic reign of seniority since it signifies proximity to figures of authority—a meritocratic trait that was often defined as a method of encouraging nepotism and favoritism. As an older *col bleu* once demonstrated: “Me I never go upstairs...I don’t agree with it [*j’suis pas d’accord avec ça*]. I think a guy should be able to figure things out on his own [*un gars devrait être capable de se*

debrouiller tout seul]” Here, the older *col bleu* who works for another department effectively illustrates two very important points: the speaker disassociates himself completely with the mere possibility of taking a quick trip to the second floor, imbuing such an activity with a negative value, and he also makes a differentiation between being a man and “being good at being a man” (Power 2005, Herzfeld 1986). To be able to “figure things out” is an ability that signals a high degree of masculinity and the term in Lachinois French is *être débrouillard*. Men who are perceived as manly do not need to go upstairs, they keep quiet and reason out the problem. This is perhaps the motivation behind the production of an over-the-top theatrical act when planning to go upstairs due to a paystub that does not add up or vacation planning. The performance itself attempts to negate any association with *le stoolage* and acting in an effete way. Thus, through a brief statement, the older *col bleu* reproduces and maintains the culture of silence by remaining acquiescent and by being able to lay claim to a masculine existence. In other words silence itself, not contesting hegemony, becomes emblematic of stoicism and manliness.

In the case of the grass cutters, many of whom are childhood friends, *stoolé* becomes a difficult and at times impossible option. Therefore, producing a critique of seniority and work ethics is out of the question. Even though a young *col bleu*’s labour may be appropriated for the benefit of others (“others” often being defined by intimate friendships), the culture of silence not only promotes voiceless passivity but it also attaches a strong masculine value to it. After all, tough guys are supposed to “figure it out for themselves.” For *cols bleus* like Arsenault or Taillefer *La Ville* is not only a job, it is a career trajectory that they have chosen to pursue. They have invested emotionally, physically and mentally into its structure and cultural world in hope of a future. To

contest the culture of silence could be equated not only with putting one's reputation on the line, an unsavory option compounded by complexities surrounding informal group allegiances and ideas of manliness, but it also represents a confession of sorts: that *travailler pour La Ville* is not all it's cracked up to be and an egress difficult to identify. Many who have experienced an appropriation of their labour by coworkers also have to make payments on cars and homes and most live with their *blondes* ("girl friends"). Willis has observed a similar process whereby the working-class, anti-intellectual lads realise once they experience "entrapment" within the shopfloor culture that "going back to school" is infeasible and a dearth of opportunities must be faced (1977:119-120).

The taboo surrounding the act of *stoolé* cannot be underestimated. In fact it was not rare to hear workers, the *same* workers who had received the shorter end of the stick (such as having had their labour bankroll someone else's afternoon of repose), employ what can seem to be an apologetic tone for the very person responsible for the inegalitarian treatment. It is possible that this had to do with the fact that many of these young workers had shared a common childhood together, however this position only served as an acquittal of sorts, a testament to the culture of silence's lasting efficacy. One young *col bleu* once said of a very lackadaisical worker that, although he did not help much, he had a lot of "culture" (*Il est très cultivé*). The recipient of this rather flattering remark had once spent an entire morning (from 7:30am to noon) relaxing inside of a truck listening to the radio until the truck's battery wore out and *Le Centre Technique*'s electricians had to be called via cell phone to give a boost. Another *col bleu*'s attempt to domesticate tyranny within the workplace stated that Meloche had a "beautiful baby boy" directly after discussing the former's lack of morality and brutality,

making for an interesting and tangential juxtaposition. Arsenault once stated that one could not ask for a “better guy” than JP during a party since he was so much fun. He made this statement after a particularly difficult day of labour during which JP had enjoyed Truck Timing all over Lachine, ending the day in pristine shape while others plainly wore their exhaustion due to sun stroke and the loss of electrolytes through perspiration. Lastly, following a quarrel between Arsenault and Meloche concerning the fact that the former’s productivity on the tractor was robbing everyone of overtime, Arsenault had taken the rest of the day off. Before punching out for lunch, he was visibly upset and had told me what had happened. The following day Meloche approached Arsenault in the cantina and expressed regret to him: “I knew how you would take it...” Arsenault who was seated, seemed to be relieved and made a whining sound like a small puppy, and cuddled up to Meloche’s hand by placing his cheek on it.

These vignettes display an attitude towards injustice that is very much part of the culture of silence and any justifications, be they about “culture” (which is often equated with finesse, class and education), a “beautiful baby”, the life of the party or an explicitly physical acquiescence, produce an attempt to turn away from contestation and to give the floor to seniority. There may be rational explanations behind these “courtesies.” Not challenging and remaining silent is a manly thing to do, as was noted above, and it is also an act of separating oneself from the possibility of even being considered to be a stoopigeon. If one never contests the discursive space that is being manifested through actions that are impacting upon one’s quality of life one need never run the risk of being imagined as a disgruntled worker who seeks retribution for past misdeeds. *Cols bleus* joke about work ethics and may even call one another “dog fucker” in jest, for it is an

issue that garners much attention in the media as well as in the workplace. To be called *un stooleur* can also be used as a term for some friendly ribbing, however, due to the fact that the culture of silence is a sensitive issue it is used with restraint. The following brief example demonstrates how easily one can become *un stooleur* without even having opened one's mouth.

While working on the multitude of rose bushes adorning *La Promenade Marquette* (part of Lachine's waterside and cycle path) with pneumatic clippers, a verbal disagreement between two of my crew members (Leduc and Brière) erupted. Trimming rose bushes requires a good amount of skill since there is a correct way of removing dead branches while encouraging new growth. Technically only the *conducteur* and Leduc were allowed to clip the roses bushes, however they decided to also teach Brière and me. During our second week on rose bush duty, Brière made a passing remark about a green and healthy branch that Leduc had cut. Leduc took this as an attack upon his work and an energetic yelling match ensued with passersby watching the *col bleu* battle. The *conducteur*, who was acting as crew leader, decided to step in and Leduc suddenly felt cornered. He yelled until his face turned bright red and blamed both Brière and the *conducteur* for conspiring against him and not having respected seniority. The matter was dropped. However, everybody was shaken (even I who wisely decided to remain neutral) and the air was still crackling with tension. The next day during lunch break in the cantina, a co-worker matter-of-factly stated to my crew's *conducteur*, who was seated next to me, that Leduc (who was not present at that moment) had said that he had "talked" with our department boss about the altercation. The *conducteur*, who had apparently not reported anything, was dumb struck by the false allegations, however the

trap had sprung and it was too late. Nothing that he said seemed to register with the *col bleu* who had broken the “news” to him or the others sitting at the table. My *conducuteur* was suddenly a traitor and many looked at him with grave eyes and saying ominous things like “that’s no good...” He was completely flabbergasted and so was I.

This summary displays the power that *stooling* can have even if it does not happen. *Stoolé* someone is the possibility of breaking the culture of silence through an unrecognized process while a recognized and legitimate process can involve grievances concerning matters of seniority that are handled by the union. The taboo surrounding contesting unfair workplace experiences is very strong. Hegemonic strategies pertaining to the evasion of labour and the appropriation of production of one’s childhood friends symbolizes a rational and manly way of acting within the recently reconfigured workplace. *Stoolé*, as perhaps the most powerful weapon in the slim arsenal of counterhegemonic strategies, is itself countered by an efficient mechanism that seeks to maintain the status quo. There are times however when there is no choice left but to brave the “grave eyes” and ostracizing gossip. During my fourth year, in 2007, the grass cutting crew was in a sad state of affairs with Taillefer and I doing most of the labour while the other two *whipeurs* abided by *la loi du moindre effort* (the law of least effort). JP was often absent so that left us with Gingras, who was actually reputed in the entire Public Works of Lachine as being a very mediocre worker. He had been hired as a charity case: his mother having died of cancer and his brother and sister having committed suicide together. He has spent time in prison for dealing cocaine and also has a young son living with his ex-wife. Charity cases in Lachine are not uncommon—Normandeau once candidly told me that his learning disability almost made him unemployable for many

jobs. Gingras has held various job types in different departments —proving inadequate for all due to laziness—until the administration decided that the most physically demanding job was the right choice for him. So he became a grass cutter. Gingras proved himself to be a very mediocre *whipeur*, often sighted on park benches or at the truck. JP, an ardent supporter of seniority who used *stooleur* as a pejorative and who had once told me that he preferred to “work smart” by only coming to work when there was overtime available, was taken aback by Gingras’ work ethics which were even more indifferent than his own. One day Taillefer approached me after a washroom break with a special request. He told me very frankly that he could not stand Gingras anymore, the two having nearly come to blows on several occasions due to work ethics. With tears in his eyes, Taillefer asked me if I would be willing to accompany him to “go upstairs” and talk with the head of the department regarding Gingras. I was startled by Taillefer’s naked emotions, considering that emotive states like sadness, frustration and depression are made into targets of derision for they are perceived as being marks of weakness. Vocal anger and boldness, for example, are acceptable because they are “clean” emotions: they are rarely, if ever, used to criticize the unequal appropriation of labour or hegemony—they *are* hegemony expressed through the skillfully conveyed discourses of masculinity, as shall be seen in the next chapter. Taillefer, as the crew’s *conducteur*, bore the responsibility of productivity...as did I, since I was an accomplished *whipeur*, and Taillefer and I had entered into an implicitly stated agreement of cooperation. We needed one another to survive the season and to give meaning to our work. The prospect of expanding my fieldwork experience by *stooling* was very enticing so I agreed. What was perhaps an ironic turn of events is that JP, upright citizen of seniority, had already *stooped*

out Gingras to Honorine. What on earth could have motivated JP to commit such an act of open criticism of another's work ethics? The conditions changed when JP got a taste of his own medicine, so to speak, by having his own labour appropriated by Gingras and to have this inegalitarian experience muffled by the invisible politics of the pad.

The culture of silence and the notion of *stoolage* produce a powerful system that has the ability to constrain counterhegemonic strategies, however this does mean that there are *cols bleus* that choose to remain indefinitely silenced. Both meritocratic workers as well as seniority workers within the grass cutting branch have contested what the structural shift has enabled and facilitated. *Stoolage* is a strategy that carries significant amounts of culturally generated culpability and it must not be forgotten that it is effeminately constructed: one failed to “figure it out” or to remain impassive and stoic in the face of intimately experienced injustice. As for Gingras, the reader need not worry too much about him—he was promoted to the ranks of tractor driver so that his productivity could be tracked by the administration. He received a raise and also autonomous mobility, since tractor drivers are able to more or less organize the workday according to their own tastes. Not a shabby recompense for being “the most mediocre worker” of the Public Works. In the end, Gingras won it all...

Agency

To move beyond the experiences of the grass cutters requires more than limited strategies and a shift towards the creation of agency. Many young *cols bleus* have described agency in terms of wanting to achieve control over their own labour. This statement could be viewed in and of itself as being a critique of seniority, for although silence may be encouraged and maintained, many within the grass cutters' ranks seem to

be intimately aware of what the structural shift has brought and are equally aware that a “commitment to change” in their futures could represent a higher quality of life (Sider 1986:126).

Leaving the ranks of the grass cutters by becoming a tractor driver is a popular ambition and although the augmented purchasing power creates an incentive it is misleading to draw attention only to this factor. Able to work alone and away from crew dynamics becomes the primary incentive. Taillefer has achieved this by successfully completing his class 3 training and gaining access to large vehicles equipped with airbrakes. He still works within the department, however, there is no need for a *navigateur* nor must he seek to counter the experience of labour appropriation. Becoming the crew’s *conducteur*, although prestigious in the past, has been made into a very difficult position as we have seen. Larocque, a young *col bleu* who started his career *pour La Ville* on the grass cutting crew, typifies this knowledge by having refused, on numerous occasions, *conducteur* status. Larocque does not yet have a driver’s permit and states that he does not plan to acquire one as long as he works as *un col bleu* in order to never have to deal with the responsibilities that a permit can bring. This resolution serves as strong testimony to the fact that Larocque does in fact perceive the hegemonic strategies that are used and imagines what could befall him if he found himself behind a steering wheel. Besides, Larocque participates in those very systems of inequality and staying clear of status allows him to continue to do so.

Another option is to attempt to leave the grass cutting branch and to become an unspecialized free agent within the Department of Green Spaces. This is an appealing choice since one has access to a wide variety of jobs that change according to season. In

the spring and summer one may find oneself planting trees and flowers, pulling weeds and, in autumn, hedges need trimming and dead leaves need raking. At times, rarer jobs are made available and one gets the opportunity to work with the older *émondeurs* (tree pruners) where tree climbing, heavy lifting and chainsaw wielding are part of the day's labour. It is difficult to be transferred to new work, however being recognized as a "good worker" and having good ties with the head of the department certainly helps. I myself achieved this following a work-related neck injury. Not wishing to look a gift horse in the mouth I was able to, with the help of a doctor, supply the administration with a medical report that stated that I must never touch a whip again.

Arsenault has successfully found a way out of *Le Département des Espaces Verts*, moving into a "better department" and doing something he enjoys. While he was a janitor, Arsenault had access to a workweek configuration that is unique as far as regular workweeks are organized. He worked for 3 twelve hour days (Friday, Saturday and Sunday) that left him with ample spare time to work with his older brother and cousin doing construction. Arsenault worked enough hours and garnered enough experience to obtain *ses cartes de compétences*, qualifications that certify that the individual has reached an acceptable level of skill in regards to construction. Armed with his newly acquired credentials, Arsenault gained access to *Le Département des Métiers* as a young carpenter and has been happy ever since. I bumped into him in the new IGA supermarket last November in 2007. He had not been working since September because of a torn ligament in his knee while playing ice hockey—he plays as a goal keeper and will require surgery. He was receiving *chômage* (unemployment insurance) but he was out of luck with the worker's compensation board (*la CSST*) since the injury had been produced

outside of the workplace. Arsenault was happy not to be working currently because a new round of collective bargaining had been initiated and the union had recently sent him an instruction manual detailing that a conspiracy had been uncovered: figures of authority within the workplace had been given orders from *La Ville de Montréal*'s political top brass to apply pressure on their workers in a bid to encourage retaliatory responses—the goal being that once a worker blew a gasket a letter of reprimand could be issued. Bosses were thus described as waging a subtle paperwork war from the bureaucratic realms. Arsenault expressed his happiness at not being at work while these feelings were in the air and to be caught between two antagonistic forces (*poigné entre les deux*). He stated that his current time off gave him the chance to think about his life and his next move. Arsenault added that if he was still currently in the Department of Green Spaces that he would be feeling differently: “I would be losing it!” (*j’serais en train de capotter!*). The situation is now different though and carpentry suits him well: “I’m happy as a carpenter. I go to work, do my job and get paid...that’s the way I like it!”

Finally some *cols bleus* simply decide to leave *La Ville* altogether. Reportedly, many individuals have made this choice and the stories that I have heard are all related to work ethics and the wish to control one’s own labour. This creates a paradoxical image of *La Ville* as *une bonne job* that many in Lachine would want. It would seem though that it is not everybody’s cup of tea...

Chapter 6. Masculine Aesthetics: the *Raconteur*

This chapter explores the shifting masculine aesthetics in *Le Centre Technique* that followed the collective agreement of 2004 that initiated the seniority list: a new type of union-based protection that on one hand defends even the most lackadaisical of workers while on the other curtails the exploitation of networks that have been historically known to supply participants with beneficial resources. I suggest that the shifting masculine aesthetics can be approached by way of a cultural assembly that I have come to call the *raconteur*, meaning “storyteller.” Storytelling or detailed narratives do not represent rare oratory devices amongst *les cols bleus* that I have worked with. On the contrary, being a good *raconteur* is something that many male workers, young and old, subscribe to and aspire to become. After all, who wishes to be known as a slow draw during a bout of verbal sparring or as a dullard when it comes time to share a story that should be delivered with energy and creativity? The *raconteur* is an individual who is particularly skilled at gossiping, joking, telling a culturally valid story or publicly (and covertly) teasing someone. The *raconteur* is not only skilled at speech he is also skilled at putting on an elaborate act becoming a performative spark, a dramatic stage presence. It is a narrative model that is discursive in construction and intent, yet is much more than that. As Lancaster cogently advances in his study of Nicaraguan males and manliness: “machismo is resilient because it constitutes not simply a form of ‘consciousness,’ not ‘ideology’ in the classical understanding of the concept, but a *field of productive relations*” (Lancaster as cited in Gutmann 1996:222 emphasis my own). Here, I do not wish to draw more attention than is necessary to the “machismo” element, although the *raconteur* also possesses discursive dynamics that scholars such as Lancaster (1992) as

well as Gutmann (1996, 1997) may have labeled as being as such, rather I am interested by the “field of productive relations” that the former eloquently describes. Similar to Lancaster’s evaluation of machismo, the *raconteur* is also representative of constructing and maintaining a productive field of relations that generates different layers of meanings. There are contradictions that arise within the *raconteur* that move above and beyond performance, creativity, masculinity, hegemony and discourse, although all of these components are present and in order to understand what the *raconteur* is and how its culture of storytelling functions it is necessary to observe its more literal articulations (however not devoid of paradoxes) before moving to the “inner terrain of culture” (Sider 1986:185) that is more often than not hidden behind a curtain of formality. I propose starting with the discussions provided by Herzfeld, Limón and Sider concerning speech and social interactions for they generate the analytical tools that are needed to understand the *raconteur* and its intricacies.

In The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village (1985), Herzfeld’s discussion of *simasia*, *eghoismos* and *khoui*, all cultural devices employed among the pastoral male “Glendiots” of the Cretan mountains, offers a productive beginning for the *raconteur* model since they are concerned with performance through speech. *Simasia*, Herzfeld writes, is “meaning in action” in the mountain village of Glendi and it is not “lexicographical abstraction”—it is speech and performance, however this has arisen from specific and lived experience (1985: xiv). Through *performance* actual experience is hoisted up to the realm of significance and shared with others, therefore *simasia* is both part verbal and act (*Ibid*). Herzfeld posits that one of the underpinnings to a successful performance is the projection of the self as an extraordinary

subject by not only employing skilled speech and delivery, but also by using as stage or backdrop an ideological attitude that is culturally accepted (1985:10). By “suppressing a sense of incongruity”, as advanced by Herzfeld, a truly *habile* performer is able to identify the self with larger categories of identity such as historically prestigious patrilineal figures or valid ideological structures, such as highly indexed feats of masculinity like drinking, playing cards and the consumption of stolen meat (1985:10-11). *Simasia* also acts as a kind of abacus that attributes success or failure to individual actions—Glendiot males who have successfully achieved a meaningful action (to pilfer a few sheep from another’s herd for example) and imbue the activity with theatrical wit in front of an audience are thus able to reap the lion’s share of *simasia* (Herzfeld 1985:18).

Eghoismos and *khoui* among the male Glendi entail the concept of “self-regard” and creativity respectively (Herzfeld 1985:11). While both notions are also much about differentiating between “being good at being a man” and “being a good man” (Herzfeld 1985:124, Power 2005:15-16), what sets them apart from *simasia* is the focus that is applied to the quality of the performance itself and the uniqueness with which the actor has articulated the discourse. Herzfeld explains this as being “the projection of difference for its own sake” and this successful divergence is to be understood as a social category of excellence (1985:11). *Eghoismos*, in essence, is refined showmanship where “conventions are not rejected so much as creatively redefined” (Herzfeld 1985:16). *Khoui* as “demonstrative eccentricity” and to insist upon supplying the audience with an inimitable approach to spheres of social interaction is “evidence of fundamental conformity to canons of Glendiot identity” (Herzfeld 1985:136-140). In regards to *khoui*, the performer must not seem to have pondered his speech or his action, the fluidity of

quick thinking, luck and an ever readiness with words is to be conserved (1985:140-142). Dunk has also made this type of observation when analyzing the game of “lob-ball”—a somewhat more “relaxed” version of baseball that, while it remains competitive to a certain degree, is to be played with insouciance and unlaboured poise (1991:65-100). It is much more impressive to be able to catch a fly ball while unhurriedly backpedalling with a drooping cigarette in one’s mouth than to catch the same ball while exerting tremendous amounts of energy. A young *col bleu* who appears to have momentarily laboured to respond to a verbal javelin may be faced with the following remark: *Ou-aië...ça t’as tu pris du temps d’la trouver celle la?* (Sheesh...did you hurt yourself trying to come up with that one?) This deliciously shrewd criticism pokes fun at prefabricated retorts or obvious answers, drawing immediate attention to the discourse’s lack of luster. The notions of *simasia*, *eghoismos* and *khoui* underscore a nuanced and thriving economy of meanings, creativity and evaluations that are imbedded within a symbiotic relationship between performer and audience—a mechanism also present within the *raconteur* model that I have observed within the fieldwork site.

Having conducted fieldwork in his natal home of Mexican-American south Texas, Limón draws attention to the language, jokes and performances of the lower working-class *batos* (guys, dudes) who are marginalized and alienated by a dominant Anglo and Mexican American bourgeois culture (1997:63). Within the comedic accounts of *chingaderas* (“fuck ups”) and *vaciladas* (“play routines”) that Limón has participated in and observed (and at times fallen prey to, encouraging Limón to suggest that “...we must always decenter our own narrative self-assurance lest it be saturated with dominating power” [1997:80]), he has found that they are characterized by a “powerful sexual and

scatological discourse” that possesses historicity within Mexican working-class folk traditions (1997:67). Limón states that the lexicographical landscape that *los Batos* skillfully navigate has been subjugated and delegitimized by authoritative discourses spanning from the mid 1930s to the 1970s and promulgated by intellectuals, a practice continued by the contemporary holders of class power (1997:63-64). *Los Batos*, like Willis’ *counter-school lads* (1977), Herzfeld’s *Glendiot shepherds* (1985) Dunk’s *Boys* (1991) and Power’s *traditional fishermen* (2005), celebrate their system of knowledge through various cultural engagements and one such example is carried out through what Limón calls “speech plays” that are prevalent during an event called *carne asada*—the barbecuing of meat held at a modest rancho (1997:70). Limón proposes that speech plays among the Mexican *Batos* consist of “ludic moments” that are framed by native markers such as bantering, playing and joking (*Ibid*). While intellectuals such as Ramos and Paz assume that the central feature of this humor is that of humiliation, the outcome of a hostile contest (Limón 1997:67), Limón supports the existence of a more complex world of cultural performance that possesses several denotative layers and are discourses that appear “often in narrative form” (1997:64). Speech plays, the author writes, should not be reducible to a monolithic interpretation of aggressive verbal symbols with a clear demarcation separating the conquerors from the conquered (or “humiliated”) nor should they be thought of existing in a “social vacuum” promoting static concepts such as solidarity (Limón 1997:72). Instead, Limón argues that speech plays are “scenes” that possess a multivocal construct and are “eminently ideological”, therefore these practices are grounded within a political economy (1997:68-69).

According to Limón's research literal language undergoes a transformation during speech plays rendering it socially harmless as well as supplying its participants with a basis for solidarity (1997:70-71). The "mock aggression", Limón explains, that emerges along with themes of anality and pollution while feasting upon the internal organs of the steer, tough and chewy meat that is considered to be low-status in the wider social economy of south Texas, represents membership as well as criticism through creativity (*Ibid*). Open or "real" aggression, overriding the surrogate version established within the parameters of speech plays, can only appear by mistake and rest upon the participant not being able to properly identify a "ludic moment" and/or having a poor grasp of the symbolic language that is employed (1997:70). Herzfeld, writing of the Glendiot poetic notion, also makes a similar observation in a different cultural context: "A clever verse riposte serves to restrain physical violence and an individual who responds with violence suggests that he was incapable of responding with wit" (1985:143). Young *cols bleus* also see the value of being able to retain poise and control when jousting and teasing, "scenes" that are important for anybody to be able to identify successfully—and not everybody does, for they are often formed in such a way as to mimic plausibility and discerning friend from foe can become confusing. Taillefer, the Chemical King of Lachine, once shared his thoughts concerning skilful speech: "I think it's much more effective when you can retort (*répliquer*) without losing control (*sans perdre les pédales*)".

In Limón's study, the interaction among the men at the small rancho where the *carne asada* is held are embedded within a political economy that, when analyzed critically, produces multiple layers of meaning. Through a critique of Bakhtin's notion of

the carnivalesque, Limón argues that it is only possible to achieve criticality of the unofficial culture that *los Batos* produce by not only analyzing the objective of their antagonistic stance towards a dominant regime (the affirmation of an alternative social order) but also to observe that “its ideological and material character is not one of *undiluted seamless opposition*” (1997:75). The *carne asada*, as in Dunk’s analysis of lob-ball’s misleading egalitarianism and solidarity (1991), seeks to challenge domination, however the components of this scheme’s expression consist of dominating discourse, thus liberation and criticism is ultimately constrained. The *carne asada*, Limón observes, excludes women from participating and the frequent consumption of alcohol and beef damages *los Batos*’ health (*Ibid*). The author also briefly, however very importantly, points out *los Batos*’ attitudes towards anthropologists as being “elite”, “effeminate” and also, contextually, devoid of common sense (Limón 1997:78). Speech play as complex language becomes a performance of inclusivity among *los Batos* that is generated by an “artistically textured discourse through skilful manipulations of allusion, metaphor, *narration*, and prosody” (1997:70-71, emphasis added). Limón states that the scenes produced and shared by the participants are created in “collective equality” and composed of *confianza* (trust and familiarity) and *respeto* (respect) juxtaposed to an outside world largely perceived as being hostile (1997:72).

Les gens de mon pays (The people of my country)
Ce sont gens de paroles (They are a people of words)
Et gens de causerie (And people of speech)
Qui parlent pour s'entendre (They speak to hear themselves)
Et parlent pour parler (And speak to speak)
Il faut les écouter (We must listen to them)
C'est parfois vérité (At times it is truth)
Et c'est parfois mensonge (At times deceit)

—“Les Gens de Mon Pays,” Gilles Vigneault, Québécois poet, translations are my own

Vigneault, a sovereigntist (as can be surmised by the first politicized verse that favors the word “country” over “province”), was observant enough to attach importance to everyday speech and perhaps even more so in identifying the contradictory and paradoxical element of “truth” and “deception” imbedded within these social transactions that Sider refers to as being “divergences and correspondences” within culture and within class itself (1986:75). Sider’s discussion pertaining to *cuffers*, *mumming* and *scoffing*—northeast coast Newfoundland fisherfolk customs—are helpful in further developing notions of speech and of introducing the “paradoxes and contradictions” of culture (1986:74). Although *cuffers* are closer in nature to the *raconteur*’s storytelling and moralistic accounts, *mumming* and *scoffing* are so interrelated with the former custom that leaving them out would prove to be counterproductive. What I find meaningful and analytically rich about the ambitions advanced by these three customs based upon social interactivity is not a concern about masculine performative excellence (Herzfeld 1985), nor collective solidarity (Limón 1997), rather, it is about creating a paradoxical sense of “intimacy and antagonism” (Sider 1986). A *cuffer*, according to Sider, is a kind of tale about past local events, however the details are distorted and swapped with other events, essentially forming a tale that is a lie (Sider 1986:162). A *cuffer* possesses all the structural ingredients that are part of the social interactions explored by Herzfeld (especially during Glendiot card games 1985:152-154) and Limón (1997), as well as the *raconteur* model that I have observed during my fieldwork: a narrative is told by a “storyteller” to an “audience” and this cultural envelope is unpacked during an “informal gathering” in a specially chosen location (Sider 1986:162-163). The informal gatherings surrounding a *cuffer* appear to be dictated in relation to the status of labour. The cultural

marker framing these events are triggered when work has been completed (labour-intensive household reproductive activities as described by Sider)—when firewood has been cut and when fish have been caught and animals hunted (1986:162). The informal gatherings are held inside of sheds in the afternoon, evenings or nights where time can be passed among a male collective and peripheral labour is leisurely conducted such as the reparation of equipment that is necessary for the ongoing functioning of life in the outport regions of Newfoundland (*Ibid*). These informal gatherings, I suggest (Sider explores the symbolism of the cuffer and only mentions the actual gatherings very briefly), denote a social acquisition of sorts that is experienced only when labour as a precondition has been met. This is a distinct dissimilarity between the *raconteur* of *Le Centre Technique* that is able to ply his trade without having to make concessions regarding the relationship of labour and leisure time. The storyteller that is in charge of the cuffer, has great responsibility due to the very nature of the tale's discursive fabric, which is predicated upon the grey area that lies between familiarity and aggression, truth and deception (Sider 1986:162). Collective communication that contains the seeds of paradox, be it through gossip, joking, pranking or the sharing of intimate knowledge, is an often difficult interactive form to engage in (and analyze) considering the ambiguity of it all. Within their tissues lies no clear-cut path that designates the acceptable from the unacceptable, instead there is a comingling of meanings that leads one down snaking lanes. A cuffer, as a contorted recollection of the past that is activated through a narrative form (as storytelling) produces a fascinating reaction from the audience as explained by Sider:

The disagreements can become, or are provoked into becoming, fairly intense: Men shout, occasionally shove, make bets, and even threaten one another. And it is impossible to tell if these disagreements are sham – pretense from beginning to end – unless someone goes too far and gets really angry. Those who do not cross this

line might have been taken in by the cuffer, at least for a while, or they might just be disagreeing for the sport of it; and the same for those that agree with the storyteller. But when people get really angry they get very angry – either from the cuffer itself, the provocative or genuine arguments, or from having been “taken.” (1986:162)

The storyteller perhaps serves as narrative vessel, and could be perceived as orchestrating the intensity of the interactive climate, if skilled enough in delivering the cuffer. “Tell us a cuffer, George” (Faris as cited in Sider 1986:163) as friendly request alludes to an individual who is sought out precisely because he may possess great knowledge of past local events and of what the audience is likely to know as well as a goodly amount of experience in what really makes for a lively cuffer, and as the above quoted paragraph demonstrates, a cuffer appears to be able to produce energetic responses. The knowledge that is indispensable to tell a cuffer is “profoundly intimate” since the storyteller and the audience share and appraise the material of their cultural universe together (Sider 1986:162). The experience is a collaborative one, since the audience reaction is necessary in making what a cuffer is: a lie about history that is challenged, agreed upon or a bit of both.

Mumming and scoffing represent occasions where the coexistence of merriment and implicit threat are central features to the customs (Sider 1986:75). Mumming entails the visitation of households, from the 25th of December to the 6th of January, by neighboring male and female fisherfolk that conceal their physiognomy with eccentric costumes, and disguise their voices by speaking while breathing in, and announce their presence by weirdly rapping at the kitchen door (Sider 1986:76). The mummers are never strangers—they are people that the members of the household know, however they enter as unknown beings, withered vegetation hanging from their heads, noisily dragging

chains behind them and masks hiding their visages (*Ibid*). The mummer straddles the realms of the frightening and the jocular as a trickster creature that makes a lot of noise, dances, prods and molests both women and men, however the “hosts and victims” are not without defense: they can pinch and poke the mummer right back until the concealed become revealed (Sider 1986:76-77). When the mummies are unmasked and transform themselves into normal guests drink, food and song follow and reciprocal offers are made to the hosts, thus renewing and strengthening already established relationships or producing an opening for a potential one (Sider 1986:77).

Scoffing is a very much different kind of festivity that is based upon the theft (“bucking”) of provender from an unwitting “host” or “sponsor” during the autumnal months of the year (Sider 1986:78-79). Food is never stolen from the powerful (like merchants), from “figures of external power” (doctors and government officials for example), from marginal individuals (the very poor, the morally marginal) or from family members—food is always taken from other fisher families, therefore the very act has strong overtones of membership (Sider 1986:78). The foodstuffs that are bucked are significant in quality and quantity such as deer and moose meat, the product of hunting or a live sheep and chickens, the product of a humble level of animal husbandry curtailed by the harsh terrain of Newfoundland discouraging mass grazing (*Ibid*). Once the considerable amount of food is taken, always from people that are not part of the hegemony (like merchants) and that a great feast is organized and enjoyed in close intimacy with family and friends (attended by both genders, unlike the cuffers), and as Sider observes, a site of merriment supplied by the plunder: “a lot of sexual teasing, verbal and physical, drinking, dancing, playing cards, singing songs, telling tall stories

and jokes, and eating, on and off, throughout the evening” (*Ibid*). Interestingly enough, a considerable amount of left over party food is reciprocated to the unwilling “sponsor”, an ironic and contradictory gesture of generosity (*Ibid*). What is important about this type of theft is not only the preciousness of the food itself but the fact that the “victim” does eventually discover who the culprits are, and apparently not from guesswork but from the obviousness of the “gift” of leftovers, therefore doing two things to the antagonistic nature of the scoff: firstly, intimacy is underscored not only by the good company that attracts the feast but also by the reallocation of food to its rightful owner as well as not relegating the theft to anonymity (what might be perceived as a *true* act of aggression) and secondly, threat is not supplanted by the ironic act, instead it is extended as plans to get even are made (Sider 1986:79).

Cuffers, mummering and scoffing point to a cultural system that I find very thought provoking because the presence of these cultural internal dynamics are difficult to anticipate without extensive consideration. Sider argues that mummering, scoffing and the storytelling cuffers are representative of different forms of alliance (sentiment and emotion, work and production [1986:80]) that also come into conflict and contradiction with one another, thus producing an interlacing effect—the “confrontations and collusions” that are activated and brokered respectively *within* a class and *between* classes (Sider 1986:8-9 emphasis in original). The three customs discussed above all possess what Sider establishes as “antagonistic intimacies” and cannot be reduced to pure solidarity nor to pure hostility (1986:164). In addition, as can be seen in mummering and scoffing both genders are active participants, therefore discussing these dynamics as “demonstrative/performative masculine performance” as Herzfeld has described Glendiot

interactivity (1985), is not possible either. Lastly, and very significantly, Sider, writing about cuffers, observes that the dynamism involved “mocks not just the victims but also the very intimacy and antagonism that it expresses” (1986:164). This unique characteristic has also been observed by Herzfeld among Glendiot males who regard jokes about their own system of values as a true index of creativity and “manhood” (1985:148). This mocking of the dynamics combined with antagonistic intimacies points towards irreducibility to polar opposites and it is very productive to apply this to *Le Centre Technique* and its young male labourers. Aggression and intimacy and paradox is present within all three forms. What makes Sider’s discussion of paradoxes so compelling is that they afford the possibility of a more diversified and ambiguous experience that do not inexorably lead to interminable contests of masculinity or alternative cultural worlds that are constructed with strands of dominating (and constraining) discourse.

The Multilayered Meanings of the *Raconteur*

Within the discussions provided by Herzfeld, Limón and Sider a few reoccurring characteristics emerge, namely: narratives/discourses and the collaboration between storyteller (performance) and audience (evaluation); speech or act as being skilled; special treatment of aggression or threat; locales imbued with significance; and, the juxtaposition of the particular forms of cultural expression with hegemonic regimes. Many of these traits can also be applied to the *raconteur*, however there are also variations that produce different layers of meaning as one digs farther.

Common sense knowledge is a resource that is regularly exploited by the *raconteur* and as a cultural system of knowledge emphasizing the immediate and

concrete, it is very useful in producing tales or quicker social transactions that are well received by the audience. Common sense knowledge appears natural, practical and obvious, and serves as a guide in the process of making sense of the world in comparison to what is perceived as being the impractical and abstract musings of scholars for instance (Dunk 1991). The core strength of common sense is twofold: firstly, it deems itself quite capable of determining the precise cause of complex social phenomena for it is devoid of the characteristics that formal knowledge falls prey to. *Les cols bleus'* thoughts about African Canadians and *les races* (visible minorities) and women as sexual objects that must subscribe to a stringent aesthetic code, for example, are not the product of long reflection and analysis: views are easy to arrive at and there is no need to study or to sequester oneself in deep thought. Secondly, and most importantly, common sense can be easily transmitted via proverbs, jokes and moralistic accounts which are accessible to everyone and formal qualifications are not required to articulate them. Common sense thus acts as a meaningful and potent repository of cultural values and mores that can be convincing when articulated in a culturally valued way. It is important to observe that although speech may not be ensconced within the formal realm, it is by no means a democratic system that can be shared and enjoyed by everyone. Common sense knowledge imparted through speech in the form of jokes, stories and moral accounts more often than not exclude particular members of society and particular cultural worlds. Common sense is powerful precisely because it is a convenient device that enables its proponents to create instantaneous order within a very complex world and views about intellectuals, women and visible minorities that circulate in *Le Centre Technique* are no exception to this.

The presumed and immediately knowable fill the *raconteur*'s quiver with ideological arrows. However, adhering to common sense is not enough to make a *raconteur* what he is. A great degree of artistry is displayed by unpredictable play on words (*des jeux de mots*), mastery of Lachinois expressions, energetic gesticulations and knowledge of the goings-on in Lachine and its environs is needed. Physical proximity is also a technique that many will use when "enjoying" a face to face chat with a colleague. This is a strangely aggressive as well as intimate experience as the *raconteur*'s face looms in very closely and an index finger starts to tap one in the chest or a too friendly arm wraps itself around one's shoulder and the *raconteur*'s mouth starts to whisper information into one's ear. All in all one must be somewhat of an artist and a politician: the former embellishes while the latter persuades and manipulates the convictions of the audience. The *raconteur*'s language and gesticulations are devilishly well calculated and sophisticated, nothing is left to chance. Once common sense is conjoined with creativity, eccentricity and uniqueness, truly captivating narratives are produced. Discourses that prove to be popular are circulated, retold and strengthened, the accuracy of the tale becoming questionable as embellishments are added or details that could prove embarrassing are removed in order to render at times what appears to a simple tale into an epic that aims to impress. A "good" *raconteur* can even produce a performance using a mobile or cellular phone as an aid to reinforce their point of view. On several occasions young *cols bleus* (often during Truck Time) would phone their *blondes* and make a discursive spectacle of it. The tone of voice that the male uses is frequently rough and bluntly distributed answers accompanied with direct questions punctuate the conversation. The machinegun rattling of questions such as—"Where are you?" "You're

with who?” “When are you going home?” “What are we eating?”—are meant to establish quite a few things within a very short time frame. These questions are rhetorical, invasive and produce power in favor of the male while simultaneously showcasing the *raconteur*'s ability and ideological streak. Chiding *la blonde* as if she were but a mere child or berating her for having forgotten such and such task that the *raconteur* had issued to her becomes a different form of male violence (Gutmann 1997:214). Even the conclusion is carried out with a flourish that drips with hierarchy: the flip phone is closed with an audible clap and tossed upon the dashboard with enough force to bounce against the inside of the windshield if the *raconteur* is the *conducteur* or *navigateur*. The conversation with the significant other has proven to be inconsequential and is symbolically discarded perhaps followed by a tirade against women where the audience can apply gender assumptions in heaping spades. Less aggressive chats conducted via cell phones to a buddy (*un chum*) can also be used by a *raconteur* to produce a strong appearance of belonging to the jet set. Here, the audience (such as the passengers of a crew truck or the eavesdroppers in the cantina) becomes less implicated, they are simply there to witness the *raconteur*'s popularity and plan making. Here also the tone of voice is imbued with a special quality: it is not only business-like and fast paced but often what appears to be purposefully loud, after all, the interlocutor on the other end of the phone is not the only one involved in the conversation. The audience (such as the passengers of a crew truck or the eavesdroppers in the cantina) become less implicated, not because they are not listening but because they are simply there to witness the *raconteur*'s popularity, as he performs the conversation for all the world as if important negotiations are being brokered and critical plans fashioned.

The way in which the *raconteur* speaks, gesticulates, touches and delivers various discourses are ultimately cultural details, that, while important, do not help in contextualizing this field of productive relations within the political economy of *Le Centre Technique* in the wake of a structural shift. It would be misleading to cast the *raconteur* in a similar light as Limón's working-class *Batos*—that is to say, as experienced in collective equality and solidarity, or *confianza* and *respeto* as writes the author (1997:72). It would also prove to be too simplistic to define the *raconteur* as masculine aesthetic and be done with it. Although the model of the *raconteur* is not ensconced within the formal realm, the *raconteur* is by no means a democratic experience within the everyday realities and power struggles of the *col bleu* cultural world in Lachine and there is a precise reason for it being a “masculine aesthetic” of particular excellence and repute. As was discussed in chapter 4 and 5, in many cases seniority encouraged a reversal of the manual and mental labour dichotomy by augmenting union-based protection and producing a workplace situation where employees that are both a burden to the *l'administration* and to other *cols bleus* cannot easily be rid of. Hegemonic strategies, such as the appropriation of labour and Truck Time, as well as the culture of silence, are complex dynamics that have arisen due to the structural shift, and have been regarded by many *cols bleus*, young and old, as being viable resources to develop (see especially chapter 5). Of course, as we have observed, the exploitation of these new resources exact a heavy price upon the other workers who are forced to bear the consequences of such tactics. The *raconteur* is not only undemocratic because it excludes particular members of society and particular cultural worlds, it also excludes other workers. The best *raconteurs* in *Le Centre Technique* are proponents of seniority

because, quite simply, they make the time to articulate it and refine their performances. That is not to say that meritocratic workers are not “good” *raconteurs*, on the contrary, they also produce excellently delivered tales that establish their sexual and combative prowess or racist observations that cast visible minorities and women as human beings of inferior intellect and of questionable morality. Thus, a meritocratic worker can deploy as undemocratic a discourse as a seniority worker. The difference between the two *raconteurs* of oppositional pedigrees is that one will have the time to work as well as articulate his message while the other can often make a living being a *raconteur* for most of the workday. It is an episodic versus sustained relationship vis-à-vis the discursive nature of the *raconteur* that makes all the difference in the world. As was previously discussed, meritocracy and seniority cannot be viewed as being polar opposites, for both systems overlap and share similar ideations pertaining to a wide array of topics such as “proper” masculinity, the importance of homeownership, heterosexual coupling (having *une blonde*) and prestigious vehicles however it is seniority that has the capacity of defining what is and is not acceptable, since it is the current hegemonic regime. Being *un bon raconteur* espouses the shifting masculine aesthetics from manual to mental labour in an extravagant way. As a storyteller, the *raconteur* becomes a mental labourer *par excellence* and can often make a living doing so. A skilled *raconteur* is able to cobble together an alibi for an inquisitive *contre-maître* at the drop of a hat and if his skill is great enough his lackadaisical work ethics can at times be overlooked in favor of his amusing tales. The successful *raconteur* figure can accumulate prestige by laying claim to an elevated sense of masculinity because of seniority. Here is a figure that can recite a tale, tell a good joke, win a verbal sparring contest and whose gossip ledger is up to date.

Being able to achieve all of this while making sure that “all of this” is adequately presented upon a canvas of common sense is astoundingly complicated. It is no wonder that a habile *raconteur* can draw a crowd and that the audience will often respond positively to the spectacle. A *raconteur* need not only depend upon elaborate speech to get the message across. It is also carried out through bodily movement and sumptuary mores—an air of easy confidence in the way one walks, the way a baseball cap is worn, the way one sits, the scratching and “readjusting” of one’s genitals, the size of the gold plated chain that adorns one’s throat—these all act as accoutrements. A walk is “worn”, as is a dangling cigarette, and used like any other article of clothing. Physical movement, accessories and clothing are also part of the discursive moment.

The *raconteur* also possesses important linkage to the culture of silence (see chapter 5) displaying a surprising paradox. It is often only during a *raconteur*’s theatrical performance that an individual who has become an orator plying his trade in front of an audience that carefully gauges his repertoire of verbal thrusts, jabs and parries that one is allowed to momentarily demarcate oneself from the rest. Thusly, speech not only becomes performance but also signifies a culturally legitimate time frame where one can shine and excel at something. Performance becomes a showman’s production very much in the same sense as Herzfeld’s Glendiots who espouse a protocol of “performative excellence” through creativity, uniqueness and eccentricity (1985), however these characteristics must intersect with seniority given its status as regime that has restructured, and continues to restructure, *Le Centre Technique*’s contemporary workplace. More importantly than generating an index of manliness, the *raconteur* becomes one of the only available methods of excelling at something considering that the

type of manual labour that was encouraged during meritocracy no longer represented as enjoying proximity to the hegemonic logic. Being recognized as a brilliant comedian, or proving that one is an old hand at quick repartees is one of the only accepted skills that one can demonstrate without fearing to be ostracized by one's coworkers. Of course the great irony being that a *raconteur's* material is often dependent upon ridiculing or symbolically assassinating another *col bleu's* standing within the group, therefore the possibility of one day being ostracized is not lessened, if anything, the chances are exponentially increased.

Willis' lads (1977), Herzfeld's Glendiots (1985), Dunk's Boys (1991), Limón's *Batos* (1997) and Power's fishermen (2005) all articulate their knowledge with flair and pride which they place in oppositional value to a perceived hegemonic regime. At times this regime is defined by the cultural groups studied as being a bourgeois culture that holds class power (Dunk 1991, Limón 1997), an official or formal paradigm (Willis 1977) or a state sponsored structural shift (Power 2005). Within *Le Centre Technique* a revised approach is needed since the new regime, seniority, has indeed encouraged some individuals to react to it utilizing recalcitrance displayed through certain strategies (attempting to protect against the appropriation of production through cooperative efforts) and recalibrated life trajectories (attempting to seek an egress from *le Département des Espaces Verts*, see chapter 5). What differentiates the situation of *les cols bleus* from the above mentioned studies is that the structural shift has allowed an element of their own culture, the *raconteur*, to be articulated with even greater force, becoming in and of itself a mechanism that not only dominates other genders and cultural groups outside of the

workplace, but also dominates its own members within the workplace. Let us now observe specific examples of the *raconteur* in action.

Mighty Meloche

An October sky full of grayness greeted *les cols bleus* of *Le Centre Technique* that morning. Strong winds from the West brought rain that beat the walls and cavernous garages. From inside of the base's confines one could hear the heavy drops pounding with monotonous cadence joined by a menacing howl as the wind blew through *Le Centre's* nooks and crannies. There was a subtle melancholy in the sounds, a promise that the day would be very long. The morning's grim concert did nothing to brighten my sour mood as I learned that I would not be working with my usual crew. This morning I had been paired up with Meloche—Arsenault's nemesis in 2004, and an outspoken critic of my own work. Meloche has been working *pour La Ville* for 10 years and this experience has endowed him with a healthy reserve of seniority. His name, followed by his punch number, is prominently displayed in the higher echelons of *Les Espaces Verts' liste d'ancienneté*. This official document, product of a structural shift that has changed the landscape of labour for many Lachinois public workers, is known without embellishment as *La Liste* (*the list*) and the bluntness of this cultural instrument's title effectively summarizes what it does: neatly spaced columns divulge name, punch number and most importantly, position. *La Liste*, protected from tampering and graffiti behind a glass panel, is easily found a few feet away from crossing the threshold of the front doors, a meaningful location that enables for quick consultations, like simultaneously glancing at a watch and a compass to get an idea of where one stands in time and space. The document has also (inevitably) entered into the *col bleu* cosmology of language and

symbols and to express “*M’a aller checké la liste*” (I’m off to check the list) connotes a concern for the integrity of one’s position and/or to survey another’s progress.

Grievances are made when seniority is not respected, when boundaries are crossed.

Nurturing one’s *ancienneté* takes time and patience as one waits for an older permanent worker to retire or a younger worker to quit, thus freeing up a prestigious spot in the shade that will bequeath the next one in line with a wider scope of benefits and security.

The seniority system, in *La Ville*’s current context, becomes a waiting game rather different than the meritocratic system’s structure of ambition where it is in one’s interest to perform well within the workplace and to forge alliances with figures of authority. In close proximity to *La Liste* are two other important material fixtures in *Le Centre*

Technique: the pigeon holes that receive our paychecks every Thursday and the electronic “punch” that records our comings, goings and the surface quality of these activities cross checked by tardiness. It is a holy trinity of sorts: position, money and performance. Of course “performance” here is used loosely since there are quite a few young *cols bleus* in my department that pride themselves upon never arriving late and giving their “daily 50%” effort wise during work time.

Meloche’s demeanor as a full-fledged *gars d’la Ville* is unquestionable as he strides confidently out of *Le Département des Espaces Verts*’ morning meeting area and down the *Centre Technique*’s hallways. Meloche does not only talk the talk, he also knows how to move properly. The humming neon tubes overhead illuminate the hallways with a cold light and I see my partner very clearly. He is not a very tall guy but he pushes out his chest like he means business and walks with slow, unhurried purpose. In a way he reminds me of Lucky Luke’s half pint arch nemesis, Joe Dalton, with a shock of black

hair crushed underneath a grey and blue union issued baseball cap and bluish stubble smothered over a strong jaw adorned by a cleft chin, pistols strangely missing. Moving down the halls, a small tank of masculinity, Meloche's bodily posture is eloquent and well studied: his legs appear slightly bowed, his arms subtly bent at the elbows and swaying with exaggerated momentum and his fingers are loosely balled up—a fist not out of reach. Even the way in which Meloche wears his baseball cap is not left to chance: it is worn at the back of the head and the bill angles sharply skywards, exposing the forehead. Many young workers decide to wear their baseball caps in such a manner. At times the cap is placed so far back upon the head that it seems as if the bill is frozen in salute. A heavy silver plated chain dangles around his neck. Meloche is also aiming for union delegate status since one of the current delegates is attempting to become *un contre-maitre* next year, thus freeing up a position. The next year (2006 and my third year) Meloche was successful in obtaining the union delegate position through his seniority and ambition.

I *follow* Meloche; my lesser seniority relegates me to following status without discussion and without fuss, especially when in the presence of an individual like this who is quick to make sure that his leadership not be debated. My submissive position is appropriate however it is also exhausting since I will have to keep it up all grey-day long. Meloche will call the shots and I will acquiesce every time. I know it and he knows it and this inevitable organization of hierarchy is only one of the elements that make up *La Ville*'s spiritual canon, its complex network of seniority-style common sense that is operating both explicitly and implicitly. He is also an accomplished *raconteur*. Meloche

is an individual who is particularly good at articulating this common sense and doubly so for his knowledge of Lachine's goings on and his subscription to seniority.

I walk behind Meloche as we thread our way through *le garage des mécaniciens*, *Le Centre's* large indoor garage. It is here that mechanics, electricians and welders work on a variety of vehicles that are held up high above their heads on shining hydraulic pylons. It is an impressive sight full of hanging chains, oil drums, gas tanks, over-sized tires, motors undergoing reparations, work stations covered with various chrome tools and spare parts and machines sighing and trembling. A radio is playing loudly and the mechanics, having already donned their navy blue coveralls, are busying themselves with their tasks.

Le Centre Technique theoretically enforces a no smoking indoors policy, reflecting the province of Québec's recent stance towards cigarette consumption in public spaces. Those who spit in the eye of policy can incur hefty fines that can reach up to \$1000 for repeated offences. As Meloche and I enter the mechanics' garage area, he reaches for the inevitable cigarette that was tucked behind his right ear and lights it with an air of nonchalance. His brazen act of defiance is symbolic of his general stance towards *La Ville's* administration and its redoubled surveillance efforts regarding its workers in the wake of the media's interest in blue-collar work ethics. Perhaps Meloche's indoors cigarette smoking is not as brazen as it first appeared to be: twenty seconds later we exit into the vast yard and into a curtain of rain. His action was more akin to a token jab at policy en-passant rather than a sustained resistance. Whatever its meaning it does not fail to impress me, more so considering that Meloche manages to skillfully defend his

cigarette from wind and rain as we cross the yard and enter a two floor garage whose entrance is flanked by towering stacks of plastic bags containing cedar mulch.

The garage we find ourselves in at 7:15am is composed of several storage rooms where a variety of equipment belonging to several different branches of *Les Espaces Verts* is kept. The three largest grass cutting tractors are sheltered here as well as a collection of rolled up plastic winter fences that are used to protect the small trees of Lachine from being damaged when snow removal commences. This garage is often called *le coqueron* (a small room) because of the two smallish artisanal storage rooms that are constructed with chicken wire and that contain most of the grass cutting equipment such as the lawnmowers and the infamous weed-eaters or whips. The equipment to lay down the white demarcations of soccer fields and baseball diamonds is also stored in this garage as is the small three-wheel tractor equipped with a metal chain rake that gives the red sand of baseball diamonds a tidy brushed effect. There are also high stacks of peat moss for the flower beds and a variety of soil mixtures and two great piles of sand and gravel that smell very strongly of urine. When we are seeking to kill a bit of time during a rainy day such as this one, we will usually chat in loosely formed groups in this garage and the sand piles become handy urinals, saving the needy from embarking on a trip to *Le Centre Technique*'s washroom that can be easily intercepted by a foreman. As an informal meeting space *le coqueron* can't be beat for two specific reasons: the garage door provides a wide view of the yard and alarm can be given if any *contre-maître* movement is detected. Since most of the department's tools are found here potential alibis are democratically supplied to all.

When Meloche and I arrive, there is already a sizable group congregating in the center of *le coqueron*. The odor of urine mingles with that of peat moss, paint and a vast patchwork of oil leaks. All of the participants are young males and are using white plastic buckets as seating while others lean upon the tractors while cracking jokes, smoking cigarettes and hocking copious amounts of loogies on the ground. Most of us were all dressed in our union issued rain gear and the grey sky that had now turned into a black growling bruise promised us that we would need them. Meloche and I made ourselves comfortable and joined in. I gravitated towards a small group whose members were chuckling appreciatively at what could only have been *une sucré*, literally meaning a “sweet one” or a fine joke/piece of gossip composed of elements that are culturally meaningful to the audience. I turned a free bucket upside down and sat on it while making a statement that was as inevitable as Meloche’s cigarette: “*Ou-äie...ça travaillent fort!*” (Well, well...the guys are hard at work!). It is the tonal mimesis that a figure of authority or a righteous citizen might use when catching *un col bleu* “at play”, however in *le coqueron* during a rainy morning, it becomes completely emptied of actual threat and the delicate issue of work ethics becomes deliberately exploitable—membership in wolf’s clothing.

For Whom the Bell Tolls: Gossip and Joking

The discussion of that morning’s *sucré* while sheltered from the wind and rain proves to be somewhat of a detour from my morning with Meloche, however it is worth taking it considering the windfall of meanings that are of interest to this research. The bit of gossip and creative joking focused upon a new worker, who had recently joined the ranks of *Le Département des Espaces Verts* at the same time as his mother. This was a

unique configuration *pour La Ville*: a mother and her son labouring within the same workplace and within the same department. This nineteen year old male was not present in *le coqueron* that morning therefore the hounds of war could be released with impunity and his performance could undergo detailed scrutiny. That morning he was working (and not talking) with a crew of female *cols bleus* (all in their forties) and, for what I have observed during my 20 months of fieldwork, *les filles* (the “girls”) are consistently “hard workers” and loci of ideology (a notion that will be discussed in this chapter) such as *le coqueron* or the cantina represent cultural resources that, while they may have physical access to them, they do not necessarily benefit from the same degree of cultural resources that these *fields of productive relations*, as writes Lancaster, are representative of (as cited in Gutmann 1996:222). That morning the young male in question had been christened “Ong-Bak” in reference to the Thai martial arts movie of the same name that had been released in North America that year (2005) and that he apparently held in great esteem. He was in the habit of asking most male *cols bleus* if they had seen that particular movie and then insisting that they listen to his detailed plot summary. “Ong-Bak” was not meant as a term of endearment, as a nickname or *surnom* of admission (see chapter 2), it was meant to underscore the young man’s social deficiencies within the cultural world of *Le Centre Technique* and his ultimate failure at being *un bon col bleu* that could be respected and accepted. What kept him from *becoming* was his wish to be immediately included by *les cols bleus* of the department. His prior experience of a “rough and tumble” young male culture was based upon a year spent at a Christian bible study camp where the tenets of the religion were taught, including non-aggression, chastity before marriage and the omitting of popular Québécois curses in everyday speech. *Le Centre*

Technique where loud “tabarnaks” reverberate in the yard and hallways like the peel of thunder and the plentiful tales celebrating sexual prowess as well as combative ability perhaps was not the best of milieus for Ong-Bak to advertise his beliefs. Instead of biding his time to gain acceptance, the young Ong-Bak employed the same template of social interactivity he had learned at bible camp among his fellow dormitory mates. He reached out by attaching positive values to what he had learned in bible camp as well as using a repertoire reliant on scatological and homoerotic humor. These types of jokes, although glossed as being popular material among *les cols bleus*, especially homoeroticism, necessitate an approbatory period to be respected from any potential participants—one simply does not jump into the fray expecting to encounter wide ranging approval. Membership is slowly acquired very much in the same way as tenure is built-up. There are exceptions of course such as being employed through reputable familial networks, being already part of an informal group or being a naturally gifted speaker. Otherwise, one must work one’s way into the group without attempting to commandeer the spotlight, because if the delivery of one’s material proves to be obvious or devoid of creative craftsmanship, both telltale marks of feebleness, one runs the risk of becoming the comedic fodder of a more habile weaver of stories. Such was the fate of Ong-Bak. The Christian teachings that he valued conflicted with the popular imaginings of masculinity in *Le Centre Technique*, seniority or no seniority, thus his homoerotic jokes only served to confirm what many thought of him: he was a natural born “fag” and it was only a “matter of time before he wakes up one day with a big cock in his mouth” (*lui y va s’éveiller un man’d’née avec une trique dans y’eule*) as Leduc once stated to the guffaws of those present.

Successful homoerotic jokes are contingent upon established membership between its participants because of the physical and verbal intimacy of their nature. It is not a unique occurrence when waiting in the cantina for the final bell that marks quitting time to witness, experience or contribute to the fierce twisting of nipples, the insertion of wet fingers into ears, brusque shoving into a wall or into someone else, all the while accompanied by a pungent orchestra of belches and rippling flatulence. Among all of this “friendly” jostling, to be gently and rhythmically poked in the buttocks, a nod to sodomy, or tapping another in the genitals with one’s key chain is not a great transgression—if the people know each other and share a friendly rapport. The concept of sodomy is strange and ambiguous terrain. Symbolically performed, as is prone to happen in the cantina or even in an outdoor worksite, it becomes a badge of amicability or of teasing. Sodomy as amorous act between two consenting males belongs to the realm of *les tappettes*, *les fifs*, *les pédales* and *les pédés* (“fags”, “queers”, “sissies” and “fairies”) and this is mostly defined as being unacceptable among my coworkers, however a positive value is accorded to a female (i.e. *une blonde*) who is willing to be sodomized. Some of the young *cols bleus* lament their unfair lot in life because their *blondes* refuse to have anal intercourse. There is a catch to *les belles filles* who do decide to experiment with anal intercourse: they run the risk of being labeled as *une désosée* (literally meaning “deboned” or “boneless”, easily consumed without difficulty and connoting sexual promiscuity *chez les femmes*), the direct opposite being *une fille fiable*, which basically translates as a “good, responsible and respectable girl”. *La fiabilité* as notion can also be applied to males but moves away from the sexual realm that encapsulates the whore/Madonna dichotomy (Dunk 1991) and becomes a manifestation of dependability

and initiative. *Un gars fiable* is a man that respects his engagements and can be approached to solve problems or supply help for those in need. *La fiabilité* for males possesses proximity to notions of the “bread winner” and “the provider”. For instance, Bourgeois, as described by Leclerc, acted like *un bon père de famille* (a father figure) as a prominent political figure in Lachine that could be approached as *un homme fiable* (see chapter 4).

Returning to Ong-Bak, he was a self-avowed virgin, preached non-violence and refused to swear—yet, as well-meaning, albeit ill-informed jest, he would compliment the physiques of male cyclists during Truck Time and would comment on underwear color (i.e. *Belles bobettes bleu!* Nice blue undies!) when one bent over to retrieve a tool. What perhaps served to put the nail in Ong-Bak’s coffin was that his humor was not only premature but it was also unabashedly simple and devoid of complexity. The color of one’s underwear *was* the joke, however Ong-Bak did not weigh the implications for his eyes to have wandered onto a coworkers posterior. The joke’s feebleness and lack of cunning speech-play made an obvious retort not only feasible but empty of art in itself. To retort to a sloppily constructed jest or ribbing could be likened in a way to be taking candy away from a baby—to spar against an unworthy foe. Furthermore, the integrity of Ong-Bak’s routine relied on what homoerotic joking might symbolize (an acceptable jocular method among “tough guys”) without taking stock of what *he* might symbolize to others. The following remarks represent *la sucré* that developed in *le coqueron* that morning. Desnoyers is *un conducteur* and the young male in question is usually part of his crew. Bessette was another *conducteur* taking part in the gossip before heading off into the rain to pull weeds. Later, I also braved the rain and crossed the yard to enter *Le*

Centre in order to get a new pair of work gloves from *le magasin* (the equipment distribution office next to the department's morning meeting area) and to jot down my notes in the men's washroom. Desnoyers is in his mid twenties and Bessette in his early thirties.

DESNOYERS: So we're riding around in the truck yesterday and we see this nice chick [*une sale plotte*, "plotte" literally meaning "cunt" or "pussy"]. She had it all: fucking tits [*des ostis d'plombs*] out to here and a nice ass [*un beau cul*]. So I ask Ong-Bak: "Would you fuck that?" You know what this fag says? He goes: "No I'm waiting to get married". So then I go: "You don't want her to blow you?" Him: "No, I don't find her that nice..." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Fucking queer! So now his name isn't just Ong-Bak anymore...it's "Ong-Bak Mountain"!

[*The film "Brokeback Mountain" was released the same year as "Ong-Bak" and exploiting the title of the former as being a strategy to underscore homosexuality was sometimes employed with great success among the younger generation of cols bleus*]

BESSETTE: "Brown-crack Mountain"...[pronounced in English and offering a variance of Desnoyer's joke by alluding to sodomy]

EXAN: That's pretty funny...[*C'est pas mal drole ça...*]

DESNOYERS: But what do you think? He's gay right? (Desnoyers looks directly at me waiting for my input)

EXAN: Well...he is very religious and he studied to be a good Christian. The kid's never been in a place like this...It doesn't mean he's gay though, it's just his way of trying.

BESSETTE: Yeah, but I know religious guys and they don't act like that. My cousin use to say shit like he did and he turned into a fag. He's a fag now sucking cocks and busting assholes wide open [*Y suce des graines pis y pète des cennes*]

DESNOYERS: Anyways, I can't fucking stand having this guy on my crew...Hey, and have you ever talked to his mother? She's a fucking retard.

EXAN: How's that?

DESNOYERS: She was getting coffee this morning in the cantina and I'm right next to her waiting for my turn. Instead of putting the coins into the right slot she was trying to put them I don't know where...[*dans un trou pas rapport*] So I go: "Look that's where you put your coins" and she goes in this fucking dumb voice...(Desnoyers imitates a stereotypical voice depicting mental disability)... "Duh! I thought that was the good slot!"

EXAN: Well I once tried to punch-in using my bank card...

BESSETTE: [laughs]

DESNOYERS: Yeah, but she's insane. I get her on my crew sometimes and we're like pulling weeds and she'll start to laugh. I ask her: "What's so funny?" She goes...(Desnoyers once again using the infamous voice)... "Oh nothing, I was just thinking about something". These people are fucked up! [*C'est du monde fucké*]

After that morning, Desnoyers would often give us fresh reports that supported his theories concerning Ong-Bak's sexual orientation. Desnoyers constructed his burden of proof by asking him how he would react to a certain scenario such as what he would do if he was physically attacked. Desnoyers already knew the answers to such questions but seemed to relish posing them so that the young man's answers would only serve to push him deeper into the morass. Desnoyers was not the only one to participate in the sabotage-cum-ostracizing of the young man, others joined in and criticized his personal aesthetics such as his long hair that he would either wear in a ponytail or in a samurai-style topknot and his eccentric work clothes. The fact that his mother also worked there also started to garner interest, since she was also perceived as being socially inept. On a clear summer morning, while groups of *cols bleus* chatted in the large garage next to *le coqueron* where most of the pickups and bigger *classe 3* (level A) vehicles were stored, Desnoyers made a crack at Denise, the young man's mother. That day she was part of Desnoyer's crew and he appeared to be nonplussed about this organization therefore he decided to transform the situation into a theatrical stage. Desnoyers, laughing, asked another *conducteur* if he wanted to trade one of "his guys" for Denise. Denise, a forty year old mother with two children, seemed insulted and wounded about this proposed transaction that gave the two male *conducteurs* the air of slavers or sports team managers.

Denise mumbled: “I don’t need no Desnoyers...trade me if you want, I’ll be happier” while the other conducteur, a close friend of Desnoyers, answered that he wanted to keep all of “his guys” (*mes gars*) and that the trade was a no go. Perhaps in a bid to celebrate what he felt was being criticized or “feminized” (non-aggression, abstinence and declining from using popular curses) Ong-Bak started to vocalize his beliefs with more ardor. One morning while working on Desnoyer’s crew he criticized Leduc, another *col bleu*, for his interest in Asiatic beliefs of reincarnation. Leduc, known for not mincing his words, retorted with the following gem: “The apostles were all fucking queers that screwed each other up the ass (*les apôtres c’étaient toutes des ostis d’tappettes qui s’pinaient dans l’cul*). The news of this graphic reply showcasing sodomy, once again being attached to the young man, travelled very quickly within the crews of the Department of Green Spaces. After his numerous defeats the young man stopped eating his lunch in the cantina at noon and became silent to the relief of many.

Analysis of a *Raconteur*

*Frontier sons are lifelong illiterates
 Who know only how to hunt big game and brag about being tough guys
 They race proudly on their horses, chasing the sun’s shadows.
 Half drunk, they call their falcon and wander far to hunt.
 They stretch their bows like a full moon and never miss.
 One whistling arrow flies and two gray cranes fall.
 These virile heroes shake the sands.
 Confucian scholars are no match for them.
 What good is it to lock one’s doors and read books till one is gray?*

—“Hunting Song,” Li Bai, Tang dynasty

Rainy days legitimate a sort of fragile entente between bosses and workers however it cannot be overly exploited: seeking refuge from the rain and cold must be carried out with discretion and never for overly long periods. In other words it is justifiable to be nonplussed about the weather conditions and having to wear clammy rain

gear however *les cols bleus* are still expected to be productive. Because it is raining hard today, we will not be cutting grass, our usual job. The tractors make a mess cutting wet grass: clippings clump up and rot healthy grass, pock marking entire parks with unsightly yellow pits as well as making unattractive green smears on concrete that take a long time to fade away. The machinery of *les whipeurs* does not fare any better when the weather is damp because the motors are strained with the attempt to cut waterlogged grass. Most contractors will avoid working in these conditions precisely because wet grass accelerates the wear and tear of mechanical material. Rain usually means a complete reconfiguration of *Les Espaces Vert* crews: the department bosses can sometimes split them up into smaller teams (like Meloche and I) and send them to *faire des plates-bandes avec du paillis* (setting down fresh cedar mulch on ornamental earthworks). *Une plate-bande* in Lachine is a slightly elevated mound of packed soil of varying shapes and lengths decorated with shrubs, small shade providing trees, flowers and plants specifically chosen for their aesthetic qualities in order to beautify Lachine's parks and *bord de l'eau* (the water side); Lachine's most prized possession since it attracts tourists and inflates real estate values.

Les plates-bandes et le paillis (mulch) do not represent prestigious work for several reasons. Bosses are especially fickle about the appearance of *les plates-bandes* and this increases our chances of being out rightly criticized and perhaps even having to go over the work once again if it does not meet the required standards. All weeds must be ripped out before the setting down of the cedar mulch and this is a lengthy process demanding meticulousness since un-pulled weeds will quickly emerge like ugly little periscopes from the homogenously colored mulch and mar the aesthetic value of *une*

plate-bande. To pull weeds one must often get “on all fours” since this is the most effective position. In addition, the mulch itself must be judiciously set down and immaculately depressed with the flat of a metal rake since irregularities such as lumps and uneven contours are unacceptable. We must also commit ourselves to a single spot for most of the day meaning an unfair distribution of Truck Time amongst members of the crew that are working on *une plate-bande* together. Truck Time becomes unfairly distributed because it is a rather quick affair to simply empty an entire pickup of mulch sacs and when this occurs it is necessary to go back to *Le Centre Technique* to fill up again. It is understood that the worker who possesses the *conducteur*’s status will obviously drive the truck back to base, however what is not so obvious is the worker who will accompany the driver in order to help to fill the pickup with a new cargo of sacs. What tends to happen is that the same individual will seek to monopolize the front passenger seat (*le navigateur*’s seat or the “shot gun” position [see chapter 5]). Therefore if one wishes to take a ride along with the driver, one must be vigilant and quickly exploit the opportunity before someone else will, for only two can go get mulch. If the passenger quota is found to be in excess by a roaming *contre-maitre* for instance, the repercussions can be extraordinarily annoying for the entire crew. Punitive reprimands usually take the shape of increased frequency of surveillance and of surprise visitations by said foreman. Vying for “shot gun” may seem excessively petty to an outside observer, yet accumulations of small defeats (i.e rarely getting access to these mulch trips) can rapidly degenerate (or evolve) into nerve grating frustrations and rancor that negatively affect one’s quality of life as *un col bleu*. Wanting to take a ride with the driver is not insignificant since this means legitimate respite from labour and a trip to the washroom or

to the cantina's vending machine for a small bag of chips, a cold soft drink or a cup of coffee—cheap commodities that have the power to take the sting out of a dull and tiresome day. Working on *une plate-bande* facilitates surveillance from figures of authority because of the sedentary nature of this type of work. One cannot take advantage of a makeshift hiding spot (there are very few in *plate-bande* territories however there are some exceptions although they cannot be exploited for long) to attempt to whittle the day's hours away clandestinely.

Furthermore, when it is raining, our traitorously bright yellow rain gear gives our locations away very easily. Setting down mulch is considered to be feminizing labour: “*c't'une job pour les femmes, y sont ben a quattes pattes!*” (It's women's work, they like it on all fours!). This is a variation of a very popular phrase spoken in contempt of *Le Département des Espaces Verts*' less “masculine” jobs, such as planting flowers, watering them and mulching. These activities are usually grouped under the diminutive rubric of *faire du jardinage*, or “gardening” while labour such as cutting grass never has much problem of being imagined as a masculine job. The ranks of the grass cutters are only filled by young males and it is culturally recognized as being very demanding labour. Furthermore, the labour of grass cutters is carried out with a symbolic mechanized tool that is heavy, menacing, loud, causes physical discomfort and takes on the appearance of a large firearm when carried upon one's shoulder. However, as we have seen through the reversal of the manual and mental dichotomy, many strategies are employed to circumvent a type of labour that is described as being masculine. It is a rare thing to hear someone wax poetically about the merits of handling a weed eater...

After having idled away a small part of the morning chatting and gossiping in *le coqueron*, Meloche and I drove into *Parc St. Louis* which is located next to *Le Canal de Lachine*. Across the street from the park is the neighborhood Dairy Queen, a very popular hangout in the summer because of the chilidogs and ice cream treats that one can purchase and then leisurely consume while seated on a bench overlooking the water and ducks. We got out of the small green pickup that was full of twenty pound plastic bags of cedar mulch. We made sure not to completely fill *la boîte du troc* (Lachinois speech for the “correctly” pronounced boîte [box] and “truck” is given a francophone makeover by pronouncing it with a slightly rolling “r”) so that we would run out of mulch quicker and be able to exploit a ride in the truck. Underwhelming the pickup’s carrying capacity is an important technique and helps to alleviate the day’s drudgery by affording us with more rides. We got out rakes, buckets and I climbed into the pickup’s bed and started to fling mulch bags here and there, aiming for the nearest *plate-bande*. The bags were very wet and slipped in my grasp. My new leather work gloves were soon drenched and the cold was already worming its way into my fingers. Lac St-Louis’ windswept waters were brown as the lake’s silt bottom was being vigorously churned. Meloche and I were extremely visible decked out in our bright yellow union issued rain gear. We worked at a very relaxed pace and chatted about our cruel fate this morning and cursing our bosses that were holed up in their warm offices. This was the first time I had worked alone with Meloche and I was eager to please and to prove to him that I was also ideologically opposed to the administration. This particular seniority-like attitude was instrumental in that I wished to open an ethnographic dialogue with Meloche as well as to let Meloche know that I was an “alright guy” and that I understood the game. Perhaps my tactic of

rapprochement worked for Meloche decided to transform himself into a habile *raconteur* and tell me about a violent tale of domestic abuse and imprisonment. Meloche did not skimp out on the details and I listened intently so that my inevitable trip back to the men's washroom would be productive—note-wise that is. Meloche the *raconteur* recited a tale of horror while we were ironically conducting a kind of labour that was largely regarded by many as being “boring and effeminate work.” The tale is not verbatim but it is close enough since our morning coffee break was not far out of reach due to a respectable session in *le coqueron* and we returned to *Le Centre Technique*. I wish to use Meloche's tale as a way of introducing and discussing the notion of *le raconteur* and to engage in this tale by way of critical analysis by drawing upon Herzfeld's and Limón's language theories.

MELOCHE: I've been to jail...

EXAN: How did that happen?

MELOCHE: I came back home very drunk [*j'étais ben sous*] and the front door was locked but I could see lights in the bedroom...I ran into the door and broke it down...(at this point Meloche pauses dramatically and continues)...150 pounds running at full speed is enough to break down any door! [*150 livres qui cours en malade c't'assez pour défoncer n'importe quelle porte!*] Then I catch my bitch screwing another guy! [*Pis là ch'poigne ma chienne en train d'fourrer un n'aut'e gars!*]

EXAN: I see...

MELOCHE: I went ballistic [*j'pète ma coche*]. I grabbed the guy by the neck and ping! (Here, Meloche pretends to grab an invisible opponent with his left hand and cocks back his right fist bringing it quickly forward and stopping as if having connected with a solid object while making the sound effect)

[*While the metallic ping! sound effect made by Meloche when describing a scene of violence sounds out of place or contrived, it actually represents a popular sound to make that adds a visceral embellishment when describing two things that signify important accomplishments in the col bleu cultural world of grass cutters: ping! denotes the metallic sound that an aluminum baseball bat makes when solidly connecting with a*

baseball during “un jeux d’balle mole” (a game of softball) and also symbolizes the coup de grace delivered to one’s adversary during a fisticuff]

MELOCHE: The guy gets scared and he runs out of the house completely naked. It just goes to show you what kind of guy she was screwing: No balls. [*Le gars y’a peur pis y’s’sauve à poils. C’est juste pour te montrer quel sorte de gars ‘a fourrais: Pas d’couilles*] So then I grab my slut and ping! [*Fait qu’là ch’poigne ma désossée pis ping!*]... (He does the fist cocking motion once more combined with the sound effect)... I go after the guy and I’m running like this [*Ch’pars après l’gars pis ch’cours de même*]... (He holds his right hand in front of him and does swerving gestures as if slaloming down a hill and makes another sound effect that is similar to that of a loud truck motor, underscoring his stupor)... Hey, I couldn’t catch him so I go back home and I really knock her out good. She gets it rough [*Aï...pas capab’e de l’poigner, fait qu’je’r’tourne a maison pis là j’la gêle comme du monde. Ch’té dit qu’là a en passe un mauvais quart d’heure, literally “a bad fifteen minutes”*]

EXAN: Aïe-yoye... [*Ouch...*]

[“Aïoye” operates in a similar fashion as to “ouais” (the colloquial affirmative “yup”) that undergoes a transformation to the more meaningful “ou-aié”. By placing a pause after the first syllable and extending the second, a simple “ouch or jeez” is given more intensity. “Aïe-yoye” can also be used to denote disbelief or incredulousness. This speech device is often uttered during Truck Time when a young woman who demonstrate the kind of physical aesthetics that les cols bleus find alluring is spotted]

MELOCHE: While I got back she had had time to get dressed so I grab her and strip her [*A’eu l’temps d’s’habiller fait qu’j’l’a poigne pis j’la crisse à poils*] I beat her while verbally insulting her and I force her to get into the dog’s cage so as to teach her that what she just did to me wasn’t right [*J’la bât pis j’y cris toutes sortes de bêtises pis en plus j’la rentre de force dans’ cage du chien pour y’apprendre que qu’est c’qu’a viens de’m’faire c’pas correct*]

EXAN: You’re lucky you didn’t kill her... [*T’es luckeux tu l’a pas tué...*]

[Here, “luck”, a clearly English word, undergoes a transformational embellishment to become “luxeux” which is often favored over the blander, and grammatically correct, “chanceux”]

MELOCHE: She looked like hell [*A’vait l’air d’la chienne a Jacques, literally “she looked like Jack’s bitch”*] Her face had turned into jam [*A’vait a face en compote*]

EXAN: What happened after that?

MELOCHE: She left and called the cops. They came to get me and I went to jail...

EXAN: How long did you get?

MELOCHE: I got a month and it changed me...

EXAN: Oh yeah?

MELOCHE: It helped me to make better decisions in life and not to lose control. Doing time hardened me. My heart is as hard as a rock now [*Faire du temps ca m'a endurci. J'ai l'coeur dur comme d'la pierre maintenant*]

This tale of domestic abuse represents a rich discursive skein and the *raconteur* is careful to frame the story at the very onset within a moralistic sphere: vengeance has been exacted from a “cheating” female by a male figure of power. The actors within the drama are very clear-cut and devoid of any ambiguous status: Meloche is the protagonist and his *blonde*, along with the other male, represent the antagonistic presence that is physically defeated. Within the story’s discursive framework, the *raconteur* is careful to give an account that will be articulated in such a way as to afford the orator with a processual accrument of prestige. As the story develops, Meloche’s importance and masculinity swell and by the time the story is finished he has established himself as a potent individual within *La Ville*. The following points all contribute towards Meloche’s agenda of self aggrandizement:

- 1) *Les cols bleus* generally attach a positive value to drunkenness and to narcotics and perceive these habits as viable leisurely activities.
- 2) The *raconteur* reacts in a “manly” way to the scene; he uses extreme physical violence upon several occasions to resolve the situation and the cause (a female cheating on a male) easily justifies his action within the realm of *La Ville*’s common sense knowledge. While men that cheat and that are sexually promiscuous are often characterized as being

endowed with great sexual prowess, the same cannot be said of their female counterparts.

This double standard is prevalent.

3) When Meloche commences his attack, the other male flees, proving that he is not brave enough to face his assailant and this retreat counts as a victory for Meloche. In fact at this point in the story Meloche sneers: “It just goes to show you what kind of guy she was fucking”.

4) Meloche physically assaults his girlfriend for the first time. In his tale the violence is justified because it is constructed as being an acceptable response to this kind of double crossing.

5) He then gives chase to the other male. Here, some humor is injected into the tale as Meloche concedes that due to his stupor he fails to catch the culprit. He also uses gesticulations to underscore his deskilled zigzagging run.

6) Meloche returns home and delivers a second beating, which is very ferocious and humiliating. He utilizes explicit imagery here.

7) The *raconteur* finds himself in jail for one month and undergoes a transformation that he celebrates as having made him more level headed as well as possibly crueler.

It might seem unrealistic and perhaps contrived that a young individual would ideologically celebrate a month long stay in prison, however Meloche, dressed up in the *raconteur*'s finery, goes about doing just that. Meloche seems proud of having spent time in prison, but this pride is partly eclipsed by him exhibiting remorse for his actions. He states that doing time “changed” him and that he is now more patient and willing to explore non-violent options when confronted with certain situations, yet this statement is at odds with his final concluding statement about his current stance towards life:

“Spending time in jail made me harder. My heart is like rock now...” Having gone to prison, Meloche reinvents (through *La Ville*’s common sense knowledge that attaches a romanticized element to those who have gone to jail) what is viewed as a socially stigmatized experience into one that he perceives to be worth celebrating. The message remains ambiguous at best: “willing to try non-violent routes” conflicts with a concluding “heart of stone”. In a bid to circumvent this unwieldy bind that threatens to steal the tale’s thunder, Meloche opts to claim both conflicting statements for his own: he is simultaneously enlightened and made crueler. This maneuver is the mark of a truly skillful *raconteur*. Meloche has a superior command of Lachine patois, he has internalized common sense’s discourse of gender roles, he speaks with assurance and conviction and he has re-imagined himself as a hero who was maligned by unforeseen events and who acted in a justifiable and masculine fashion. Therefore the *raconteur*’s ultimate goal is not only to reproduce and maintain common sense discourses but is also to make certain that his selfhood does not suffer any defeats in front of the member(s) of the audience. At the end of the tale Meloche’s tone of voice changes as does the language of his body. The descriptions of the various violent acts that occurred were accompanied with emotional language, energetic gesticulations and sound effects. The tone that Meloche uses here is almost reverential and this sets up the type of theatrical stage that frames this section of his tale. Jail is a respected institution amongst *les cols bleus* I work with and it is charged with ambiguous meanings. It is not described as an experience that should be attained; however tales of violence and incarceration (I have heard many) are generally told like a moralistic account. In Meloche’s case a kind of vengeance is obtained; the protagonist (Meloche) is punished by an authoritative force (the law) and is

then transformed in some way or another by the incarceration and this depends upon the storyteller and what kind of knowledge he infuses it with.

It is meaningful to observe that an institution such as prison possesses more cultural capital *chez les cols bleus* than an academic institution. Academia is often viewed through a lens of suspicion and a remembered inventory of injustices, boredom and effete cultural elements. That is not to say that *les cols bleus* I have worked with routinely attach a positive value to prison time, but they do seem more accepting of experiences of incarceration, the peddling of narcotics and violence than higher levels of schooling, like university for instance. There may be several reasons for this that will undoubtedly elude the scope of this thesis, however two symbolic agents readily jump to the forefront: prison experience possessing a high masculinity content and academic experience being perceived as unfathomable-irrational (Willis 1977).

The movies and television series depicting prison as an arena rich in manly deeds are innumerable (Gutmann 1996) and when a prison experience is displayed through a storytelling mode, as in Meloche's case, there is much room for artistic license. Depending on the *raconteur's* leanings the prison experience can be made to appear legitimate, heroic and moralistic or a combination of all of the above. It is timely here to recall Lapierre's (the former president of *Local 301*) short stint in prison—coincidentally the same amount of time Meloche spent in prison—and the heroic treatment of the incarceration. Going to jail becomes a meaningful experience that is celebrated instead of perceived as antisocial behavior.

In his study of gender and machismo in Mexico City, Gutmann observes that the attitudes of male participants in attitudes towards domestic violence and wife beating

employed a variety of arguments that only served to “release men from responsibility for their violent actions” (1996:210-213). Meloche’s tale acts very much in the same way, producing an effect that allows him to distance himself from the violent crime (physical retribution is offered as being the only logical option) while simultaneously embracing the act as performative excellence. Fuller treatment of the topic of physical violence against women among male *cols bleus* is beyond the scope of this research, however many jokes, detailed reviews of pornographic movies and fantasies that revolve around sexual violence and domination is prevalent enough. Interestingly enough it is the male penis that garners most attention in these flight of fancies, and not the aesthetic quality of *la fille* that is the recipient of the penetrating member. Desnoyers once candidly stated during a short bout of overtime that he wished that he had a much bigger penis and that *le bon dieu* (“god”) probably knew that he would have been “violent with his penis.” The penis as a weapon that potentially causes suffering is widely perceived among *les jeunes cols bleus* as symbolizing an important emblem of masculinity and virility. As an afterthought, or perhaps as a consolation prize, Desnoyers added with what could have passed as being satisfaction: *Mais ma blonde a ’cris quand j ’la mets d ’ans* (“But my girlfriend groans when I put it in”). Other *cols bleus* talk about their penises with pride and some even take snapshots of their genitals. One morning after punching in late I was accosted by one of my coworkers in the morning meeting area who held out a cell phone, encouraging me to flip it open to see *une belle photo* (a pretty snapshot). I did so, with a due amount of suspicion, and was greeted by a picture of his semi-erect penis (*une demi-goal* in Lachinois French) with his pubic hairs completely shaven. I closed the phone and tossed it back to him, any witticism that I should have been able to generate lost in end-

of-season battle fatigue. He grinned and proceeded to show two other coworkers—one who often talks about his own penis with delight and another who specializes in sexual jokes.

“Ultimate Fighting Championship”, an international competition featuring participants who have trained in a variety of martial arts and fight inside a ring featuring “full contact” combat has become very popular throughout Québec society. Québécois fighters are well represented in the UFC by the likes of David L’Oiseau and Georges St.Pierre. Many *cols bleus* are avid followers of this type of spectacle and tales that celebrate combative prowess against a male opponent are widely distributed and positively perceived in *Le Centre Technique* when formulated by a *raconteur*’s storytelling abilities. Sauvageau, a young *col bleu* who grew up in Lachine’s Duff Court is reputed to have “won” many fisticuffs and throughout my fieldwork he has shared many, recounting them in clear and grisly detail. In the summer of 2007, amidst a tightly packed group of *cols bleus* from *le Département des Espaces Verts* during a unionized coffee break, Sauvageau related a particularly energetic rendition of a recent altercation that he had with his sister’s boyfriend. Sauvageau’s sister had been dating an older drug dealer and was being frequently beaten by him. Sauvageau urged his sister to leave him on many occasions but to no avail. One evening, Sauvageau reports that his sister came back home with a black eye and that this merited a hasty intervention on his behalf.

SAUVAGEAU: I found him in Duff Court right in front of where he lives...he was walking his dog. I got out of my car and gave him a good right [*une bonne drette*]. I hit him until I broke quite a few of his teeth and I know I broke his nose pretty badly [*J’y ai decalissé l’nez*]. He’s grabbing onto me and he falls onto the hood of my car [*su’l hood d’mon châr*]...I grab him and slam him to the pavement. I put my knee on his throat and I’m ready to kill this guy...but I feel pity for him, he’s all fucked up, bleeding and coughing [*Y saigne pis y tousse*]. Then just when I’m getting up his dog bites my leg hard [*Son chien y’m mords la jambe*]. I give the dog a hard kick in the ribs and the dog lets out

a yelp and runs away...but when I kicked him he shit at the same time and me I'm limping a bit and I step in his shit...The guy gets up and he goes "Don't hurt my dog!" [*Fait pas mal à mon chien!*] He takes a swing at my head and hits nothing but air [*Y frappe dans l'beurre*, literally meaning hitting in butter]...I grab him by his collar and knock him out [*J'le rends KO*]...He's limp on the ground like a strip of bacon [*Y fait la tranche de bacon*] and I was worried that I might've killed him by accident...a lot of people were on their balconies watching me. I slapped him a bunch of times but he wouldn't wake up...His face was really mangled [*Y'avait la face maganée*] I left him in a puddle of blood [*une flaque de sang*] and jumped in my car...

Sauvageau is an impressive *raconteur* because he possesses a firm mastery of Lachinois argot, employing popular words and sentence structures that are easily recognizable and although it is well nigh impossible to represent his delivery in regards to certain pronunciations and tones, he infuses his tales with great humor. Sauvageau's impressive physical stature is also at his disposal. An avid bodybuilder who has dabbled in performance enhancing drugs, he is equipped with powerful angular shoulders and his right arm is adorned with a colorful tattoo depicting a cross jutting out from a turbulent ocean, the sky streaked with lightning bolts. I have heard many tales of violence, supplied both by young and older male *cols bleus*, involving violence aimed at other males. Meloche's tale of violence is unique because of its domestic aspect, however the accompanying details, such as the physical deterioration of the primary antagonist (his *blonde*), is not. The destruction of the antagonist's facial features—teeth that are knocked out of their gums, noses that are crushed, flesh that is pulverized—is a recurrent theme. The symbolic mutilation of the opponent's visage, often described as transforming into "sauce" or "puree" (*la face en compote*) represents an ultimate victory of sorts. It is conquest through physical deformation, the erasure of physiognomy and the *raconteur* becomes a hero who has triumphed over adversity. In these particular tales, violence is cast as not only a viable and logical direction to move towards, but also a masculine one.

Loci of Ideology

Artfully conveyed meanings that appear “often in narrative form” (Limón 197:64) are of great interest to my research because the discursive potential of the *raconteur* is fully realized when appearing as a well-polished narrative. That is not to say that jokes, *surnoms* (nicknames), taunts or jibes and physical contact in the form of borderline mock aggression (“playful nips” [Bateson as cited in Limón 1997:70] often having the habit of escalating into significantly harder contact and vigorous grappling glossed as “*tiraillement*” or “horsing around”) and suggestive or explicit homoeroticism, for instance, are devoid of meaning. On the contrary, they are complex systems of membership, exclusion, and common sense dissemination, however they pale in comparison to the lengthy performances that characterize the *raconteur*’s art. What differentiates jokes from *raconteur* performances are to be found in the complexity of the tale and the duration of the interaction between performer and audience. In *Le Centre Technique* jokes are often at their best when improvised—especially pranks—their power and appeal deriving from an opportunity that is exploited such as applying a thick coat of grease to a steering wheel in order to produce a physical reaction. *Les sucrés* and/or *les bonnes* (*aie, j’va t’en compte une bonne, hey you wanna hear good one?*) often configured as “grapevine gossip”, hearsay or the firsthand witnessing of jarring social inadequacies (as was the case in *le coqueron* as discussed above) are imparted to a chosen, preferably small audience, creating a sense of intimacy, membership and discretionary protocol. Of course, there was nothing discrete about the ostracizing that the nineteen year old Ong-Bak faced, effectively demonstrating the stonewalling capacity that gossip is imbued with. *Le raconteur*, however impressive and frequently employed

within the work environment as well as in culturally recognized locales in Lachine (such as softball games), does not go unchallenged.

Scholars such as Willis (1977), Herzfeld (1985), Sider (1986), Dunk (1991), Gutmann (1996), Limón (1997) and Power (2005) have observed that certain locales and places within the field are imbued with cultural relevance. Be it a game of lob-ball where nonchalant sportsmanship is prized (Dunk 1991), a gritty shopfloor where grown men play pranks on one another (Willis 1977), a barbeque where prestigious meat tacos are eaten and speech plays activated (Limón 1997) or on the open seas in a dory full of fish (Power 2005), interactive arenas governed by spatial and temporal markers exist, often boasting multisited manifestations, where certain discursive models can be articulated with greater force and where valued cultural resources are promoted. The cultural world that is *La Ville* also possesses *loci of ideology*. Combined with the dynamics of the *raconteur*, loci of ideology have the potential to become intricate cultural zones that amplify certain discourses. Nicole Power reminds us that discourses are ideological when they make allowance for the production and maintenance of systems of inequality that “limit and enable particular explanations and ways of thinking about and acting in society, which in turn shapes identity” (2005:16).

Loci of ideology are far and numerous when concerning *les cols bleus*. Leisure time can include discotheques, a softball match (*la balle molle* where an onus is placed upon fierce competition and excellent athletic performance), golf tournaments, drinking beer in the numerous taverns of Lachine such as *Le Griffon* (The Griffon) and *Le Vieux Moulin* (The Old Windmill), going to the gym, watching an Ultimate Fighting Championship battle at *La Cage aux Sports* (a popular restaurant-cum-bar franchise in

Québec), playing pool, attempting to beat the odds at the *Casino de Montréal*, playing ice hockey in the winter and ball hockey in the summer (*hockey cosom*) and for some, attending exotic cabarets during weeknights as well as weekends. The exotic cabaret is an institution that is very popular among *les cols bleus* of the Department of Green Spaces and run the gamut from restaurants where the waitresses are only clad in bikinis, such as *Le Père Gédéon*, to full nudity and sexually explicit performances offered by *Les Amazones* on St.Jacques Street. *Le Père Gédéon* is a very spacious establishment meant to resemble a summer chalet or a hunter's cabin: large beams of wood crisscrossing the high ceiling with a wide variety of beer signs (neon or tin placards) and animal heads/plasticized fish decorate the walls. Live hockey practices and amateur games can be viewed thanks to a series of large windows at the back of the restaurant that give upon the next door ice rink making "*Le Père*" a unique place to spend time in: juicy steaks, french-fries, beer, *des filles bronzées* ("tanned girls") and Québec's national sport all under the same roof. Also popular and part of several intimate jokes is a brothel called *Le Hilltop* that employs the façade of an exotic cabaret to discourage raids by the authorities. Some of *Le Hilltop's col bleu* patrons claim that the establishment is actually co-owned by the RCMP and members of the Hell's Angels or *les motards* ("the motorers"). There are many variances when leisure is involved and reoccurring cultural mechanisms such as the reciprocal purchasing of rounds of beer or *des shooteux* (hard liquor served in small tumblers), however I will focus on the loci of ideology that are part and parcel of the workplace experience—namely the men's locker room and the cantina. A stratum of cultural topographies reveals itself: the locker room is located in *Le Centre Technique's* depths, its "innermost organs" to borrow from Limón's analysis of low-status victuals,

and the cantina is located on the second floor, both interactive zones placed underneath the bureaucratic realm of the top floor. While *en-haut* (“upstairs”) possesses connotations of discipline, power and the possibility of *stoolage* (see chapter 5), the locker room and the cantina are areas that are dominated by a *col bleu* presence that favors play and collective joking as well as bodily needs such as urinating, defecating, showering and eating.

It seems that ping-pong’s popularity in China benefits from a similar degree of popularity deep in the belly of *Le Centre Technique* in Lachine, the former’s French-Canadian counterpart. What makes the men’s locker room an interesting place to spend time in is the ping-pong table. The table occupies the only wide surface area available, in an otherwise tightly configured room that reduces quick physical mobility due to the long benches that are constantly shifted, blocking access to some lockers and the shuffling human bodies that are busy taking off their work boots or changing clothes at the end of the workday. The surface area that the table occupies gives one the impression that the builders of the *col bleu* head quarters precisely had that idea in mind: to supply an area where play would be encouraged. The younger generation of *cols bleus* recalls that the ping-pong table was already there when they first entered through *Le Centre*’s doors, while older *cols bleus* who have been working *pour La Ville* for over twenty years claim that they learned to play the game using that very table. Ping-pong, therefore, has most likely enjoyed the participation of at least two generations of workers, supplying the game with a certain amount of traditional value. The locker room can thus be divided into two separate areas, not because of partitions, but because the area around the ping-pong table is dedicated to play while the rest of the room offers a much more pragmatically

structured scheme: three washroom stalls with closing doors and three urinals are there for those who must relieve themselves, two sinks with foam soap dispensers wash hands while a small shower is available to refresh pungent bodies especially in the summer.

The locker room becomes a great source of energy and movement especially when the day is at an end and all that is left separating a *col bleu* from a trip to the tavern or a hot supper is the act of waiting for the final bell to ring and to punch out using one's electronic tag (*la puce*, a small, square, violet colored plastic chip that is attached to our key chains). Shouting, laughing, whistling, cursing, and taunting all interwoven with the unmistakable *plink-plinking* of the ping-pong ball greets one as the mud encrusted stairs are negotiated and one enters the locker room. The lockers are custard yellow while the walls are painted white and the cement floor burgundy, the drab setting drenched in bright light complements of loudly humming neon tubes. Around the ping-pong table an entire day's worth of drudgery is effaced and there are *cols bleus* males, young and old, who prefer to spend the last fifteen to twenty minutes (sometimes much more) of the day waiting their turn for a chance to defeat the reigning champion instead of waiting in the cantina. Ping-pong attracts the participation of two particular departments: the green spaces and roadwork. The first ones to get to the table are generally the first ones to play. As others arrive—casual onlookers that eventually join in or more dedicated players—the two long benches set near the table are filled and an ad hoc seniority list of challengers is formed. At times footwork can become fairly exotic, as players attempt to transcend the inherently clumsy nature of work boots, while hunks of dried mud that are shaken loose from the soles are pulverized underfoot, transformed into a fine coat of slippery dust that is left for the concierges to clean. It is a land of noise, much more so than even the

cantina and the *tabarnaks*, creative insults (*mon osti d'pinguin!* “you fucking penguin!”) and the mimesis of the speech and physical movement of one’s adversary (always done so in order to impart maximum foolishness to the target) create an interactive methodology. Foul tempers are only façade, however violence against the ping-pong ball itself or the lockers is not prohibited. Several of the lockers surrounding the ping-pong table have been caved in or are severely dented due to ferocious kicks with steel-toed boots following defeat or a botched opportunity to equalize the score and *le cimetière des balles* (“the cemetery of ping-pong balls”) is a dusty nook used as a depository of crushed balls. Several pages taken from pornographic magazines are taped to one of the walls belonging to the ping-pong arena and it is not a rarity for Luigi, a *col bleu* of Italian descent working in the roadwork department (*La Voirie*) to disrupt a game in progress by showing up after having showered, without a scrap of clothing and only wearing flip-flops. His big belly jutting out combined with his immaculately trimmed mustache offer an intriguing and unexpected source of competition to the pornography that is posted on the wall, trumping its vision of ideal human aesthetic with something far more honest. Some cover their eyes in mock timidity while others berate Luigi’s surprise attack upon their concentration.

Ping-pong, although representative of a ludic moment framed by a cultural marker collapsing creative speech plays and inverted aggression (Limón 1997) together, it is misleading to believe that it is non-competitive, quite on the contrary it is fiercely so. Belying the locker room’s decibel level and joviality, skill and accuracy are very much solicited. Although the rules of the game are pre established, rounds are played with dramatic flair. Some players are gifted in returning *un smash* that is no more than a blur

or adding *des effets* (special techniques adding top spin to the ball) all the while supplying the crowd of onlookers and waiters-in-line victory poses and ridiculous little jigs. There is an excellent balance of physical and verbal humor as jokes and insults quickly exchange hands and one player was known to mightily head butt a locker when losing, his baseball cap flying off his head and his face momentarily stunned, followed by cascades of laughter and statements of disbelief at his apparent disregard for self-mutilation.

Ping-pong is not without its tensions and in the summer of 2007, my fourth year with *La Ville*, it became a symbol of intense contestation. In 2007 a pilot project was initiated that introduced a new workweek configured like the one *les cols bleus du Centre Ville* (the Downtown district) had enjoyed for years: “group 1” would work from Mondays to Thursdays and “group 2” from Tuesdays to Fridays. Workdays were lengthened by establishing an earlier hour to punch in (6:45am) and a later hour to punch out (4:15pm) and also shortening lunch breaks (thirty minutes instead of forty-five) thus enabling a four day workweek to generate the same amount of hours as well as a three day weekend that many *cols bleus*, young and old, female and male, found very appealing. This was a significant change from the traditional Monday to Friday (ending at noon), 7am to 3:15pm schedule. The pilot project’s aim was to lessen absenteeism and to theoretically increase overall productivity. The actual outcome could not have been farther from the desired effect. “Sick hours” (*les heures de maladie*) were used—especially by the young males of *Les Espaces Verts* who had cast the majority of votes in support of the one year pilot project (it is rumored particularly by the older male *cols bleus* of various departments)—to shorten the last workday of the shift by taking the

afternoon off. By phoning in “sick” during the afternoon of the last workday, either on Thursdays or Fridays, a similar configuration to the old schedule (*le vieux horaire*) could be achieved, meaning that one could enjoy the best of both worlds. A leisurely afternoon while still being paid costs one exactly 4 hours and 15 minutes of sick hours and many *cols bleus* start the season with a healthy reserve of *heures maladie* ranging from 50 to 80, depending upon how long the previous work season lasted. Because sick hours can be utilized without fearing repercussions or needing to concoct elaborate reasons, the secretary never asking intrusive questions in regards to the condition of the “sickness”, *un contre-maître* must quickly readjust herself/himself to the sudden dearth of employees, some quite important, such as tractor drivers. Honorine, the head of my department, once described the emergence of this new tactic of labour evasion as *un mal de tête*, a headache that defied solutions.

Ping-pong, although fun and enjoyable, did not help the matter. After the implementation of the new schedule in June 2007, what could only be described as a ping-pong craze surfaced. During my twenty months of fieldwork, ping-pong had always benefited from the participation of several *cols bleus*, however in 2007, for reasons that I still find mystifying, the game experienced a dramatic surge in popularity. Suddenly it became permissible among the ping-pong mongers to discretely end the workday as soon as 3:40pm, sometimes even sooner, to start a new table tennis championship. All *cols bleus* are allowed to stop work fifteen minutes before the bell rings in order to wash up and to change clothes, therefore the workday potentially, and legitimately, ends at 4:00pm. The siren song of ping-pong encouraged many to end the day before the fifteen minute pre-punch out period and at times the action was intoxicating enough to even

warrant a late punch of one or two minutes thus ending the workday at 4:17pm for instance. At times washroom breaks following the day's first coffee-break evolved into very quick 5 point matches...

Soon enough ping-pong came under attack and the net started to be covertly confiscated by unknown antagonists. In order to counter these measures enthusiasts started to hide ping-pong gear such as paddles and balls. Finally in 2008, during my first day back at work I discovered that the ping-pong table had been completely removed from the men's locker room effectively putting an end to an arena within *Le Centre Technique* that was entirely dedicated to playfulness, perhaps encapsulating a symbolic value that made light of what it means to go work *pour La Ville*. Perhaps certain figures of authority along with other workers felt uncomfortable of discipline and play being juxtaposed in such close proximity. The disappearance of the table did absolutely nothing to curtail cultural reproductive activities such as Truck Time, for instance, a tradition that possibly goes much further back than the celebration of ping-pong, however the latter was an easy target to neutralize while the former represents a much more entrenched practice that often defies disciplinarian action. In 2008 the locker room is now a shadow of its former glory, and its walls no longer echo with laughter and the *plink-plinking* of ping-pong.

A locus of ideology that has gone undiminished is undoubtedly the cantina. The cantina's cement walls are painted aquamarine, a color often preferred by hospitals and the back wall sports an intricate mural depicting an idyllic golf course, a rainbow hovering in the background and two rabbits in the foreground. As the younger generation of *cols bleus* starts to establish itself as home/car owners and fathers, golf is starting to

gain popularity and in some cases it is slowly replacing hockey and softball as a sport of choice. Peanuts, chocolate bars, small bags of chips, cakes (Vachon's *Maywest* in particular), cold cans of soft drinks, bottled water and instant coffee are made available for purchase by four vending machines. There is one communal fridge, five microwave ovens and a small kitchenette equipped with an oven, sink, cupboards and drawers. Five tables with benches and chairs serve as dining area and a big message board advertising all manner of secondhand goods ranging from summer tires and weightlifting equipment to videogame consoles and fishing lures adorns the wall along with a smiling photograph of the current pope. Large tinted floor-to-ceiling windows look upon *Le Centre Technique's* vast yard. As is evidenced in the seating arrangement of crew pickups reflecting seniority, a loose version of this also applies inside of the cantina with the younger generation and the older sitting apart from one another however the two groups interact with one another very easily. The cantina has always represented, in what I have been able to observe, an area where only the very good *raconteurs* can operate. The cantina can accommodate all the *cols bleus* of *Le Centre* therefore it is quite spacious, voices carry well and very large audiences can gather. One must be a very skilled orator and one must feel confident in one's ability to be in the spotlight. It is not an easy task and certainly not for those who stumble over words or fail to come up with crisp replies when pressed to do so. The cantina does not represent a formidable struggle of masculine wits, but it does represent the jocular and performative canon of *La Ville* and here humor counts like in no other loci of ideology within the workplace. In fact it is quite similar to the aforementioned (and now defunct) game of ping-pong: the rules are pre-established, however energy, panache and a sense of style is needed to play. One day Savoie, a *col*

bleu in his early thirties who works in *Le Département de La Voirie* and who has been with *La Ville* for many years, decided to show off his newly acquired bicycle to the audience near quitting time. The bicycle was a prestigious Italian brand and it was painted bright pink, a color perceived as being excessively feminine and *pour les fifs* (for the “gays”). Savoie quickly became the center of attention, however he was the orchestrator of his own prickly situation and had decided to capitalize upon his pink bicycle by introducing it to *les cols bleus* in order to joke about it along with them. Savoie was able to make fun of himself and he was very good at it, never losing his cool, remaining creative throughout the entire mass-interaction and quite often outdoing most observations about his sexual orientation. He became a clown that was to be dunked repeatedly but he had organized the carnival and even went as far as drawing attention to his bicycle’s “bonus options”, using a term designated for cars, such as his kickstand and a rack that he could use to carry *une caisse de bière*, a case of beer. An older *col bleu*, also in *La Voirie*, called out “Hey, Savoie...looks like you’ve got a woman’s seat here...” It was a sport-style seat with an ovoid space in the center. In an uninspired and unceremonious gesture the older *col bleu* thrust his index finger in and out of the hole very quickly. “Is this hole for your dildo when you ride your bike?” “Don’t touch my hole!” Savoie retorted. “It’s there to hold my butt plug!” The exchange was a success and all chuckled appreciatively. The cantina exists as a place where *col bleu* humor can be showcased, however it is more than that—it is where their culture is celebrated among a large collective, during a legitimate time frame that need not be supported by alibis and in a spatial area that is officially theirs. This sense of collective solidarity should not always be taken at face value. The following account is based upon a stunning cantina

performance that although may appear to be an isolated event, is not entirely so, given the frequency of various creative acts in front of the cantina's large audience.

While waiting for the bell to ring, Thibault, who works in the roadwork department and who moonlights as *un collecteur* (a "bill collector" who is hired for a fee to retrieve debt money for a client by using physical violence as a method of coercion), walked in wielding a very big baton made of solid wood. He appeared very agitated and was pacing the cantina's length giving practice swings and twirling the stick with one hand while mumbling under his breath. Thibault was saying, just as the cantina was starting to fill up, that a "guy" (*un gars*) had been waiting for him in ambush armed with a baseball bat (*Y'mattendait avec un bat de base*) with a few nails driven into its head for added lethality behind *La Douze* (a name that makes reference to *une caisse de douze* or a case of twelve beers), a *resto-bar* in Lachine that is popular with sport crowds because of the massive projector screen and the flirtatious waitresses. Although Thibault did not go into any details, a few *cols bleus* informed me that the sudden appearance of this guy was most likely related to his "other job" as *un collecteur*. He stated that he had been forced to back down given the ferociousness of his adversary's club. Thibault's wooden baton also looked quite dangerous, he said he had found it in a park and there was black electrical tape wrapped around one of its ends serving as a makeshift handle. Thibault is in his mid thirties and adheres to a specific physical aesthetic. He drives a cream colored Ford Explorer (a medium sized SUV) with chromed mags, wears a heavy gold chain about his throat and wears trendy clothes to work as well as fashionable sunglasses. His sunglasses are not the ubiquitous Oakley brand that many have invested in, his are more "jet set" in appearance and color, the lenses are clear with only a hint of blue. Thibault

also works out and his left shoulder carries a tattoo in a modern tribal style—solid black twisting lines creating the effect of flames. He received a call on his cell phone and answered it in a relaxed manner while standing almost in the center of the cantina, literally the star of the show and many eyes were upon his blossoming performance and heads were cocked in order to listen. *J'me bas pas avec si y'a un pêteux* (“I’m not fighting him if he’s got a gun”) Thibault said, his voice resonating with bravado. *Check ça pis rappelle moé* (“Check it out and call me back”). A few minutes later a second call seemed to serve as a confirmation: *En arrié du Scores à Lasalle? Parfait. Y'es mort, m'a l'tuer* (“Behind the Scores in Lasalle? Perfect. He’s dead, I’m gonna kill him”).

Thibault’s battle plans were unfolding via cell phone and as he communicated with his correspondent who seemed to be organizing the melee, most of the cantina’s occupants (those that were interested and who were listening to the drama) were witnessing a very effective method utilized by a proficient *raconteur*. Thibault generally speaks very well—he is quick and uses excellent Lachinois argot. As previously discussed above, the cell phone creates a misleading distance between storyteller and audience. The *raconteur* himself may not be directly interacting with the cantina audience, however a performance is undeniably unfolding as a theatre stage is being charged with various emotions and an atmosphere of danger is building up. Thibault’s *raconteur* message is constructed as being indirect and situated within a conversation to an ally through a cell phone yet the volume of his voice (brazen) and the physical placement of his body (cantina center) was carefully chosen for he avoided discretion and opted for bravado. It was an effective design choice because he did not need to supply the audience with a historical background to the feud, we got to listen to history in the making. In other words, Thibault

committed himself to his performance, speaking with loud confidence and letting the audience be privy to a monologue laced with danger and promises of a brutal fight— behind a popular franchise restaurant renowned for its salad bar, barbeque ribs and chicken.

It was exciting to hear him speak to his ally while he paced the cantina, one hand holding his mobile phone while the other grasped his club by its black electrical tape handle. Just as things seemed to be getting quite serious (arrangements had been made for the fight), Luigi walked into the cantina and immediately expressed his wish to attempt to break Thibault's baton in half with a karate chop upon seeing it. Luigi was a Taekwondo champion in his youth (he is in his mid forties) and is known for his wild stunts and antics, as are other *cols bleus*, in the cantina.

It is here, however not only here, as will be discussed shortly, that Thibault's performance takes a strange turn. A truly carnivalesque atmosphere develops as Thibault suddenly complies with Luigi's wishes and they ready the baton for destruction by resting it in a declined position on the edge of a table and onto a bench so that the baton finds itself to be about hip level to Luigi. Luigi breathes heavily and takes a few practice chops. Whenever his hand touches the baton he lets out a slow exhalation of breath. He dramatically raises his chopping hand and drives it forcefully down onto the baton that does not even bend in the slightest, bouncing Luigi's hand into the air like a stunned dove. Luigi shakes and rubs his wounded karate, his face wincing. "Fuckin' fuck!" Luigi groans. He is trilingual, speaking in English with the flair of an archetypical Italian mobster and French with a thick accent. He refuses to quit even though many members of the laughing audience warn him that he might end up breaking his hand and not the stick.

At every failed chop a collective moan of agony ripples through the cantina, Luigi's chopping hand denied by the strength of Thibault's baton. After at least a dozen tries Luigi picks up the baton and first tries to snap it by bending it with his arm strength and finally by slamming across his knee. The wood is strong and easily repels his feverish attacks. He gives up and laughs while uttering many a hearty "Fuckin' fucks" and pacing very quickly the length of the cantina, as Thibault had done five minutes ago. Not to be outdone by a piece of wood Luigi then wants to break it by propping the baton against the wall and kicking it. Thibault vigorously objects and tells him that he needs the thing to beat the hell out of his opponent behind the Scores in Lasalle. The cantina audience interjects and states that breaking the baton with a kick would be all too easy and that "anybody could do that." The bell rang and the audience filed out of the cantina, the spectacle was over and, as always, it had been worth the price of admission. Luigi still massaging his brutalized hand got into his Mazda sedan and Thibault was off like a shot, the cream colored Ford Explorer darting down St. Antoine Street, the mags flashing in the sun, heading to Lasalle.

What is meaningful about this account concerning a cantina performance is that humor was almost always present from the very start and that the over arching theme of violence was not the only account available at the time of performance. Where I was seated at the time, at the table usually reserved for the young males of *Le Département des Espaces Verts*, another narrative accompanying Thibault's was being produced. Many participated in the production of this sub-narrative and it acted very much as a counter-point or alternative to Thibault's performance. Whereas the performance that Thibault was putting on was chiefly composed of promises of violence, the sub-narrative

that was evolving was based on humor. The young males of my department found what Thibault had to say amusing, not impressive, and they proceeded to invert the aggression that he was producing. Many snickered as they watched him pace the cantina and when Thibault stated “*J’me bas pas avec si y’a un pêteux*”, many laughed. *Un pêteux* is a slang term for a gun however it can equally mean “sphincter” or “anus”, opening up an avenue of interesting possibilities and reinterpretations revolving mostly around sodomy. Soon it was not a melee that Thibault was attending but an amorous tryst behind “the Scores in Lasalle”—an equally ridiculous and mediocre place for a showdown that was being advertised as being of epic proportions. The baton also lost its credibility as many started to draw attention to *le beau morceau d’tape* (“the pretty piece of tape”) that served as a handle and the fact that Thibault had retrieved it in a park, again markers of mediocrity, of bric-a-brac being appropriated in order to fuel delusions of grandeur. The scene was being steadily drained of threat and of mysticism becoming more akin to Savoie’s cantina act discussed above. It is even questionable if Thibault himself took it seriously, especially when he decided to enter into a partnership with Luigi. By suddenly opting to support Luigi in his own impromptu performance, any scraps of seriousness that were left, the sanctimoniousness of violence having already been desecrated by the sub-narrative, it was an easy feat for the jocular mood to prevail. It is also noteworthy to add that Thibault never did fight. It would seem, according to the following day’s rumors, that Thibault’s adversary stood him up on their date behind the Scores in Lasalle...

The messages of the *raconteur* are often based upon ideal concepts of masculinity, sexuality and success, among other things. This system of knowledge that structures a *cols bleus*’ being in the world—that is, the experience of *Le Centre*

Technique and a type of culture that is often first encountered by the younger generation as being rough and nonsensical—does not represent a be-all-end-all definition of excellence. On the contrary, this system of knowledge and the figure of the *raconteur* who serves as a delivery system are contested in what I judge to be a subversive manner. Perhaps this alternative narrative is not consciously forged, and perhaps it is, it is very difficult to say, however its articulation is very real and it often has the ability to deflate a discourse, transforming it into a clownish act, its contents having been identified as being empty and devoid of substance. Many young *cols bleus* have shared with me their feelings in regards to their first impressions of *La Ville*, never in great detail but as brief (and rare) statements, and they are not flattering, nor are they consistent in the ideal imagery of men as workers within *La Ville*. In many cases working *pour La Ville* was first experienced as being a cultural shock, a deprivation of what *really* made sense, a fascinating reaction indeed considering that many of these young males call Lachine their home and have grown up on its streets. Desnoyers often puts up a “tough” front, using a rhetoric that disallows ambiguity, however one day while we were both making our way across the vast yard of *Le Centre*, after a day of pulling weeds, we watched a small group of older *cols bleus* horsing around. Desnoyers gave a deep sigh and uttered *J’ai honte* (“I’m ashamed”) while slightly shaking his head in a dejected manner. *J’ai honte* could mean several things, however if not for the sign and Desnoyer’s naked mood, it could have been meant in a playful or good-natured manner. Given his body language that was telegraphed sincerely, this conclusion does not seem very likely or convincing. *J’ai honte*, I believe, can be read as meaning what it means and if a feeling of shame or disappointment is felt while delving into what one’s future may look like via the older

cols bleus, it may also point towards another conclusion: “becoming *col bleu*” is not an easy task, the apprenticeship is a bumpy ride and *La Ville* as *une bonne job* needs reconsideration as does the younger generation being passive recipients of a common sense knowledge. These feelings will be explored in greater detail in the last section of this chapter for they are very important and crucial in understanding the “inner terrain of culture” that perhaps was only observable during the structural shift’s brief period of friction and readjustment (Sider 1986:185). Loci of ideology are therefore not only cultural zones where certain discourses are articulated with greater force and with a larger audience, they can become forums where an alternative account is produced. As will be discussed later in this chapter, alternative accounts or narratives that contradict masculine ideals in *Le Centre Technique* are important to understand the diversity among *les col bleus* instead of viewing them as a homogenous and static entity.

Female *Cols Bleus*: Sources of “Hard Work”

She [the head of the department] certainly thinks we’re very good at pulling weeds!

—Pierrette, female *col bleu* in her mid forties, married with two teenage sons

It’s like we have the word “cleaning” stamped on our foreheads. It’s all we do.

—Claudia, female *col bleu* in her late thirties, single

You got to work with les émondeurs [the tree pruners] all week? You’re loading wood in the chipper right? You’re lucky. I wouldn’t mind doing something different once in awhile...

—Mélanie, female *col bleu* in her early forties, single

In 2007, my fourth year with *La Ville*, I had the repeated opportunity to work with a crew of female *cols bleus* and found that their experience of labour was vastly different when compared to that of the older and younger male *cols bleus* of the department. In fact, it was ironic that their type of meritocratic work ethics was encouraged instead of

discouraged. A few of the female *cols bleus* have previously worked factory jobs and in *les shoppes* (shopfloors). Pierrette, who is married and has two teenage sons who play ice hockey (their equipment costing a small fortune as she once stated), has worked in a triage center for recycled materials and describes herself as having become a proficient forklift driver as well as having had access to a wide variety of tasks and responsibilities. Pierrette enjoys being able to work outdoors, however she has also stated that the lack of variety of work in *La Ville* sometimes depresses her, but manages to keep her disappointment at bay by repeating the following mantra: “What counts is that there is a paycheck for me every Thursday.” The three above quotes draw attention to an accurate paradigmatic division of labour operating within the workplace milieu. The quotes were taken during *Opération Netoyage* (“operation cleanup”) which was initiated in Lachine in the summer of 2007. Male workers were also part of this operation, however, labour requiring the highest level of meticulousness and discomfort for elongated periods was relegated to *les filles* (“the girls”) as Honorine is sometimes apt to say. This work mostly consisted of pulling out all the weeds that grew along the sidewalks and in the fine spaces between *le pavé-unis* (cobblestones) of some of Lachine’s busiest and longest streets such as Provost and Victoria for weeks on end. The days were very hot during “operation cleanup” and the cement sidewalks did nothing to help abate the heat. The best position to pull out the weeds that had developed very tough roots and that clung to cement was often to get “on all fours” or to bend down low with one hand on the ground and the other pulling as close to the base of the weeds as possible. It was very hard work and after a day of kneeling and bending and walking on hot cement my bones felt fragile and the tips of my fingers felt raw due to the pinching grip we had to use on the shorter weeds.

Labour such as this as well as working on *les plates-bandes* pulling more weeds and setting mulch is very much the preserve of women. While other male crews also complete this type of labour a wider variety of work is often granted to them such as hedge trimming for instance. *Les filles* are recognized as being “hard workers”, not because they are effective workers, which they are, but rather because they are imagined as being “hard workers” by default. Labour that is shunned or that is deemed to be far too dull by male *cols bleus* (such as pulling weeds) is guaranteed to be completed with a far greater degree of professionalism and discipline by the crew of female *cols bleus*. This has become an unspoken assumption, quite similar to that of the internal dynamics of the culture of silence (that has been experienced intimately by young males) that assumes labour can be appropriated by deterring effective counterhegemonic strategies by having instilled taboo like values to the articulation of injustice (see chapter 5). It is timely to recall Turcotte’s (one of La Ville’s *émondeurs*) statement here: “A young guy like you has better things to do than wasting his time on all fours pulling weeds!” (see chapter 3).

Female *cols bleus* represent an elite labour force within the department and their efforts are perceived this way by the head of the department. The Public Works of Montréal’s boroughs have perhaps begun to proactively employ women, visible minorities and Anglophones, however women in Lachine do not have access to the same cultural resources that men do. The reason for this is very much linked to the structural shift that has subtly privileged an aesthetic that focuses upon attaching cultural resources to the reversal of the manual and mental dichotomy. This shifting aesthetic is understood as being the current definition of masculinity. *Les filles*, because they are perceived as being able to complete work that is less desirable in a timely manner, are meant to be put

hard to work. They themselves become a special resource within *La Ville* that is not dependent upon an ideation of aesthetic but on pure manual labour. It is a similar characteristic that is shared with the meritocratic workers however with the differentiating trait that they do not have access to the same pool of cultural resources. I do not wish to imply that *les filles* are not creative in their speech, do not joke, do not gossip and find very little interest in fashioning intriguing narratives, it is just that they do so much less instead expressing themselves through their work, which provides the head of the department with a crew that will work under any weather conditions and successfully complete jobs that might take another crew significantly longer to complete.

The *raconteur* and loci of ideology are thus handled in a very different way in that they do not really apply to this particular group of labourers. Storytelling, as we have seen, needs *time* to be developed and since the women are consistently working there is very little time allocated for intricate verbal duels. Furthermore, many of the *raconteur*'s tales make women the butt of jokes and the nuclei of their moralistic accounts.

Considering that these gendered and engendering stereotypical elements are often entrenched within the *raconteur*'s discursive structure, it is only logical that a group of working female *cols bleus* would decline from belittling their knowledge, their labour and their gender. Truck Time or *TDVs* (*un tour de ville*, signifying a leisurely cruise around town) are also configured in a specific way. Truck Time is only allowed when the workday's "to do" list is completed in its entirety. When *les filles* do allow themselves to indulge in *un TDV* it is laughably uncomplicated: a few laps around a very short circuit, always at the very end of the workday, all the while justifying this rare luxury by continuously reminding themselves that all the jobs had been completed—in other words

a great amount of guilt is felt. Instead of ogling young girls and calling out to them, Truck Time becomes an educational experience consisting of finding the names of certain flora and trees.

In her study of structural shifts experienced by Newfoundland's fisheries, Power observes that the two oppositional models that the fishers access (the traditional male fisherman versus the educated, rational and modern fisherman), and the cultural resources that accompany both, are not readily available to women, a dynamic that becomes a "patriarchal dividend" (2005:158). In addition, the sexual division of labour in fish processing plants, Power argues, has positioned men and women in different jobs, perpetuating the notion of sex difference without conferring "femininity" to women performing the jobs (2005:160). Many of the young males feel that pulling weeds is a waste of their energy and of their talents, while often finding the time to ridicule the women, deeming their physical appearances and work clothes as being "unsexy." Some of the women have broad backs and shoulders and they too sport similar aesthetics as their male counterparts such as cigarettes that dangle from their mouths while lifting equipment and baseball caps to protect from the sun. After all, this is work and not a beauty pageant. Strategies to circumvent unwanted work are actively pursued, and Honorine acknowledges that certain types of jobs with *Le Département des Espaces Verts* will encourage unproductive behavior in some of the male workers. The women subscribe to a work ethic that is consistently productive and of high quality while the men, even the "hard workers", are allowed some slack and take advantage of this double standard arrangement. The resources that the *raconteur* and loci of ideology produce, aesthetics classified as being masculine and adhering to the current hegemonic regime,

are not evenly distributed. The hiring of women can thus be perceived as the administration's strategy to acquire a small, dependable workforce that does as it is told to do. The labour of women serves as a surprising example of meritocratic work ethics not only being allowed, but encouraged to operate unimpeded. Besides, the women's locker room is far too small to accommodate a ping-pong table...

Contradictory Confessions

It is not possible to believe that the society which we study has a unity and forms a system, if one doubts at the same time the unity of its culture. But after that, it is necessary to identify its cleavages, its lines of opposition/contradictions, and also its exchanges which go across, in specific ways, the society studied and the field of its representations.

—Schmitt as cited in Sider 1986:75

Reading print media and watching televised exposes relating to the *col bleu* “problem” on the island of Montréal may unfortunately lead one to believe that public workers are effectively reducible to a handful of pejoratively laden descriptors as being accurate and consistent to the culture's internal dynamics. Angelo Soares' study, although well meaning, was dependent upon a mailed questionnaire and not prolonged participant observation as a manual worker employed by a municipality (see chapter 2). Although I clearly agree that *les cols bleus* are worthy of careful study and even more careful reflection and consideration, questionnaires do not offer sensitive enough analytical instruments, making the detection of nuanced and subtle work experiences difficult to achieve, such as those present within structural shifts for instance. Even a shorter period of participant observation, compared to the twenty months I have spent side by side with my fellow coworkers, may not have been adequate enough to provide the thesis with a look at the finer strands of tissues that make up *La Ville*'s organism. To have temporarily become *un col bleu* within the changing structure of *La Ville* in

Lachine, within a particular physical department and as a member of a specific crew's daily life possesses similarities to having been an adoptive member of a household undergoing a difficult and confusing change.

To have gained access to *La Ville* during a precise moment of structural shift was a great stroke of luck and has made it possible to observe what Sider refers to as a "culture's inner terrain" (1986:185), a notion that was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The inner terrain draws attention to the presence of complex and ever-shifting dynamics that steer away from the totalizing concept presuming that "everyone in the society is supposed to have the same culture" (Sider 1986:6). The same outlook is applicable to class as discussed by Sider:

It is precisely at this point that culture – a reformulated notion of culture – enters into the dynamic of class. Not because culture "happens" within classes, and class struggle between classes; not at all. Culture enters the dynamic of class because...it is where class becomes dynamic; where the lines of antagonism and alliance come together and apart (1986:9)

Class cannot be divided into neat camps reducible to external and seamless antagonisms. Furthermore, hegemonic regimes, although representing solid experiences that are intimately felt, are not total and uncontested. The structural shift following the 2004 collective bargaining agreement that shaped the workplace experience in *La Ville* produced a zone where vastly different cultures not only collided together, but also created alliances and emerging cultures that are still changing even now in 2008. With a new round of collective bargaining on the horizon, projected for 2009 or 2010, the workplace experience of *les cols bleus* that I have worked with shall continue to dynamically change. Lancaster's ideation of machismo in Nicaragua as a "field of productions" (as cited in Gutmann 1996:222) is important in regards to the *raconteur*

model that has been discussed in three specific senses. First, the way in which the *raconteur*'s storytelling is verbally, physically and ideologically expressed—through performative excellence—provides a cultural envelope that is rich and important to observe since definitions of masculinity are involved, however it would be misleading to stop the analysis there since this is the *raconteur*'s surface and does not locate it within a realm of power. Second, the *raconteur* is not a democratic system, not only because of the exclusive nature of its discourses but also due to its privileged position within seniority's hegemonic regime signifying that those who take the time to become very good at it are often the ones who are appropriating someone else's production. Thirdly, the *raconteur*, as well as other cultural systems that are part of *La Ville*'s experience such as the culture of silence (see chapter 5), does not go unchallenged, unimpeded and unquestioned. A "field of productive realtions" is an apt description because of the multitude of meanings and layers that interact with one another and that are also evaluated by the participants.

What is perhaps paradoxical of the seniority regime as well as *La Ville*'s reputation as *une bonne job* and a male preserve that is tolerant of *les dossiers criminelle* (individuals that have criminal files), drinking and physical violence, is the emergence of what I have come to call *contradictory confessions*. The apprenticeship to *La Ville* is a difficult one and the structural shift has only made it that much more complicated to navigate and to understand for the young males who are coming to the realization that their lives are committed to that of public manual labour and that other options are now becoming slim, a development that will be discussed in the concluding chapter. Contradictory confessions produce accounts that are of a striking intimate quality that do

not move in the same direction as the discourses that are displayed in *La Ville*'s daily interactions. Contradictory confessions come across as being tender, uncertain, fearful and critical—emotive positions that are not often accorded attention or serious thought within the workplace, a milieu often favoring accoutrements of loudness, posturing and self confidence, attributes that belong to a masculine way of being. The sub-narrative that was juxtaposed to Thibault's *raconteur* performance in the cantina is also made of contradictory ideations albeit made publicly acceptable because it used the same components as that of a storyteller such as wordplays and humor and was also a collective effort, not a personal one demonstrating naked vulnerability. In his study of gender in Mexico, Gutmann also observes the official aspects of masculinity and those that are more pragmatic: "...it has always been a challenge for me to distinguish between my friends' more *formal* performances of masculinity and their more *practical* ones" (1996:247 emphasis my own). The curtain of formality certainly does pose a problem, however intimately participating in the politics of production (as employed *col bleu* of the Department of Green Spaces) allows one to occasionally contact a more practical or pragmatic version of what it means to be *col bleu* in the oldest suburb of Canada, the "tough little town" of Lachine. In Limón's discussion of the South Texas *batos* he discusses that *confianza* and *respeto* are part and parcel of the *carne asada*, where intricate speech plays are performed (1997). The *carne asada* or barbeque serves as a locus of ideology where *los batos* are able to celebrate their culture within a sphere of familiarity/trust and respect. Feelings of *confianza* and *respeto* have been more present during counterhegemonic measures than the *raconteur*'s "speech plays." Contradictory

confessions on the other hand are more likely to be manifested in “collective equality” (Limón 1997:72).

In order to discuss the importance of contradictory confessions I wish to engage in two conversations: one with Maçon, a twenty-one year old male on the 29th of July 2005, and another with Taillefer on the 10th of May 2006, my second and third years working *pour La Ville* respectively. At times the conversations were more akin to monologues or “confessions”, with the young male speaking his mind while I became a listener, only talking when commenting briefly or when asking a question. Here the antics of the *raconteur* have been completely shed and the accounts are quite intimate. I still believe that my status as a student and as an “outsider” to *La Ville* were advantageous attributes for I became an individual who could be trusted with their complex feelings and doubts. I was more than a sympathetic ear, I could relate easily for I also had many ambiguous feelings about what the future would bring. These accounts were not recorded and took place in very different environments: one on a terrace at a popular bar on St. Denis Street in downtown Montréal and the other during the morning’s coffee-break inside of a truck parked on the perimeter of Parc Carignan in Lachine. In Maçon’s case, notes were taken upon my return to Lachine (thankfully we only a few beers and I was not inebriated) and for Taillefer I was able to jot down notes in my regular hiding place, a stall in the men’s washroom in *Le Centre Technique*. The accounts are not verbatim, however their essence has been preserved as best as could be managed given the intimate circumstances and time constraints. In 2005 Maçon was my partner for a significant amount of the work season and in 2006 Taillefer and I spent the entire

summer on the same crew. I will discuss both accounts first and then offer an analytical perspective.

I had agreed with Maçon to a few Friday night beers. It was his third year as *un col bleu* and he was now earning almost double what he had been earning a year ago due to the augmented salaries that *La Convention Collective* of 2004 had procured for auxiliary workers. He is a good-looking young man who, like many males his age, enjoys investing in clothing, especially expensive designer jeans such as Guess and Parasuco. He also wears tight fitting undershirts. Maçon differentiates himself from the other *cols bleus*. He considers his values as being superior to those articulated within the workplace and he told me that he was afraid of being “transformed” (*transformé*, the actual word he used) by his coworkers because he thought of himself as being impressionable. Maçon stated that he had attended a “good school”, *Collège St. Anne* (see chapter 2), and had been brought up by “good, caring parents” (*des bon parents*). He also recognized that the networks he had created at *Collège St. Anne (les connections)*, were also responsible for his class consciousness and the culture that had been inculcated to him. During work hours Maçon often told me about his refined culinary tastes or his weekend visitation to a friend whose parents owned a sumptuous mansion in the West Island.

Maçon considered Meloche as being the “worst individual” (*le pire d’la gang*) working *pour La Ville* and that he steered clear of him because he liked to fight and had been aggressive with him during his first and second years. He also said that Bégin, another young *col bleu* who was a childhood friend and who had started working in our department one year prior to his own employment, was the reason that he had tried “chemical drugs” (*du chimique*) such as speed and ecstasy. Maçon reasoned that it was

individuals working *pour La Ville* like JP that were responsible for Bégin's current state of addiction. For Bégin, things indeed seem to be spiraling out of control and Maçon explained with visible sadness how his friend had recently been forced to run out of a taxi cab, skipping his fare, because he had lost his wallet and then proceeded to fall asleep in a fetal position behind a dumpster in a downtown alley, completely exhausted from the night's revelry. He recognizes certain individuals as representing agents of pollution, not only to himself, but to one another also, and he observes that their lifestyles seem to be redundant as money is earned in order to binge drink and snort cocaine: "They're doing a job they hate so they can afford to have a good time." A similar observation was also made by Lise, the ex-landscaping contractor that has now become a professional leather worker (see chapter 3).

Maçon is busy producing a critique of *La Ville* and he is concerned about what is at stake. His future and the culture that was supplied to him by his schooling and his parents, especially his successful father who is a stone mason of repute who works exclusively on large homes in wealthy neighborhoods, is not compatible with certain cultural aspects that are celebrated in the workplace. He is aware of *La Ville's* capacity for "changing people" and recognizes the lackadaisical work ethics that operate. Maçon also described the Lachinois French that *les gars* use on a daily basis as being *très cru* ("very raw"). *La Ville's* culture contradicts his own culture and its definitions of performative excellence. Maçon succeeded in obtaining his *secondaire cinq* and he had started technical training in cabinet and furniture making (he had once showed me with what appeared to be pride the cabinet, trunk and coffee table he had made and which were prominently displayed in his apartment) in between his first and second work

season. It was a two year course and his return to *La Ville* for a third season had conflicted with the responsibilities of his future as a cabinet maker. The terrace where we were seated was lively however Maçon, sipping his beer thoughtfully, seemed to be facing a significantly powerful internal adversary. He did not know what to do: embrace *La Ville* in all of its entirety—heart, body and soul, warts and all, or continue his technical training. His choice would inevitably impact the other. Formal training necessitates *un effort* (an effort) while *La Ville* offers an all together different type of answer. Maçon's realization that what he sees in Meloche, JP and even his childhood friend Bégin, is what he can potentially become and this in turn becomes a visualization of destroyed boundaries, "good" morals being replaced with "bad" ones, or, more accurately, a type of cultural background that is experiencing a difficult integration into a milieu that is letting him know that he is different from its participants.

Although Maçon seems to be critical of the constraining structure of *La Ville*, paradoxically it is all within arm's reach and it is possible that it is this proximity to acquiescence that fills him with concern. He was also concerned about his drinking capacity and said he could not drink excessively and was impressed when hearing the *raconteur* stories of the parties and late nights drinking on weeknights made possible by the consumption of speed and cocaine, "frenching" girls in clubs that they did not even know. Maçon seemed rather impressed by these tales of drunkenness/narcotic consumption while simultaneously appearing discouraged by it. He also attached a positive value to the type of work we were doing (cutting grass) and viewed this labour and the Thursday paycheck as enabling him to stake his claim to a youthful and masculine culture. Maçon stated that maneuvering *un whip* all day long increased arm

strength (*ça m'fait des bras*), the outdoor nature of the work grants him a healthy tan and the salary has allowed him to procure his own apartment. These are material aspects that working *pour La Ville* bestows upon its participants and he finds this appealing.

We left the popular bistro, my head full of unwritten notes, and I drove Maçon back to his apartment in Lachine. I parked the car yet he made no attempt to get out. I was itching to go write my notes, to record the night, to accrue more material to apply to a thesis that many viewed as being un-anthropological and more sociological, but Maçon continued to sit there, in the passenger seat of my burgundy 1991 Ford Contour. At work, Ford becomes an interesting acronym: *Férouille* (scrap metal), *Ordure* (trash), *Rouille* (rust) and *Détritus* (rubbish). I asked Maçon what was wrong and his concerns for his future took a different tone than on the terrace we had left behind. His feelings spoke of isolation: “When I sit alone and have nothing to do, I smoke a joint (*j'fume un join*) and then I can remain sitting and I'll think about things I don't usually think about. I don't feel too good, I feel so lonely (*j'me sens pas très bien, j'fil vraiment seul*)...I don't know what to do about things.” Maçon, although finding certain elements interesting about what employment in *La Ville* produces, does not appear very happy with the current arrangements. He expresses sentiments of isolation at work and at home even though he equates success and responsibility with having moved out of his father's luxurious home in upper Lachine, close to the Dorval border. He is in between two cultures and does not know which one has the most potential to support a level of life that will prove to be satisfactory. I will return to these issues after having discussed Taillefer's similar discomfiture.

Taillefer has also attended *Collège St. Anne* and knows Maçon very well since they had classes together. He also finished his *secondaire cinq* and dabbled shortly in an electronics course but when his friends started to gain access into *La Ville* he immediately agreed to join the Department of Green Spaces. 2006 marked his fifth year as *un col bleu* as well as his fifth year as a successful drug dealer. It was during his first year as a manual labourer that an older female *col bleu* taught him the vagaries of selling narcotics—a rare instance when a woman is relegated great prestige in a story and Taillefer indeed describes her in positive terms. Unfortunately, Taillefer's mentor lost her job because she was caught smoking marijuana inside of a pickup during work hours. Taillefer's forays into the drug economy consisted of conducting "deliveries" on his bicycle for a bigger seller. His hard work and dedication eventually netted him his own right to start selling in earnest as an important Lachinois drug dealer that specialized in chemical based narcotics. The Chemical King's secondary weekly paycheck allowed him to invest in prestigious consumer goods.

It was a cold morning in May and Taillefer and I worked together picking up piles of raked leaves with a machine called "the little wonder": a large flexible tube that suctions piles of leaves and shreds them into a fibrous pulp as they are expelled into a large capacity container via a metal chute, not dissimilar from a snowplow. The entire contraption is pulled by a pickup and it is a loud and fickle machine with jams occurring with great frequency as the leaves clump together and weaken the suction. The unplugging process is lengthy and bothersome as the chute's bolts must be undone and the tightly compressed piles of damp leaves pulled out. During our morning coffee-break Taillefer wanted to talk to me and expressed some very personal feelings in regards to his

current life trajectory. It was a surprising talk to have, not only because this was only my third day back to work, but also the level of intimacy was similar to Maçon's talk of solitude and uncertainty while seated inside of my car in front of his bloc apartment. It was also surprising because Taillefer puts on quite a tough act when in the collective public eye of *Le Centre* therefore his opening statement caught me off guard:

TAILLEFER: I've got a good job (*une bonne job*), a good girl (*une bonne blonde*), I've got the car I always wanted (*le char que j'ai toujours voulu*) and I make money and I'm feeling alright in life (*j'ai fait d'argent pis j'ai bien dans vie*) but there's something missing and I don't know what it is...it's a funny feeling (*c'est un drôle de feeling*)...Sometimes I feel like leaving my apartment and my life with Jacynthe (his *blonde* or "girlfriend") and moving back in with my mom...going back to school or something.

EXAN: And why don't you? What's stopping you from doing that?

TAILLEFER: If I do that I'll lose everything I have. I'll lose my job, my apartment and my friends...

EXAN: Who are your friends?

TAILLEFER: Well...the guys that work *pour La Ville* and my new friends with the other thing I do (*l'autre affaire*).

L'autre affaire ("the other thing") is often Taillefer's encoded method of referring to his drug selling operation. He stated that he did not want to be selling drugs all of his life but that it was lucrative and that one of his goals was to purchase a small house in Lachine. Taillefer elaborated most interestingly on aspects of friendship which were interrelated with class consciousness. He said that he could not see his old friends from *Collège St. Anne* because he felt that he had changed too much (*J'ai vraiment changé...*) and that a common ground between past and present could no longer be established. The "new" friends could never be introduced to the "old" friends, moreover, Taillefer expressed that he had ceased to communicate with the *St. Anne* crowd. Friends and

acquaintances are agents that shape the knowledge systems of informal groups. The type of membership that composes an informal group frequently dictates the cultural mores and values that will be articulated and strengthened (Willis 1977, Dunk 1991). By leaving behind *La Ville* for instance, Taillefer feels that he would be losing face and prestige, an undeniable possibility.

Similar to Maçon, Taillefer does in fact realize the cultural differences that exist between *Collège St. Anne*'s costly education and *La Ville*. His transition is much more complete than Maçon's though: selling drugs has created a link that he cannot shrug off easily. It is through *La Ville* that Taillefer learned his secondary trade and it is through these two generators of resources that he has been able to purchase the car that he has "always wanted", afford a waterside apartment and a large plasma screen television that he can play his costly Xbox 360 on, an expensive videogame console that is very popular among the young males of the department. The informal group of *La Ville* and the informal group surrounding Taillefer's drug operation possess many similarities, among them is the reality that there are many other drug dealers, young and old, who are employed as *cols bleus*. Taillefer, like Maçon, also wishes to differentiate himself from the rest and has described himself prior to this account as a very mellow guy (*un gars tranquille*) who did not like going out that much and who did things differently from the average *col bleu*, thus producing a symbolic delineation.

I once attended a birthday party that was held at Taillefer's home and met the friends that hail from the other side of the tracks. I was the only other *col bleu* along with Taillefer. His large television set was tuned to *Musique Plus* (the French Canadian version of MTV) and playing rap videos. Everybody wore hip hop clothing and another

modified Honda Civic (with flamboyant sparkling chrome “mags”) was parked in front of his home. It was painted light blue with fuzzy white synthetic fur covering the dash, console and seats. Taillefer told me that it belonged to one of his business partners. I chatted with Jacynthe (I had previously met her on numerous occasions), a young working class female, and she expressed herself as colorfully and energetically as any of the male *cols bleus* at work. She wore tight fitting clothing and used gesticulations and fast speech to communicate. I also talked with a young African Canadian male who spoke Lachinois French and Taillefer described him as a close friend, a statement that I found ironic since he had often employed fierce pejoratives aimed at visible minorities when at work—a fine opportunity to remind oneself of Gutmann’s observations pertaining to formal and practical masculinity. The doorbell rang and in “moved” a very short young male also dressed in hip hop clothing: a beige velvet track suit with very baggy pants, an expensive baseball cap and basketball shoes that looked like big white marshmallows. He walked with a very curved back and his slight shoulders moved in an exaggerated and rhythmic fashion, following his creative footwork that mimicked those seen on *Musique Plus*. When he smiled he revealed four missing front teeth and his lips pinched a sweet smelling cigarillo. *Des shooteux* were offered, beers were distributed and a dense grey cloud of marijuana soon crept over the ceiling. The *St. Anne* crowd had now been replaced with a different informal group and even though Taillefer displays a street smart demeanor, his confessional tone inside of the pickup spoke of unhappiness and uncertainty belying the material wealth he has amassed. The birthday party scene struck me as being another theatrical stage closely resembling the loci of ideology that are part and parcel to *La Ville*.

The contradictory confessions that Maçon and Taillefer have communicated are not unique for they are not the only individuals who have shared with me their fears and doubts, completely doing away with the *raconteur's* formalities, *Le Centre's* masculine discourse and Lachine's "toughness." Maçon and Taillefer are also not the only ones who have spoken of education or formal training as an ideal alternative to "*une bonne job*" status that is often applied to the Public Works of Lachine. In their study Sennet and Cobb analyze the relationship between the "new class"—composed of highly educated professionals who have provided new forms of manual work amid declining traditional industries—and that of manual labourers in the deindustrialized City of Boston (1972). The researchers recorded a formal interview with an electrician named Carl Dorian that possesses striking similarities to the sentiments that have been expressed by the likes of Maçon and Taillefer:

I have no problems, if you know what I mean, but I can't say as I'm really content...I can't really figure it out, like I feel impatient sort of...I guess it's a question of, like am I working *for* someone? I...I feel like I'm taking shit even when, actually, even when there's nothing wrong... See, I feel like I'm being held back, like I'm not on top of things...maybe sort of powerless, but it's a feeling not about any one thing that's gone wrong (Sennet and Cobb 1972:34).

Sennet and Cobb explain these complex sentiments as being part of what appears to be the manual and mental dichotomy discussed by scholars such as Power (2005, experiential and formal qualifications), Dunk (1991, common sense knowledge and book learning) and Willis (1977, practical and theoretical knowledge): "money power" versus "internal development" (1972:35-36). Carl, a unionized worker, also makes "good money" and his salary allows him to procure certain prestige items, however there is a feeling of "powerlessness" that the highly educated professional, in this case a teacher, does not exhibit. The researchers posit that the teacher who "makes half of what Carl

makes” is given license to lay claim to a different kind of prestige: internal rewards in terms of her/his own professional growth and personal development (Sennet and Cobb 1972:35). Carl may make more money, but it is the teacher whose position appears to pivot on an internal power. I believe that Maçon and Taillefer (as well as several other young *cols bleus*) are aware of this difference and the knowledge of being placed in between two conflicting cultural worlds is eliciting from them critical considerations in regards to *La Ville*. They are placed at a cross roads and I, who am part of the academic structure, have at times become their personal interlocutor, not judging them and not employing certain discursive trends that are part of our daily workplace experiences. I listen to them not only because we work together, but also because I care for them in a way that is both personal and surprising. If it were not for the male codes in my society I would gather them into my arms and perhaps find solidarity in our fears and worries.

Un effort (a word that is often employed when entertaining the draconian breaking away from the world of Truck Time and the *raconteur*) is needed to pursue formal training, something that deters many of my coworkers, yet, paradoxically, the content of formal training and education is not challenged in the same sense as the discursive “anti-intellectualism” advanced by Dunk’s informants in Ontario (1991:136-140). The Boys’ knowledge supports a difference between “doers” and “talkers”, the militaristic and manly overtone difficult to overlook, is a phenomenon that was encountered differently during my own fieldwork (Dunk 1991:148-149). My coworkers do not only know that education is a key that unlocks a wider variety of choices in our contemporary society, they have begun to *feel* it, however they doubt that they will be able to locate *une job* that is as “easy” to complete and well-paid as *La Ville*’s configuration allows. Variety itself is

sought out in *Le Centre Technique* and many *cols bleus* that have started their careers in the Department of Green Spaces chafe at the repetitiveness of daily work. Mélanie, a female *col bleu* whose quote appears above, also expressed a wish to apply her energies towards different labour and stated that I was “lucky” to have been able to work alongside *les émondeurs* (the tree pruners). The realization of education’s potential seems to have been a recent epiphany. Willis has also observed this processual logic: the lads, who have developed an intricate system of recalcitrance towards grammar school and a “working-class cultural election” has enabled them to move through their world at blistering speeds (1977:107-111). The lads began to drink, fight, smoke, want cars and lead sexually active lives at a young age, however as soon as a series of shopfloors become their final destination, sentiments of being in a cul-de-sac emerge and the speed which they have lived becomes a slow crawl (*Ibid*). As Bégin, Maçon’s childhood friend, once told while he chauffeured us very casually and skillfully avoiding as much work as possible: *Travailler à Ville c’est facile... Y’a pas d’effort physique ou mental à faire pis j’fait plus d’argent que mon père. Y’capote ben raide!* (Working for the city is easy... There’s no physical or mental effort involved and I make more money than my father. He’s really freaking out over that one!). A new worker who was employed in the summer of 2007 hailing from the Lac St. Jean area and who has been living in Lachine for eight years also finds *La Ville* appealing however he once declared to me that: *La Ville, ça tue tes rêves* (The city kills your dreams), a cutting remark that perhaps hits closer to the heart of the matter than many *gars d’la Ville* might care to ponder. Most find the salary appealing and do not want to lose their seniority by going back to school but feelings that often cannot be identified seem to creep up with greater frequency now that

they have begun to settle into a future of manual labour, union disputes, the concrete politics of control and the evasion of labour that proves to be more of an effort than the actual work itself. As sings Iris Dement: Easy's getting' harder every day...

Maçon and Taillefer did find their ways and they finally made their choices. In the late summer of 2005, Maçon and Taillefer had an intense altercation that may have escalated had I not intervened, or perhaps the altercation may have never manifested itself had I not been there, it is difficult to say. All three of us had been cutting grass in *Parc Lasalle Ouest* (the western section of Lasalle Park, containing hundreds of trees that *les whipeurs* must cut around) and Taillefer and I were taking a breather at the truck, gassing up our whips and cutting fresh lengths of wires. We were chatting about nothing particularly important when Maçon arrived on *La Gravelly* (the small, highly maneuverable tractor used for perimeter cutting and finesse work) and asked us what we were talking about. Taillefer replied that it was none of his "goddamn business" (*c'est pas tes câlisses d'affaires*). Maçon began to retort and it is here that his *Collège St. Anne* colleague, in a nod to the surreal, threw with great force a plastic bottle that was two thirds full at his head. The bottle hit Maçon very hard in the face and Taillefer, in a bid to add insult to injury, added in a business like tone that he wanted the ten bucks (*le dix piasse*) that was owed to him. Maçon, his face red with what must have been a mixture of humiliation, stunned disbelief and pain jumped off of the tractor and screamed with a very red face "I THOUGHT WE WERE FRIENDS!" The two squared off, moving with caution, and I "broke it up" by standing between the two and babbling about things I do not recall, my inner demon shaking its head in chagrin, a promising fight neutralized. The two antagonists backed down and Maçon left the park while Taillefer, in a gesture that

seemed to have been concocted for its degree of chivalry, stated that he was “sorry” that I had witnessed such an ugly spectacle, reminding me that even if I had been working with *les cols bleus* for two seasons, that I was still, and most likely would always be perceived as an outsider and/or semi-figure of authority due to my education and the academic path that I had chosen. This feeling reminded me of Shostak’s reaction to Nisa’s maltreatment of a winged termite (“It seemed like an inexcusable torture”) and her accompanying dance that mimicked the insects death throws (1981:321). Shostak, reflecting upon Nisa’s action remarks that: “...the incident also reminded me of the cultural gulf between Nisa and me. It raised the probability that some of my questions would not find easy answers, while others might lead to answers I might not like to hear. The differences in our backgrounds, though I sometimes tried to deny them, would always be there” (1981:321-322). Our level of education, amongst other cultural differences, separated us, however had I not also wanted to see them fight?

In his Brazilian study of physical altercations (“*brigas*”) in São Luis, Linger observes that eruptions of violence are not gratis—complicated reasons that move beyond the monolithic cult of machismo govern them, especially when feelings of “neurosis”, as one of his primary informants describes the working-class environment of the city, are present (1992:158). The tension between Maçon and Taillefer had been brewing for a quite awhile. During that particular work season, Maçon often made subtle (and at other times overt) references to his continuing efforts in the cabinet making program. He would frequently, and vocally, celebrate his maintained participation in a formal training program, while criticizing other *cols bleus* that lacked “ambition.” By juxtaposing his own perceived “success” with a perceived “mediocrity”, Maçon was effectively creating

a discursive space that boldly depreciated *La Ville*'s currency. Taillefer himself was not a stranger to distance producing discourses, having described himself as an individual who did not partake in the same activities as his fellow *cols bleus*, however having had attended the same prestigious educational institution as Maçon he may have been more sensitive to the meanings behind his coworker's hierarchical ordering. Maçon's discourse not only served to create a model that portrayed *La Ville* unfavorably, but it may have also exposed feelings that were volatile during a structural shift.

The next work season, in 2006, Maçon had quit *La Ville* as well as the cabinet making course, his father having recuperated him from indecisiveness, taking him on as apprentice stonemason and sole inheritor to a lucrative business that had made him a very wealthy and respected man within the community. As for Taillefer, the work seasons of 2007 and 2008 both marked his perception of *La Ville* as an undisputedly viable future as he successfully completed his class 3 training (something that Meloche had unsuccessfully attempted on three separate occasions) and obtained his qualifications (*carte de compétence*). Taillefer also purchased a house in Lachine and his car underwent additional (and significantly costly) aesthetic modifications. The uncertainty and seeming regrets that he had expressed in 2006 now buried in the past by a present that has seen him extricated from the ranks of the grass cutters and has allowed him more control over his own production of labour.

Contradictory confessions are very important because they demonstrate several meanings. Contradictory confessions question more than what it means to be in a "tough little town" or to have *une bonne job* or to be *un col bleu*. These intimate and vulnerable narratives afford a glimpse into "culture's inner terrain" through seniority and

meritocracy's paradoxical flux of "conflict and collusions" (Sider 1986, Cole 1991, Gutmann 1996). They are not simply to be perceived as reactions to seniority's hegemonic regime, but also a critique of masculinity itself. Contradictory confessions become an intimate and vulnerable expression of masculinity as a paradigmatic structure with standards and ideals that are socially constructed and that are difficult to live up to. Humans are flesh and blood beings who experience life in practical ways and who also experience the limitations and constraints, as well as the possibilities, of hegemonic systems in very real and intimate ways. Hegemony exists, however agency also does. It becomes important to explore both hegemonic structures and agency as well as to ascertain what shapes them and what allows for their "negotiations" (Cole 1991). These "alliances and antagonisms" demonstrate that culture is dynamic and that gender also is. Within *Le Centre Technique*, where ideal images of masculinity and work ethics are articulated in implicit and explicit ways, the questioning of such criteria is not beyond reach and this effectively creates an alternative and malleable image of *les cols bleus* as human beings through the way they *feel*. The observation of contradictory confessions achieves this intimacy and depicts that navigation through the tranquil and choppy waters of Lachine's *bonne job* defies reductionist imaginings.

Chapter 7. Conclusion: The Inner Terrain of Culture

The move from a meritocratic system to a seniority driven workplace marked a dramatic structural shift for the young male *cols bleus* who perform the physically demanding grass cutting work in *Le Département des Espaces Verts*. Meritocracy and seniority, although worlds apart ideologically, are not polar opposites. The force of the confrontation between these two cultural worlds for the working-class, manual labourers who experience it cannot, however be underestimated. Sider has cogently observed that it is precisely in the collision of alliances and antagonisms within classes, not only between classes, that culture emerges (1986:8-9). This is the “inner terrain of culture” (Sider 1986:185) that is difficult to glimpse and this is due to the dynamic and shifting circumstances that have produced it.

I was fortunate to gain access to *La Ville* as a legitimate *col bleu* during this period of change and confusion. The structural shift to meritocracy from seniority, is not the only factor at work. *La Ville*'s history as a male preserve and as *une bonne job*, a “good job” that was and still is often sought out as an ideal as well as prestigious career, is also meaningful, as is Lachine's standing as Canada's oldest suburb, and quite possibly, oldest working-class neighborhood. It was beyond the scope of this thesis to conduct a historical analysis, as encouraged by Sider (1986), of union activity, ethnic/cultural power struggles, “toughness” (perhaps in a similar fashion attempted by Gutmann who explores the historical sources of Mexican machismo), the earlier administration of *Le Centre Technique* and what *La Ville* meant in the province's past. This said, the present study has explored a complex set of contradictions and paradoxes that mark the lives of *La Ville*'s *cols bleus* in the current era.

Meritocracy and seniority share ideals of masculinity. In the meritocratic lens, performance of excellence consists of “hard work”, discipline, and the celebration of manual labour as well as networking and “courting” figures of authority. Seniority, quite surprisingly, has inverted the “classic” ordering of the manual and mental labour dichotomy within a working-class environment. During the structural shift, encouraged by the enhanced union-based protection offered to all *cols bleus* and by a discourse that promoted the rationality of lackadaisical work ethics, a new masculine aesthetic based upon mental labour was developed. The evasion of labour and the establishing of control over the workweek are activities constructed as being masculine and rational, however, and paradoxically so, these evasive strategies are often more work than they are actually worth. Furthermore, and one of the cruxes of the thesis, not all the young *cols bleus* of the department subscribed to the new regime’s privileging of non-productivity. *Cols bleus* like Arsenault, who had begun to labour at a young age, continued to conduct their work, not only out of pride but also because their future and livelihood depended upon figures of authority such as *les contre-mâîtres* recognizing their level of productivity as an asset to the Public Works of Lachine.

The pragmatic necessity for the “hard workers” to demonstrate their capacity to labour effectively was beleaguered by seniority. “Good” or “hard” workers experienced an intense form of labour appropriation by individuals who were often their own childhood friends. Meritocratic workers were treated as anachronisms while their labour was taken for granted. This dynamic was well hidden by a built-in system of silence that applied a powerful taboo to those who might consider articulating their discontent and exposing the unfair treatment (ridicule and ostracizing they experience) at the hands of

their coworkers. This relationship possesses many similarities with the way in which the labour of female *cols bleus* is interpreted in the workplace but with an important exception: the quality of their labour output is not only taken for granted but it is encouraged, creating a double standard predicated upon the gendered division of labour. The hiring of women supplies the Department of Green Spaces with a consistently productive, reliable and meticulous crew while at the same time fulfilling part of the drive to diversify Montréal's public work force—visible minorities being left out in Lachine. The high quality labour that female *cols bleus* generate is thus used as a countermeasure for the more lackadaisical workers of the department. Meritocratic male workers can also be perceived as supplying a consistent level of “hard” manual labour. However, following Power's identification of the “patriarchal dividend”, the genders' degree of access and ideological claim to cultural resources—such as a bit of Truck Time on a balmy summer day—are significantly different (Power 2005:158-164).

Bourdieu, writing about doxa (common sense knowledge), structure and power, argues: “What is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying: the tradition is silent...customary law is content to enumerate specific applications of principles which remain implicit and unformulated...it is unquestioned, and no room is made for opinion” (1994:9). Charlesworth, writing of unskilled labourers in the deindustrialized British town of Rotherham, states that by resisting their stigma (the author advances that the articulation of their culture “offends the middle class”), they reproduce and maintain their patterns of perception that arise, not only from a position of powerlessness, but also from their exclusion from “new language forms that could transform their relation to culture” (2000:280). Both of these statements assume the

powerlessness of individuals within hegemonic structures. In the Department of Green Spaces the culture of silence is produced and disseminated in such a way that it represents a powerful deterrent to confronting the injustices felt from the unequal appropriation of physically demanding labour—rendering the injustices experienced all the more poignantly felt. *Stoolé* provides one method of criticizing and challenging this system. Becoming *un conducteur* is another strategy to move away from being *un whipeur*, as is leaving *Le Département des Espaces Verts* behind, in order to gain access to a department that is more favorably perceived such as *La Voirie* (roadwork). Leaving *La Ville* “for good” (*pour de bon*) represents an option that many *cols bleus* may talk about with relish and bravado yet it is not something that many can entertain seriously, given their lack of education and formal training. But walking out of *La Ville* is not unheard of. Becoming a *conducteur*, a prestigious job within the Department of Green Spaces, or changing departments are strategies for mobility, but most attempts at making the experience of *La Ville* more appealing now focus on seniority.

This said, certain legacies of meritocracy such as retaining a good relationship with one’s department head and *contre-maître* can still supply one with opportunities. Cooperation as a counterhegemonic effort among the grass cutters is also important. Cooperating in order to create a common defense against the unequal appropriation of labour, a phenomenon encouraged by the seniority regime and the work’s demanding physicality, produces a group effort. This cooperative effort does not put a stop to having one’s labour appropriated by a coworker, however it does at least produce a pocket of hope where efforts can be shared amongst the membership. Cooperation is both a strategy for survival (Sider 1986) and a tactic (Scheper-Hughes 1992) of operating within an

antagonistic environment. Cooperation creates moments of collective experience that are necessary and valued, but ultimately fragile. Thus, a hegemonic system's production of feelings of powerlessness is never total, agency cannot be absolute either.

Les cols bleus also use language as a dynamic stage of creativity. New styles of speech and expression emerge every year. The *raconteur* model is constructed around speech as a creative and energetically articulated delivery system of ideology. Some scholars of working-class settings have argued that language that is a constant maintains class "positions" (Charlesworth 2000). I have attempted to demonstrate that language in *La Ville* is far more than simply "constraining" and provides a mirror for all to reflect themselves in. The *raconteur* excels in *La Ville*'s performance of "common sense": the *raconteur* celebrates a potential knowledge system and applies a masculine value to it by excluding and devaluing other members and cultural worlds that are part of Québec's contemporary society. Seniority has made the *raconteur* a very viable cultural resource. The critique of the seniority system thus also contains a critique of the *raconteur* and the values he promotes. Masculine aesthetics are also dynamic. Although Herzfeld does not provide the Glendiots with a generous margin of possibility, defining their system of performance in decisive terms—effete or manly—he does observe that the "poetics of manhood" are *changing* as the shepherd's toughness and cigarette smoking are replaced with big bellies, big bank accounts and opulent homes of the business minded agriculturalists (1985:262-270 emphasis my own). During meritocracy, manual labour was prized and rewarded by figures of authority; the distribution of lucrative winter work and prestige positions were not a rare occurrence. This masculine aesthetic was replaced with seniority's complex phenomenon of manual/mental labour inversion and a host of

paradoxical elements. The *raconteur*'s meanings and ideology do not only represent an emblematic manifestation of seniority; it is a system of knowledge that is also shared by meritocratic workers. Through cooperation, instead of "male competitiveness" and reevaluations and questioning expressed by the *raconteur* and the culture of silence, *La Ville*'s socially constructed status as *une bonne job* undergoes critique. Cooperation replaces "formal" masculinity in favor of "practical" masculinity (Gutmann 1996:247). What is fascinating about cooperative efforts between young *col bleu* males within the grass cutting branch of the department is that an intimate space is created for a different kind of sub-narrative that questions *La Ville*. Cooperation prepares the groundwork for contradictory confessions, which are very intimate in nature. Contradictory confessions are representative of the inner terrain of culture, for they are part of a narrative that emerges between alliance and conflict *within* class. It is here perhaps that homogeneity among *les cols bleus* is disproven with the most force because contradictory confessions are manifested through *conflict*, fueled by dissimilar approaches to work ethics and culminating in a questioning of what *cols bleus* are supposed to be like and also what masculine discourse should sound like.

In 2008, my fifth year working *pour La Ville*, I am no longer part of the grass cutting crew. Its membership has changed as certain individuals have left *La Ville* or have acceded to a "better" position, vacancies filled by new arrivals or a reorganization of personnel. Upon my reintegration into the *col bleu* world, the MA nearing completion, a mountain that had once seemed to have withdrawn all footholds, it seemed as if the old workplace tensions between seniority and meritocracy had undergone change. The structural shift that had been initiated by the union's 2004 collective agreement, no longer

a novelty and point of fierce contention, seemed to have been replaced by a standardized “way to labour” among the young males of the department. Rather than consisting of evading work or of psychologically intimidating certain coworkers, the new way of labouring emphasizes and reflects the current reality of the young males who now more than ever are embedded within *La Ville*’s structure. Tensions seem to be lessened and a pragmatic attitude towards work has been taken up as many of my coworkers have become homeowners and fathers. Even some of the more reluctant males who waxed poetically about their freedom from debt have purchased new cars, the cheapest models easily setting them back twenty thousand dollars. Before these new notions were allowed to set and harden, by a twist of fate I was able to spend one afternoon with the new grass cutting crew. I discovered that things had not changed that much within the small crew of *les whipeurs*: some worked while others did not and those who did work found the going tough. Many say that a new round of collective bargaining is approaching for 2009 or 2010 and will undoubtedly bring more changes. Some fear that the status of permanency will be effaced for good, while others think that the union’s days are numbered and that the reign of the contractor is hovering on the horizon. It will be interesting to see what the future has in store and how *les cols bleus* of Lachine will adjust.

The Grey Cat: Paradoxes and Contradictions

There is a young man who reminds me very much of some of my coworkers. He lives in the block apartment across from mine and when the weather is warm I see him on his balcony. He often wears a white undershirt and exercises by doing fast bicep dumbbell curls *pour se faire des pipes* (to get big arms) while listening to *Fifty Cent*, an African American rapper whose popularity has become an international phenomenon.

The young man wears a baseball cap and a golden chain that sparkles around his neck as he works his arms. He also has a grey cat. One day, returning from work, I glanced up at his balcony and there he was exercising feverishly. He completed his routine and lay down the weights at his feet. His cat was sitting on a white plastic patio chair. The young man looked at the cat, the music still playing loudly, and gently picked it up, hugging it to his chest like a parent might hold an infant. With *Fifty Cent* articulating a discourse of manliness as skillfully as any *raconteur* had in *Le Centre Technique*, the young man kissed the cat on its head several times and then carefully let it down. His chain flashed in the sun and the grey furred cat seemed content in this “tough little town”. I watched them in silence, smiled and walked away.

Epilogue

Once you've looked at a thing, you ought to remember it forever...Don't force your intelligence...it's reason that gums everything up...Give your instinct a chance...Once it gets a good look the game is won...It'll never deceive you...

—“Death on the Installment Plan”, Louis-Ferdinand Céline

In his introduction to *It's a Working Man's Town: Male Working-Class Culture in Northwestern Ontario* (1991), Thomas Dunk shares a confession which I have come to view as a revolutionary insight into being a worker as well as an intellectual and why it becomes, for me at least, a difficult task to reduce the idea of class to a set of rigid boundaries (Sider 1986; Gutmann 1996). Dunk situates himself as a worker belonging to a middle-class working family. As a student in anthropology the author always felt left out of the collective readership because he felt that the literature was aimed at a particular audience with whom he had very little in common with: “I wondered just who the “us” was, never mind who the “them” might be” (1991:15). Dunk states that he was not quite sure why he decided to enter university, however the move marked an incomplete

transition between two vastly opposing worlds: on one hand, the subculture of the *Boys* (his childhood friends and informants) where “intellectualism” is devalued and getting a “good job” is the rational choice; and, on the other hand, that of the generally bourgeois environment of university (1991:14-15). Dunk explains that the Boys’ quick repartee and verbal flourish was beyond him: he lacked the skills of the *raconteur* and they were aware of this deficiency. It did not help things that he also did not feel at ease within an academic milieu (*Ibid*). In addition, his introduction to the academic milieu is one that displays the ambiguity he felt: he took night courses out of boredom and studying anthropology was not part of a planned career trajectory. The researcher illustrates that he existed between two worlds: he had been a “working man” however he had not mastered their cultural lore, even though he himself hailed from a middle class working family, while the move to undergraduate studies is characterized by a half hazard impetus. Because of his inability to fit in with an academic cohort that shared values different from the ones he was accustomed to, he felt marginal. It is precisely this marginality that generated his interest in the subject of his ethnography (1991:15).

Dunk’s candidness concerning his marginality and interest of topic was very important for the development of my own interests. The author’s own position struck me as being uncertain and un-powerful, the absolute opposite impression that many anthropologists convey in their writing. I suggest that the transitory and the ambiguous may produce new forms of sensitivity and critical analysis. To have intimately experienced manual labour as well as mental labour, even though this experience may have been expressed through an incomplete “ideological transition” during the early stages of my MA, is ultimately advantageous since different questions can be asked and

new cultural terrains explored leading to unique anthropological contributions. I am proud of what I have been able to achieve as “an anthropologist at home.”

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