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Between Men: A First-Person Documentary Video

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BETWEEN MEN: A FIRST PERSON DOCUMENTARY VIDEO

A Thesis Presented

by

THOMAS PRUTISTO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2014

Department of Art, Architecture, and Art History

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DEDICATION

To my spouse, Kim, who gave me this time to find myself (I hope to do the same for her!) and to my family for their support, encouragement and belief in me. Without them, I may not have believed in myself.

Also, to Steve and Larry, whose memory I will carry with me, and to my father, Donald Prutisto, for his gift of gentleness—evidence of him is all over this work.

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ABSTRACT

BETWEEN MEN: A FIRST PERSON DOCUMENTARY VIDEO

May 2014

THOMAS C. PRUTISTO, B.S., ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Directed by: Professor Susan E. Jahoda

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The achievement of happiness requires not the... satisfaction of our needs... but the examination and transformation of those needs.

—Stanley Cavell

The subject of *Between Men* is my brethren, my gender, which I have unknowingly studied throughout my life. I came to this project through a simple succession of connecting events; a need to reexamine personal family history, economic loss and insecurity leading me, surprisingly, back to myself, as the place this work begins. Central to my sense of self as a white male is an understanding that I can only know myself through shared experiences with other men. My hope is that as a man documenting and asking other men questions, which are generally not discussed, I have started a process of deep engagement between men that transcends fears about homosociality.

I have come to understand the act of making and viewing a *documentary* as a kind of “social practice” in which I engage men in conversations about a subject matter, *masculinity*, that is seldom spoken. The practice of directly engaging men with this subject serves to undermine traditional patriarchal manhood and allows men to define masculinity on their own terms. With each conversation a new opportunity arises for definition or re-definition, and in this manner, men become more attuned to the needs of other men. It is the directness of the task, the asking

and telling, which provides for me a “practice” involving both myself and other men in conversations about the meaning of manhood. I see this as an important *collaboration* built on the ethical responsibility of men to openly discuss their beliefs and experiences surrounding masculinity.

Adopting a common public site of interaction, in this case a barbershop, was a necessary element of this work, as these conversations must be witnessed by other men, even though they are not necessarily directly engaged. I believe the very visibility of men’s social interactions should be broadened beyond the confining patriarchal structure that naturalizes silence between men. Unpacking the burden of these silences in public space through shared encounters is a central underpinning of this project. At the same time, being a mostly male community, the barbershop is also a site that reinforces male stereotypes. This makes for the possibility of tension within the established structure of masculinity even in the act of re-making of it.

As the title, *Between Men*, suggests, we men have been and continue a negotiation of *masculinity*. Men are often positioned between a persistent patriarchy and unfamiliar social territory, struggling to adapt to changes in what it means to be a man today. In this work, I reflect on my personal history and ask men to consider their masculine roles. As a young man, I was expected to learn through *observing* the ways of men rather than through thoughtful instruction. I believe my experience, in this respect, to be a fairly typical white western male practice. Though I had a caring and expressive role model in my father, it was with relative uncertainty that I passed from adolescence to adulthood using what I had witnessed. However, less fortunate young men whose male role models more

strictly adhered to patriarchal norms may be subject to the influences of a brutal structure of male silence.

The dilemma for men is, I believe, that the persistence of stereotypes of what constitutes masculinity are difficult to shed and in conflict with the realities of a changing work and home life. When confronted with the strictness of emotional detachment and a male value system based on competitiveness, men may find themselves challenged, not only by other men but also by their inability to adapt to new ways of being masculine.

In this video work, *Between Men*, I use the power of *first person* narrative and the documentary genre to begin critical conversations with men. The result, I hope, is a speculative, personal, essayistic documentary. Ultimately, I would like the work to facilitate dialogue amongst and between men.

CHAPTER 2

WHY MEN?

I recently met someone whose place in life, literally, has depended on photographs. Connie, whose memory was nearly lost in an auto accident in 1991, has used photographs to reconstruct and piece together her past. She has shared with me boxes, bags and albums full of photographs, many with endlessly repetitive images. In this respect she is not unlike many photography enthusiasts, although with a much more tangible reason for her obsession as her health concerns persist. While the vast majority of these images are of her children, there are a few from her youth, a life before the wheelchair and the speech problem. It would not be unreasonable to imagine that photography has been essential to Connie's recovery and has become an extension of what she now is.

Our friendship began when Connie brought me a photograph of a curly blonde haired girl straight out of the 1980's. The photographic style, color and character of the image were familiar to me through my knowledge of the medium and despite our ten-year difference in age. There was no resemblance that I could associate with and I did not make the connection until our conversation became personal. She was a high school cheerleader, pretty and as she mentioned to me more than once, had plenty of guys "hitting" on her. The familiarity, which I had been sensing since seeing the photo, became clear when Connie told me she was from Ticonderoga, New York. Although more than a 3-hour drive from my home in Binghamton, New York, the upstate moniker, familiar landscape and declining

economy all make for a reasonable assumption of certain commonalities.

Conversations ensued about life in Upstate New York, our homes and we began connecting to a place, time and culture. As I got to know Connie, she shared with me much about her life, the accident, family relationships, and many personal details. Our friendship grew and as it did, I began to relate Connie's experiences to those of my sisters. It was easy for me to identify the stories of women's dependency, divorce and single motherhood having watched two of my siblings affected similarly. I began to hypothesize the reasons for the similarity in their stories: are they all byproducts of a failed educational system, are there some similar values being shared in upstate New York, is it a lack of parenting skills or a set of societal norms for women? I could not answer these questions so instead turned to the missing men in their lives. Where were they, what happened to them, why are they not involved and how could they have walked away from their children? Learning of the common stories between Connie and my sisters prompted me to question my ways of being a man and why I look at other men as somehow different from myself? I began to question what masculinity has meant to me, leading me to want to know more about the ways of other men.

CHAPTER 3

A HISTORY OF MEN

Despite being a man, I cannot admit to a great kinship of knowledge with the male gender. On the contrary, I would have to say that in my life as a man, I have experienced a solitary existence. That is, I have never felt a part of an assemblage, group or cohort, but rather I have felt at a distance and separate from other men. While my father was very affectionate, my brothers were considerably older and not present, and I spent most home time amongst women: two sisters, mother and grandmother. This experience certainly had a profound effect on my attitude, and possibly, my understanding of the male gender. As for home life, I was Catholic raised with a mother at home, a fairly strict household, yet plenty of exposure to other males at public schools. Ours was not the most affluent of neighborhoods but it gave me plenty of opportunity to interact with boys and men. In hindsight, I would describe my relations with men as having an overall lack of camaraderie and certainly no deeper bond except for one or two instances. Friendships would come and go, sometimes lasting several years, none lasting to this day. Time, distance, age and death have seen to that. I've often wondered why? Is the simple truth that this is the nature of men's relationships or did I not have the skills to make, find or sustain a *deep* friendship? Was I unable to have intimate friendships because of a deeply rooted suspicion I had about men?

If I were to consider my reasons for finding men suspect, I would have only to look at my youth in Binghamton, New York and the men I knew and met. My

father worked in retail sales: farm equipment, tractors and fencing. He has told me of a boom time in the late 60's and early 70's when families were buying homes and fixing up lawns. He backed out of a secure management position to take a chance earning a higher income selling fences. These were good times for him: independence at work, a solid income for his family and recognition for something he did well. By most standards this was quite an achievement for a guy from Carbondale, Pennsylvania, without a high school education. My older brothers were athletic, stylish and popular, however, being seven and nine years older than I meant that they were out of the house much of the time with jobs, friends and interests. This left me at home with my sisters, who were much more under the control of my parents. In our home it seems that my sisters social lives were constantly questioned while my brothers were given a much longer reach to find their way in the world. My parents, second-generation immigrants, believed men go into the world and women stay at home. My sisters fought these restrictions and the ensuing struggles impacted everyone in the home. Their pitched battles around clothes, curfews and friendships, particularly with young men, were severe enough that I stayed out of sight but not out of range of the emotion that poured from both sides. As a young boy, I remember feeling caught between the demands of my parents and concern for my sisters.

My sisters had their boyfriends who would occasionally make their way into the house. Although I cannot recall faces or names, I remember their presence: quiet, stiff and uncertain. To me they were not just strangers unfamiliar with our family; they were outsiders. They brought with them different language, attitudes

and styles about a range of concerns that I knew nothing of. I was both fascinated and frightened by these young men whose newness was exciting and yet somehow presented a threat. Perhaps it was their difference that was alluring yet, as they had been a source for some of the sister-parent arguments, they were also linked to the powerful emotions that had been on display. They were always pensive when they visited, perhaps feeling a tension with my parents. I would catch glimpses of their personalities when my parents left the room and noticed a distinct reserve when they returned. The silencing of their voices was an indication to me of an inner motive, which these young men did not want to reveal. I have wondered whether it was their desire for my sisters or a desire to hide their own emotions.

The men my sisters would marry shortly after high school had plans for military service and physical labor as their professions. The demands of spousal separation for long periods of time and the drain of physical labor, combined with a set of patriarchal family values where women stay home with children, would eventually doom their marriages. I believe these men were caught between traditional masculine roles and changing expectations for women. Regardless of the reasons for divorce, these men chose to walk out on their families as if they had no obligation to them. This is angering to me as a brother to my sisters, but also puzzling as a man who does not feel a sense of privilege in my masculinity. It was not until much later, after both my sisters had divorced their husbands and raised children as single mothers, that I would reflect on the actions of these men. I imagine they must have faced the fear of failure, a fate that can be catastrophic in patriarchal men, yet their masculine ideals gave them the capacity to walk away. To

behave as such is indication of the power men hold within this structure and possibly also of their inability to *re-create* a new personal interpretation of masculinity that my sisters needed of them. Now, when I look at their sons, my nephews, as they struggle with their self-identities, I see how much they needed their fathers. Yet, I cannot admit that I feel these men should have been more involved in the raising of their children; as I consider the men that they are, I am reluctant to accept this.

As a boy in Binghamton, the success stories were there in front of me: hard working immigrant buys first home, the first child to go to college in the family, returning to fulfill the role of prodigal son. The model was there for all to see and in fact my family shared in much of this *American Dream*. Yet built into men's social contract is competitiveness, where the ethics of hard work and determination win at all costs and survival of the fittest were the rules. As my primary role model, my father participated in this social contract trying to secure his family's future. Somehow he was able to navigate these demands and find a balance with his masculinity. Knowing his role and being able to fulfill it was no doubt what enabled him to be successful. When I asked him about his memories as a young boy, he told me stories of growing up with his sisters, the only boy in the family. He talked about liking to dance and the other boys calling him a sissy because of it. Parallels with my own incidents of bullying aside, I am most shocked by the enduring constancy of the ritual homophobia. If I were to attribute my suspicions of men to their treatment of women, I must also include how men treat other men.

In the Binghamton of today, block after block of IBM factories sit idle, employment having moved overseas, victim to global competition, stock markets replacing jobs as income generators and a squeezing of the labor market. While my brothers and I, with our college educations, found some security, my sisters' men had more unreliable paths. Without some of the factors and motivations for advancement, such as higher education and the promise of work, these men languished doing physical labor. When that employment dried up, much of their masculinity was threatened. Would continued prosperity have saved these men's marriages to my sisters, or could they not adapt to changing norms? In my nephews, their sons, the outlook is gloomy having inherited a poor economy with few prospects for the future. Today, when I visit Binghamton, I find myself caught between feelings of tragedy and outrage.

In *Between Men*, I revisit several personal episodes of bullying to illustrate the impact of such events on young men. Memories of these incidents, even now in this writing, are painful, but to a young boy trying to understand the world of men they are equally confusing. Long after they occurred, questions continue to circle my mind: what made this person act this way, what did I do to provoke this act? To this day I want to know the reason for the attack outside my elementary school. In a single, seemingly random moment I was introduced to male violence and coercion. The messages I was being given, namely, do as you were told, fear authority and the punishments that would be enforced, began to create a barrier for me in my relationships with men. While I consider the influences of my mother and sisters as formative, a female upbringing alone does not fully explain my distrust of men.

Rather I believe it is the questions about men that I have never been able to answer, or I should say, that men do not answer. In this silence, there is violence and it is the silence, most of all, which I do not understand.

CHAPTER 4

BECOMING MEN

There is much research and theory about how men acquire their knowledge of masculinity. The process of interviewing men confirmed for me that men essentially gain their knowledge of masculinity through observation in an inter-social network with other men. We do not have conversations or discuss masculinity in the locker room, over dinner, in casual or formal ways. For men the norm is not to speak of masculinity but to observe other men's practice of it. Our learning; therefore, is dependent on the individuals we associate with and our environment. This unspoken communication takes place in the everyday interactions boys and men have with each other. It is a point of inquiry in *Between Men* that we make this communication visible and audible. I contend that the invisible rules of masculinity be brought out of hiding and made public for the purpose of aiding men in their transitions to new understandings of masculinity.

Rarely have I heard men tell stories or speak openly of masculine experiences other than to attempt to bolster a socially acceptable notion of their ideal man. Yet, I believe the desire to hear men speak about these issues is unfulfilled. As a young man, I did not hear men speak about the conflicts they experienced around questions of family, work, morality and justice. Therefore, most boys would not dare ask how to be friends with another boy, or question how to show affection for another boy. If they did, a male authority would deflect these

requests, thereby training youth not to express their real feelings. Psychologist William Pollack, in the introduction to *Real Boys Voices*, states that “our nation is home to millions of boys who feel they are navigating life alone – and who cast out to sea in separate lifeboats, and feel they are drowning in isolation, depression, loneliness and despair” (xviv).

At the center of this silent network is homophobia, which is a constant threat not only to gay men but to straight men as well, according to Pollack. Pressure to play down your friendliness for another male leads not only to a silencing of men’s voices, but an inability for men to articulate their feelings. As a boy I remember developing a kind of a shifting gaze. I would watch other boys or men, but always be ready to look away rather than be seen observing. As a man I remain curious about other men and have spent considerable time observing men individually and in social and family groups. It is quite common for a man to be upset, defensive and considerably outraged to find another man looking at him. The outrage seems to be both a homophobic reaction and at the same time an acknowledgement of a frustrated need to communicate. Reaction to the former is often verbal and sometimes forceful, while the latter is usually silent. It is this inability to overcome silence and reveal ourselves that is of central importance in *Between Men*.

According to the philosopher and art critic Jan Verwoert, this unspoken game among men, a coded system that we practice, uses an invisible language. In a lecture titled, *Breaking The Chain: Thoughts on Trauma and Transference*, Verwoert makes a case for the need to break the cycle of “corruption” that are the codes of behavior. The codes he describes are a type of “sight of hand” that are practiced silently and

act to reinforce their message of silence. These virtually invisible events act to continually shift responsibility away from the individual, allowing the actor to avoid blame for their actions. As this invisible hand is used to coerce each new generation of men in a perpetual cycle, we can understand Verwoert's designation of the term *cycle of corruption*. I take Verwoert's speculation a step further in my pursuit of knowing men when I identify this silent language as the language men use in their communications with each other. In particular, I am concerned with how men pass this knowledge to each other, through a rigorous enforcement of the rules of manhood, which includes the threat of ostracism from society, thereby creating the rules of homosociality¹ between men. I recognize this language, having felt the pressure to conform to masculine standards in social and work environments. I was taught the silent code of behavior and at the same time being warned by the men in my life of the devastating limitations of being gay.

Extreme homophobia places fathers, brothers, sons, friends and male relatives in fear for their social lives. For me the enforcement sometimes came in subtle images of other men, such as the successful and prosperous men of my youth. Often the message was indiscriminately passed between boys (men) at home, in schools and social groups. It was usually veiled by seductive labels—strength, intelligence, self-reliance and confidence—yet each commingling in a silent voice. At other times my initiation came from direct confrontation with other men as we were taught and expected to compete with one another. This, in turn, made every

¹ "Homosocial" is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with "homosexual," and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from "homosexual". In fact, it is applied to such activities as "male bonding," which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality.' Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. Introduction.

man a potential threat or a competitor for a job, for the affections of another, for what we desired. In this I see the bully with his goals of intimidation and coercion, a vivid example usually handed out in painful personal humiliation. It is this environment, where men must carefully maneuver, that creates in me a suspicion of men's motives. I believe this same suspicion must be present in the way other men view me.

CHAPTER 5

CINE-MEMOIR

...memoir was undertaken not just as another kind of artistic expression, ... but also as an act of self-completion.

The writer discovers that fashioning a narrative from memory can be an occasion of emotional return, creating a connection that was perhaps missing in the experience itself. It can be restorative, compensatory in the deepest way.

Sven Birkerts, *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again*. (88-89)

It is unsurprising to me that I would choose photographic and filmic images as the medium through which I would both explore and express my personal arc. The camera for much of my life has been a partner in both allowing me to observe the world and in preserving memory. I find a source for these fascinations in Susan Sontag's claim of photography's "*elegiac*" nature, which alludes to memory as loss, "all photographs testify to time's relentless melt"(15). Initially my inspiration came from the old world photographs of my immigrant grandparents. Formal studio portraits in traditional poses, highly retouched, sometimes colorized, offered the only glimpse of connection that I had with a past so often talked about and relied on within my family. In my mind, the coalescing of those images as family archive and

my imaginative interpretation of them must have driven me to investigate photography's path.

My beginnings in photography at the age of 14 were purely focused on recording visual experience. The wonder of light, the solitary process of spontaneous decisions, and the often-surprising results were joyous for a young teenage boy. There was no consideration of meaning or intent; photography was purely about reaction. I received recognition and encouragement, which ensured my continuation and set me upon a path. If I could keep to this path, find a way to keep photography, which, in my world meant if I could earn a living at it, I felt I was sure to have a fulfilling life. This has been mostly true for the past 38 years, yet it has taken the shock of age and the reality of the times we are living in for me to critically examine the photographic image.

With the recognition that *documentary* practices are an integral part of my experience with a camera, I have been seeking new vocabulary to articulate the complexity of this approach. I began by researching film and video's rich history. Through a long list of pioneering artists such as Fredrick Wiseman, Albert and David Maysles, Su Friedrich, Alan Berliner, Ross McElwee, Jim McBride, Marlon Riggs, Charles Burnett, Harun Farocki, Chris Marker, Errol Morris, Werner Herzog and Abraham Ravett, I began seeking and situating my conception of *Between Men*.

To begin, Su Friedrich's *The Ties That Bind* (1984) and *Sink or Swim* (1990) are important connecting points. They explore issues of family; concerns that are ongoing in my life and work. Among the questions that emerge from Friedrich's

work are: Can we gain new knowledge through the process of re-viewing and cross-examining images from the past? And are there histories among the documents, which somehow help as we traverse our futures?

Another body of work that informs *Between Men* is that of Alan Berliner, including *Family Album* (1986), *Intimate Stranger* (1991), *Nobody's Business* (1996), and *The Sweetest Sound* (2001). In a conversation about his work, Berliner describes it in this way: "I'd say that all of my films and installations are highly edited constructions, trying to re-imagine and re-frame our relationships to things we often take for granted" (20). The process of searching through family photographs, films, letters and recorded interviews shows not only a deep understanding of the material Berliner is working with, but also his willingness to re-interpret and re-mix this history. I have come to understand that the re-editing of memory is an active part of human experience, the process of reviewing and remembering pieces of memory. These practices lend insight to the work, not just through a strict set of cinema verite rules such as do not disturb the subject, but also from a more humanistic interchange of personal information. As Berliner immerses deeply in his materials, what eventually emerges has been called *personal non-fiction* and *cine-essays*. It is this process that creates a connection with the viewer. Viewing both Friedrich and Berliner's works, along with other personal pieces, I began to discover the significance of my voice in between men.

In this respect, the work of Ross McElwee has been a crucial influence. When I first saw McElwee's, *Sherman's March* (1986), I found the dialogue to be self absorbed and narcissistic. He had clearly imposed himself via camera, voice and

image, into most every scene, creating a very personal narrative. McElwee's physical voice is a technique he uses in "autobiographical non-fiction films," where he weaves back and forth between personal experience and documentation of what he sees (272). To McElwee, the presence of the camera/filmmaker in the room needed to be recognized along with his thoughts and subjective interpretation: "For me, there needed to be a way in which the objectifying presence of the camera could be melded with the subjective perspective of the filmmaker who held the camera. The "auto" behind the autobiography needed to be fleshed out. It needed to come out of hiding" (248). Seeing this seemingly simplistic approach afforded me the courage to speak of my experience in front of rather than solely behind the camera.

The style of filmmaking that McElwee is recognized for might be called a cinema of one. As cameraman, sound recorder, editor, writer and narrator, the singular filmmaker has complete control yet must learn how to juggle these many responsibilities. I quickly found out that this was both a blessing and a curse during one of my first attempts at filming and recording sound. Just as the camera requires attention to details of light, framing and focus, additional responsiveness must be paid to sound's own intricacies, namely that our ears do not hear what a microphone does. Many times during shooting, I would mistakenly forget to correct the placement of a microphone, as the ambient sound would change, leaving the recording of a voice inaudible or requiring extensive correction. McElwee, in his usual light and humorous way, would acknowledge errors such as this and guide the viewer over the scene using his own thoughts. Sometimes those thoughts would be a reflection of how he was experiencing the scene at the moment of shooting, while

others would be more introspective. I found this technique to be very effective at shifting the viewer from a state of *viewing a film* into one of a more subtle understanding of the subject.

CHAPTER 6

IN THE BARBER'S CHAIR

The idea for *Between Men* began after several years of patronizing my local barbershop. I had mostly considered my hair best presented by a *salon* cut, but as my hairline receded and I started growing a ponytail, I shifted to a barbershop. Given the intimacy of the act of hair cutting and my personal acknowledgement of the role appearance plays in how I think of myself, it was important for me to find a barber who I was comfortable with. That comfort did not come quickly nor did my recognition of this place as a site for a project.

In the framed pictures of athletes, sounds of men talking and pungent smells of hair tonic, this particular barbershop reminded me of my youthful trips to the barber with my father. These memories certainly influenced my return as I also started to see other men I knew or recognized and wondered what we might have in common. As my personal comfort level increased, I began observing how other men seemed to experience this barbershop. There was the usual casual talk of work, weather and sports; however, I also sensed the recognition in each of us of a simple necessity to take care of ourselves. Sometimes a haircut is a practical task and at other times a deliberate act of drawing attention to ourselves. It is a common act, but uncomplicated without the usual competition and comparison we often face

in our daily pursuits. Sitting there surrounded by the red and white striped cape, we all are reduced to a simple human need.

While I stared into the mirrors, I saw not only a stripping away of clothing, but of career and social status. In a way the helplessness of the barber's chair may seem contrary to what I was seeking, yet it may also be this very fact that accounts for men's willingness to answer my questions. This vulnerability suggests the possibility for this to be a site where men trust each other. I believe it is possible that in a place where we purposefully "make" and "re-make" the visual side of our masculinity, men have an opportunity for individualism beyond the prescribed homosocial norms. Yes, I am speaking of hair, but with the many social rules I have had to conform to, such as work place dress codes and locker room trash talk, a small bit of individuality can be very welcome. I began to see the barbershop as a kind of neutral ground where we men might let go of our grip on those masculine rules for a time. Whether young or old, working or unemployed, doctor, professor or carpenter, when each of us is in the barber's chair, there is a link to a shared experience. In the mirrors I recognized my desire for openness with other men, and a sense that others might feel the same.

Initially, I asked my barber if he minded my shooting some video while he gave me a haircut. I told him that I liked to make documentaries and was interested in talking to men in the barber's chair. I felt that the footage was interesting enough to continue and I came back for more experimental shooting. As projects go, there was miscue after miscue, with few initial successes and much revising of methods

and questions. As I watched and edited the weekly footage, it became clear that men of about my own age had the easiest time speaking with me and were the most willing participants. Given my goal to produce a work about men, the seldom-discussed topic of masculinity presented a challenge in finding the appropriate method of approaching men. The moniker of *documentary* alone certainly produced a reaction among men, some choosing not to participate and others preferring only to listen and not offering commentary.

Like Ross McElwee, I chose to speak from behind the camera, to relay my personal story, explaining my reasons for the inquiry and giving men an opportunity to share their own thoughts. I was also drawn to the McElwee presence in his films; the subtle ways he moved through his scenes with familiarity and a sense of personal knowledge. It became important for me to be perceived by the men in the barbershop as an insider, one of them, rather than a stranger asking for their time. The use of a video camera also presented challenges in this public environment where very personal needs are on display. I was concerned with interfering in the hair cutting activity, and the camera's ability to create an instant staged performance, not to mention the obvious distaste some men might have for images of themselves in the less than flattering position of needing a haircut.

McElwee's very human, autobiographical films were key to my developing the strategy behind my questions for men. Namely, by beginning a conversation with the reasons I was there and with my personal story, I tried to create a shared atmosphere with another man. Although talking about myself does not come easily to me, the resulting conversations were beneficial to this project and to me

personally. Other challenges persisted, such as maneuvering a camera through this sometimes hectic environment and an often cacophony of sound, yet I found myself adapting to the technical and social tasks of being in this space with other men. Eventually, I learned to position myself tangentially to the barber's chair, allowing the patron access to himself in the mirror, while the barber and I made our way around the tasks at hand. As the conversations continued, one of us would comment on the choreography we seemed to be creating, with the punch line being, "a dance, yes...but who is leading?"

My initial attempts to talk to men were awkward and clumsy. I introduced myself as they entered the barbershop, but had little success as the next available barber quickly took them to an awaiting chair. It was not until I decided to occupy an actual barber's chair that my relationship to the clients would change. Asking if I could sit in an unused chair while I waited for the barber's next client, I discovered the activity I was looking for with me in the middle of it. I surmise that for a client coming into the shop, it may have been unclear whether I was a barber or another client. I now realize that with this simple idea, I placed myself, literally, *between men*. My conversation would intervene between the usual chatter of barber and client. Others, including the barbers, would sometimes join in. I also noted men in adjacent chairs listening to the conversations. From this vantage point, with a pivot of the chair, I could face a client on either side or through the mirrors in front or behind me, observe and interact with the activities all around. At this time I believe I became a bona fide insider, embedded in a ritual of personal care.

During one of my editing sessions, I began to notice something happening within the image frame that I was not aware of at the time of shooting. I found myself strangely positioned in odd parts of the frame, a result of the many mirrors in the space. I was not conscious of placing myself in those locations; my habit had been to concentrate on the conversation and to record the individual's expression. These were happy accidents that to me were visually exciting. The next week I started looking for and placing the camera at angles to take advantage of the mirrors. As mirrors make a room feel larger, I perceived these visuals as an expansion of knowing, of seeing and revealing in a new way. The resulting footage was a mixture of frames within frames, each being reversed, flipped left to right, sometimes multiplied by opposite mirrors. At times I could get lost in the myriad imagery, as the continued reflections were a puzzle. After a time I began to see the mirrors as other men in the room, watching and listening as a third party in my conversations.

Inevitably I would turn back to the mirror and see myself anew, changed by the barber's scissors. As I contemplated the differences, it became obvious that I could not hide the aging process by changing the style of my hair. There was nothing I could say to the barber that would reverse that process. In *Between Men*, I speculate there is rareness in this time in front of a mirror, which can act as a mechanism for opening a dialogue with men.

CHAPTER 7

RE-DISCOVERY (SUMMATION)

Some men, like my father, have the ability to strike up a conversation with another man. I, however, have had to work hard at this and have discovered that finding something in common is important. It seemed most logical to start with the reason they were at the barbershop: hair. How often do you come in? Do you get the same cut every time or do you change it up? This was a simple enough conversation to break the ice before I told them about the documentary. If this opening conversation went well, there was a good chance they would try to answer my subsequent questions about masculinity. This negotiation was most essential to the creation of dialogue and the establishment of trust. I needed to reestablish my trust in men and through the process of *asking and telling*, i.e. the documentary, I found a way to negotiate. I wanted to hear from and believe these men; I wanted them to trust me, as I wanted to trust them. Though I never asked directly, in *Between Men* I wanted to know: how does a man who does not identify with the gendered traditions under which he was raised cope with his detached, competitive brethren? How does a man who identifies himself as an emotional, caring individual talk to men who are not interested in a non-sexual intimate relationship with other men?

The general welcome I experienced by men in the barbershop indicated to me a desire to tell their stories. Without conversations about what it means to be a

man now, men will be unable to adapt to changing social norms. I believe this was the circumstance for my former brothers-in-law as they tried to negotiate masculinity's fluctuating conceptions. Did I suspect them from the start of being disingenuous men, withholding their true feelings and hiding behind their masculine silences? Perhaps. What I did not understand at that time was that most of the men I would meet also carry that silence in their relations with each other.

While my family has remained mostly in Binghamton, N.Y., I left long ago, not seeing my future in that place. As my father and mother have aged, my single divorced sisters have assumed increasing responsibility for them in addition to their own children and their children's children. This is a situation that is considered by all sides to be fraught with powerfully mixed emotions: responsibility, contempt and anger. My brothers, while involved with my parents' situation, are somewhat detached, busy with traditional male gender roles within their own nuclear families. Leaving Binghamton was certainly an indication of my desire for something other than what was offered, and it is difficult returning to a place that I feel was not responsive to the kind of flexible masculinity I desired.

In this work, I am making a case for what sociologist Michael Kimmel calls "make masculinity visible" (9). He states, "Without confronting homophobia, that fear that other men will see us as gay, masculinity becomes a relentless test. Always up for grabs, always to be proven, always having to be demonstrated." Although my barbershop conversations were not explicitly about homophobia, our gender talk provided an unexpected opportunity for men to voice their concerns about

masculinity. In that act of talking there is *naming*, which is the visibility men need to claim their masculine identity.

The conversations chosen for inclusion in *Between Men* reflect an effort to look at masculinity across age and socio-economic status. They reveal not only a range of conceptualizations of masculinity, but perhaps also similarities in our desires for a masculinity that is more flexible. The men I spoke with would foremost like the ability to decide their own masculinity, whether that is *macho*, *emotional*, or *other*. There was also a very clear desire to be involved with their families as a nurturing and supportive presence. I also heard a longing for respect from other men and fair treatment in and out of the work place. There were many conversations about the pressure of being a provider, and the effects of unemployment on a family were well understood across the range of people I spoke with. While there was dissent from the norm, there was also acquiescence to *the way things are*, some showing fatigue in their struggles for individuality. I think of the term “*becoming men*,” used as a previous chapter heading, as a reflection of the transitory state of masculinity. These conversations are evidence that masculinity has never been fixed as the stereotype implies, instead always a negotiation of social institutions and historical contexts.

I interpret my barbershop conversations as an acknowledgement of a long dormant need for a deeper commitment between men, a caring about and caring for one another from the very young to the very old. The pressure of the traditional male economic role model, as it has been socialized into men, is in conflict with the image of a *self-made-man* in this increasingly downward-driven economy. From my

talks with men, I heard this struggle and their attempts to find their own balance.

Some are carving out their own masculine paths, while others are still clinging to the traditional model. There were gay men who spoke of newfound freedom in marriage laws, and heterosexual men my own age unable to find a comfortable voice within the dominant male model. One man spoke of his happiness at discovering the role of *homemaker*, while others have assumed more responsibility for childcare. The range extended from primary income *breadwinning* males to young men creating new definitions such as *metro-sexual*. The predefined masculine role, complete with emotional and psychological do's and don'ts, places a mounting burden on men as the environment for maintaining those roles erodes from under us. Whether or not those roles were ever actually accepted or instituted by men is a claim I cannot make. I find it more likely that within western culture, we are forced to accept the prevailing sentiment of masculinity (the father who is only involved in his work or the typically sexist male) as we attempt to create our own understandings. As Bird says, "Even in a community where notions of the 'new man' are common and where anti-sexist attitudes are often expected, hegemonic patterns of masculinity prevail. One whose masculinity conceptualization is non-hegemonic still understands himself as 'not what real' men are supposed to be" (127). The persistence of these stereotypes is evidence of the power they hold in the creation of male gender identities.

When I first thought of the idea of doing a documentary in a barbershop, I was uncertain of the kind of response I would get from men. (This fact alone is indicative of the precarious position I find myself in as I negotiate the world of men.)

I thought it possible that this environment could be considered a private space for men and they might not want to surrender it. I was unsure how they would react to a camera pointing at them or a microphone recording their every word. Would they feel like I sometimes did sitting in that chair, vulnerable and self-conscious? My hope was they would enjoy talking about their experiences and many did, though there was also rejection and sideways looks. Yet I was surprised overall at the willingness of most men to participate. This suggests a reflexive awareness of masculinity and sensitivity to its shifting contemporary meanings. As one man commented to me, "I don't really know what masculinity means in America right now," expressing a concern that men cannot talk about issues such as vanity in western masculine culture. I understand this statement having spent several years in China, where it is common to see teenage boys holding hands or arm and arm, displaying affection for one another. At first I too found this male-to-male intimacy peculiar, but at the same time I was envious of the closeness. I recognize in this reaction my western male gender ideology training and its capacity to corrupt. There is no mistaking the hegemony, which thrives within the social structure of western white men. Sociologist Sharon Bird finds a hegemonic masculinity structure encompassing even those who consider themselves outside its influence and are non-the-less punished when they fail to bend to its demands (122). Eventually the relentlessness of this act leads to a lasting categorization such as the effeminate *gay* man.

I feel that it is important to recognize that this project takes place in Amherst, Massachusetts, a self-proclaimed left-leaning community of well-educated,

somewhat diverse people. What this work did not intentionally explore is the context of *class* within masculinity. Yet in *Between Men* there are hints of class influence, as in the conversation of an academic who spoke of transition in this way; “I quit a perfectly good fulltime job to come here and be a house husband... but we were very lucky it happened when it did because in this most recent economy it would have been impossible to pull it off.” Similarly, a physician spoke of his relative stability: “It’s a very recession proof business...and the pain of that, while it goes on around us, I don’t feel it directly.” Perhaps the connection between class and masculinity has become more telling during this time of economic insecurity for men. “Both class and gender became challenged by the recognitions of other social divisions, such as race and ethnicity, age, sexualities, and abilities. A great sense of fluidity in social life, brought about by flexibilities in working practices and the various complex strands of postmodernity and globalization, provided yet further challenges to both class and gender (Morgan 176).” Therefore, if men are currently feeling economically uncertain, this may give some explanation as to why they are seeking new definitions of masculinity.

Despite class differences, I believe these men want their voices heard and want to hear from one another. From a young man’s declaration that he was raised without a father and looks at his friends (with fathers) and sees a “difference in how I look at things,” to my own nephews, who despite having little interaction with their fathers, still desire the relationship. These men seem to be calling out to one another in a desire to fulfill their personal identity. At the barbershop, there was an abundance of men speaking about and demonstrating their newfound roles as

fathers, as they attempted to find new ways of thinking about being a man with a family. One man talked of “redefining yourself because, most women now, ... she’s out of college, probably has a job,” a direct reflection of an understanding of new economic realities. Another man spoke of re-marriage and a second family while still embedded in the traditional patriarchal mode of breadwinner, yet yielding to new masculine possibilities: “I choose my battles more wisely now, don’t fly off the handle, I’ve learned to communicate better.”

In this respect, I see conversations such as those in *Between Men* as an attempt to create a new dynamic between men based on sharing experiences rather than manly detachment. I think about the men I have known through work and social life, some of whom I still care about, yet I find the boundaries erected between us a constant impediment to our relationships. In particular, I remain at a loss regarding the actions of men I worked with at a former employer. These were individuals with whom I worked closely for many years and among whom there was mutual agreement about the workplace misconduct of our employer. Yet when it came time to stand up to unjust business practices, these men would not stand with me. Although I believe they agreed with me in principle, they felt fearful for their jobs, vulnerable in the face of power and ultimately capitulated to the pressure with their silence. I suffered the consequences of speaking out against this silent system and lost my job. To this day, even after those workplace injustices have been made public, many of those men have not attempted to contact me. If these are the rules by which western masculine culture plays, then I do not wish to be a player.

In the beginning of this project, I felt that if I could make my questions understood, I was certain there would be enough men who would agree to talk about masculinity. After all, not all men are the *strong, silent* type, as the characterization implies. Yet I could not determine the success of this project simply in terms of getting men to verbalize their thoughts about masculinity. I believe the true power of *Between Men* is the depth of responses and the act of sharing we engaged in. From the young man whose modest acknowledgement of not having considered my questions to the more mature reaction of “funny you should ask, I was just thinking about this,” the men in this video responded to my request to speak to me about masculinity. I am convinced that the space of the barbershop as a site of masculine social expression compelled these men to consider their responses carefully. Additionally, the combination of mirrored self-images and the presence of the *documentary* camera produced a wealth of openness in our conversations. I had not experienced such a sharing of personal thoughts and memories around family, fatherhood and work in my 15 years of living in Amherst. I believe that for all of us involved in these conversations—filmmaker, customer and barber—there were many moments of reflection and caring displayed for each other in a way that goes far beyond the typical everyday interactions of men.

As for the video document itself, my hope is that it will loosen men’s restrictions around talk of masculinity and open the possibility for a transformation of male identity. The space of the barbershop already holds a transformational significance through its practical purpose; I wish to extend this into men’s communication with each other. The men of Amherst Barbers have begun to renew

my faith in my brethren and have helped me to start a dialogue with them that I would like to continue.

APPENDIX: TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Exhibition Location:

The Herter Gallery
125a Herter Hall
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Amherst, MA 01003

Dates:

April 14th-30th, 2014

Exhibition Format:

Single Channel Video, 13'x9' projection, with sound.
Running Time, 45 minutes



Figure 1: Installation View

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PHOTO OF THE ARTIST AT WORK



DIGITAL INVENTORY

- | Title:
Between Men: a First Person Documentary Video
- | Running Time:
45 minutes
- | Format:
Digital Video/1280x720p
- Date:
2014