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From Hip to Hypocrisy:
An Exploration of the Hipster and the Cooptation of Style

By
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for graduation *summa cum laude*
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Introduction

“Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”

— Oscar Wilde

Being an avid people-watcher, I’ve always had an interest in subcultures; so naturally, the hipster has become a point of intrigue for me. What I had come to understand about the contemporary hipster subculture was that it began as a backlash to capitalist consumerism. The main goal of a hipster is to portray a lifestyle outside the grid of any socially constructed category; consequently, the famous “I know it when I see it” phrase is often the only stand-in available to describe their aesthetic. Despite this, there are a number of common tropes that have come to be associated with the hipster that suggests uniformity in their aesthetic which obviously flouts the essential dogmas of this subculture. But while the hipster may be an ambiguous character all on its own, in the past few years I began to notice an odd new accessory commonly appearing in our local hipster population: a Bible. Upon further investigation I’d discovered Sojourn Community Church, a religious subculture that has developed here in Louisville in which a large majority of their congregation consists of hipsters.

Apparently, a number of these hip churches have sprouted up across the nation over the past decade and I wondered how a hipster, a model of non-conformity and hyper-individuality, fits into a community-based organization that upholds traditional values. I hoped that this melding of Christ and culture could possibly indicate a growing tolerance for diversity in fundamentalist religious communities, but unfortunately, I found that this Hipster Christianity is merely a cosmetic makeover intended to appeal to urban youth culture. And while the hipster aesthetic appears to have been born from non-conformist

and anti-authoritarian motivations, the fact that it has been so easily co-opted by a conservative organization shows the inadequacy of stylistic expression as an effective catalyst for progressive social change. However, by exploring the ways competing ideologies reconcile with each other in contemporary society, I hope to unravel this very complex relationship between church and society.

However, in order to understand the emerging Hipster Christian, one must first have a thorough understanding of hip and its situation within the framework of American identity. Hip emerges as a dialog of tilted social relations and throughout history social inequality has had a way of resonating in outward expressions of artistic style. The Beats, Hippies, Punks, even Goth can be examined through a lens that recognizes the underlying circumstances that spurred these cultural movements and illustrate the ways in which Americans respond to existing social conditions. Historically, artistic expression has served as a stimulus for the progression of social movements, but unfortunately the rhetoric of style seems to have lost its efficacy in late capitalism. Using Adorno and Horkheimer's theories of "the culture industry" and Thomas Frank's theories on cooptation, I examine the failures of counterculture in inspiring significant social change and the roles of business and mass culture in maintaining the status quo. Utilizing theories from Pierre Bourdieu, I examine the function of symbolic capital in the cultural sphere and its relation to social hierarchy; likewise, Dick Hebdige offers insight into how symbolic capital ultimately loses its value through commodification.

In the second section, I define the contemporary hipster by exploring aspects such as the appeal of irony in postmodern world and the various forms that it takes: satire vs.

cynicism, coolness of irony vs. coolness of indifference, parody vs. pastiche. I describe the ways the mainstream has received this subculture and how media portrayals have influenced its ongoing evolution through mythmaking and demythologization practices. Using Fredric Jameson's theories about late capitalism, I explore the possible reasons why the contemporary hipster is strictly a postmodern phenomenon. Lastly, I delve into the problematic aspects of the modern hipster in respect to contemporary society.

In the third section, I examine Hipster Christianity by addressing several questions raised from the appearance of this cultural phenomenon: How does consumerism fit within this paradigm? How is the individualist aspect coped within an institutional structure which relies on community? How does the 'drop-out' or 'slacker' aspect of hipster culture survive within a conservative social structure that upholds protestant ideals of work ethic? Can Christianity be cool when a major aspect of religion is to love Christ regardless of the social consequences? Which traditional characteristics of religion are maintained within this emerging church and how? In other words, is hipster culture changing the face of Christianity or is Christianity changing the face of the hipster?

I hope to provide some insight into the ways in which culture operates in late-capitalism. Throughout this work there are two very evident patterns that reoccur. First, despite advances in modern technology and the increase in quality of life in American society, there appears to be a constant state of discontent. However, the way that cultural movements respond to this dissatisfaction not only fails to instigate any change, but also further perpetuates the underlying problems promoting this unease. By identifying this

relationship, I hope to unveil possible ways to escape this perpetual loop of postmodernist discourse.

Part 1: American Hipstory 101

“The question is not what you look at, but what you see.”

— Henry David Thoreau

The origin of the term ‘hip’ remains a subject of debate among linguistic scholars. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates hip’s first documented use in 1904 and defines it as “well-informed, knowledgeable, ‘wise to’, up-to-date; smart, stylish”. However, other scholars have argued that the term ‘hip’ actually dates much further back. In *Hip: The History*, John Leland argues that hip is phenomenon that is unique to American identity. Citing Clarence Major’s work, *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*, which “traces the origins of hip to the Wolof verbs hepi (“to see”) or hipi (“to open one’s eyes”) and dates its usage in America to the 1700’s,” Leland claims that hip emerged out of the negotiated relationship between the slaves and the early colonizers (5). Although the concept of hip unarguably reaches beyond this historical reference and is obviously not exclusive to American culture, this does provide a lens into a crucial component of hip which rests in some form of consciousness, or sight, that reaches beyond the trivial notion of what’s stylish. It reveals how hip emerges from skewed social circumstances as a recognition of one’s place in the social order, a reality that is inescapably apparent in the everyday experience of bondage.

Leland describes how hip began “as a subversive intelligence that outsiders developed under the eye of insiders” (6). Hip provided a source of autonomy. While the enslaved were forced to suppress feelings of rage and indignation, hip became a tool, an

internal form of rebellion disguised with a mask of obedience. Thus, Leland proclaims, “Hipster language, stance and irony begin not in the cool poses of the modern city but on the antebellum plantation, in the interplay of these two populations” (19):

For slave owners, who worried about what the slaves were saying, it was important to try and follow each new coinage; this, in turn, prodded blacks to invent still newer codes. This process goes on today; it is the essence of hip invention. Hip begins with a small circle, whose members push each other to more inventive or extreme forms of expression, then radiates outward in concentric circles. Each circle grabs what they can. By the time the outer circles have caught up, the inner ones have to invent new codes. Hip talk is... a strategy for multiplying meaning. It uses humor and ambiguity to convey one message to its intended recipients, and another to those looking on.

(Leland 24)

However, I must also note that this description of hip’s genesis is also a very simplistic understanding of social relations. The ways that hip functions in culture today requires a much more critical image beyond binary terms of black or white, positive or negative, hip or square, and I think one of the things that makes hip so infectious lies within its ability to illustrate the world in degrees. Hip is born from social structure, and like race, its identity is constructed within hierarchies of power, and to fully understand hip one must recognize the role of privilege. “Though it grabs ideas from the bottom of the economic ladder, hip lives in luxury” (Leland 8). The occupants of third world countries are not concerned about starving with style. Likewise, creative bloom cannot occur without the presence of leisure

time. So if hip thrives in a culture of excess, then it follows that the roaring 20's provided fertile ground for hip to take root.

A Hip Hierarchy—Highbrow, Lowbrow, and Everything in Between

No prior period in history had experienced the magnitude of social and cultural upheaval as the era surrounding WWI, and the primary factor uprooting the traditional norms and mores was the birth of consumer culture. Although short-lived, the boom that followed WWI provided the potential for an unprecedented amount of upward social mobility, and as a consequence reshaped the relationship between the business world and the public. In *America in the Twenties*, Ronald Allen Goldberg describes how revolutions in industrial practices prescribed major changes in social habits. The average workweek, which “had declined from sixty to forty-eight hours” by the end of the decade, provided urban workers with free time to foster the growth of the entertainment industry just beginning to find its momentum in motion pictures and radio (Goldberg 85). Likewise, the business world would find the need to reinvent itself in reaction to the copious amounts of products it was now able to manufacture. “Between 1918 and 1929, such factors as mass production, advances in technology, and an increasing efficiency of labor led to a production gain of more than 60 percent , which far outstripped the increase in population” (Goldberg 84). One clue of this changing relationship is the invasive role that advertising began to play in shaping the desires of consumers. “Advertising became so extensive during the decade that it consumed more than half of the output of the printing presses” (Goldberg 84). The democratization of entertainment and the rise of mass media would prove to be the most influential force shaping politics, society, and culture in the twentieth century.

In *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's*, Fredrick Lewis Allen describes how after WWI, “social compulsion had become a national habit” (171). The optimistic outlook inspired by the Enlightenment was decimated by the horrors witnessed on the battlefield of the Great War and many began to rely less on public policy and turned to introspect. I would argue that this wave of skepticism brought forth the first hipster:

The bright young college graduate who in 1915 would have risked disinheritance to march in a Socialist parade yawned at Socialism in 1925... now the young insurgent enraged his father by arguing against monogamy and God. When, however, the middle-class majority turned from persecuting political radicals to regulating personal conduct, they met with bitter opposition not only from the bright young college graduate but from the whole of a newly class-conscious group. (Allen 71)

When public interests shifted focus from the political realm to the social, distinct divisions formed among the American population that would split the nation, pitting conservatives against liberals on issues that would still not be resolved almost a century later. The disillusionment of the war accelerated the secularizing tendencies and erupted into a “revolution in manners and morals,” in which hip’s iconoclastic voice resonated loudest with women seeking to break free from the chains of patriarchy: “Modesty, reticence, and chivalry were going out of style;[...]“Victorian” and “Puritan” were becoming terms of opprobrium[...]It was better to be modern—everybody wanted to be modern—and sophisticated, and smart, to smash the conversations and be devastatingly frank” (Allen 84). By uprooting tradition, former values were discarded, leaving an empty canvas. A

newly emerging social presence would be very influential in filling this void, the “embattled highbrow” (Allen 172).

The highbrow of the twenties mirrors the characteristics of the modern hipster with an eerie uncanniness. They loathed conformity and mass culture and as a result they formed muddled clusters of urban, educated aesthetes and artists, complete with their own “ill-assorted mob of faddists” no doubt captivated by their quality of hipness; these “highbrow” hipsters carved their own space in the social arena, and their cool mystique created a new concept of elite to be envied:

They differed vehemently among themselves, and even if they had agreed, the idea of organizing would have been repugnant to them as individualists. They were widely dispersed; New York was their chief rallying-point, but groups of them were to be found in all the other urban centers. They consisted mostly of artists and writers, professional people, the intellectually restless element in the college towns, and such members of the college-educated business class as could digest more complicated literature than was to be found in the Saturday Evening Post and McCall's Magazine; and they were followed by an ill-assorted mob of faddists who were ready to take up with the latest idea. They may be roughly and inclusively defined as the men and women who had heard of James Joyce, Proust, Cezanne, Jung, Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, Petronius, Eugene O'Neill, and Eddington; who looked down on the movies but revered Charlie Chaplin as a great artist, could talk about relativity even if they could not understand it, knew a few of the

leading complexes by name, collected Early American furniture, had ideas about progressive education, and doubted the divinity of Henry Ford and Calvin Coolidge. Few in numbers though they were, they were highly vocal, and their influence not merely dominated American literature but filtered down to affect by slow degrees the thought of the entire country. (Allen 172-173)

The “highbrows” were the first to recognize the empty and valueless monoculture provided by mass entertainment and in response they carved new definitions of value that rested in authenticity and uniqueness, which became readily available in the flood of cultural variety that was emerging in the urban centers of the country during this period.

Aside from The Great Migration which brought thousands of southern Blacks to the urban centers around the country, massive numbers of immigrants were entering the scene in search of jobs as well, providing their own unique additions to the amalgam. “The 1920 census found that for the first time more than half of all Americans lived in cities” and one-third of the country’s population was “either first- or second-generation immigrants” (Leland 62). From this cultural buffet, hip feasted. But when the stock market crashed in 1929, the cultural flowering withered, and hip’s story became fragmented, if not silent.

A Musical Manifesto: The Revolutionary Voice of Hip

As the clubs and speakeasies began to cave under the pressure of the desolate economy of the Great Depression, the lively Jazz scene of the 20’s melted away. But hip continued to smolder under the broiling tension between white and black musicians competing for jobs as the entire music industry consolidated to the far more economic

medium of Radio, which catered primarily to musicians willing to water down their performance for a wider, predominantly white audience. Low wages allowed for bigger bands and fewer soloists and “the rhythms tightened around steady danceable beats” (Leland 121). However, while the majority of the population remained clueless under the hypnosis of the repetitive beats of Big Band and Swing, there were small pockets of jazz musicians and enthusiasts who recognized what was being broadcasted for what it really was, just a shallow knock-off of the real deal; through this recognition hip found its form in bebop.

In American culture, success depends on how well you play by the rules; yet, as many find out, the game is often rigged in someone else’s favor. There’s a sensibility that emerges from this realization that says “your rules don’t apply to me, so I’ll just have to make up my own” and through this self-conviction hip emerges. As Eric Porter notes in “‘Dizzy Atmosphere’: The Challenge of Bebop,” Dizzy Gillespie himself admitted “that there was no direct connection between music and politics: ‘We didn’t go out and make speeches or say, “Let’s play eight bars of protest.” We just played our music and let it go at that. The music proclaimed our identity; it made every statement we truly wanted to make” (426). But regardless of authorial intent, their music did function as a powerful political force. Porter’s analysis examines the ways in which movements in music are situated in respect to larger social concerns, how music has a paradoxical relationship with the world, mirroring its social realities while simultaneously remolding them. Within this, hip provides a level playing field, one which allows a diverse mixture of people to come together and identify with each other through the language of melody. As Norman Mailer so elegantly describes in his iconic essay “The White Negro”:

...jazz ... spoke across a nation, it had the communication of art even where it was watered, perverted, corrupted, and almost killed, it spoke in no matter what laundered popular way of instantaneous existential states to which some whites could respond, it was indeed a communication by art because it said, "I feel this, and now you do too." (Mailer)

In this way, art functions as a conduit, a form of communication that identifies common individual struggles which cut across race and class boundaries through the feelings it produces, and in doing so, destabilizes the social stratification that keeps cultural and ethnic groups separated. These musicians' mere existence challenged stereotypes based on biological determinism. Their mastery and elegance not only provided a source of pride for black communities but the alternatives they offered opened the possibility for new ways to be appreciated that didn't rely on affluence or the American ideal of perfection.

The hypocrisy of American idealism was never more evident than during WWII. The irony becomes especially apparent in the image of segregated troops battling in a war prompted by ideologies of racial superiority: black soldiers fighting and dying for American principles of liberty that were not equally available to them due to "separate but equal" legislation. While the G.I. Bill passed in 1944 greatly expanded the opportunity for higher education for both white and black veterans, studies have revealed that those benefits were vastly restricted in the south (Herbold). However, although the G. I. Bill left much to be desired in addressing the racial gap, the immense number of opportunities for education had a great impact in reshaping the American cultural landscape, creating a wave of intellectual thought that reached across class boundaries.

Hip Existentialism—Free to Be Anything...Except for the Same

Within this growing class of intellectuals, there was a mounting obsession to uncover the roots of totalitarianism in light of the atrocities of the holocaust, and critiques of mass culture further complicated our notions of value. In their work *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno claim that business culture and the entertainment industry remove the necessity of critical thought by “infecting everything with sameness” (94). By standardizing the needs of the public the “culture industry” removes the necessity of imagination in understanding the world around us. Through the repetition of an unfulfilled promise that mirrors the desires perpetuated by the industrial lifestyle, our social conditions gain an essentialist quality, concealing the necessity for critical thought:

The ruler no longer says: ‘Either you think as I do or you die.’ He says: ‘You are free not to think as I do; your life, your property—all that you shall keep. But from this day on you will be a stranger among us.’ Anyone who does not conform is condemned to an economic impotence which is prolonged in the intellectual powerlessness of the eccentric loner. Disconnected to the mainstream, he is easily convicted of inadequacy. (105-6)

Historically, sources of control had a surrogate—the monarch, the lord, the aristocrat, etc. Without a direct line of accountability, social control takes on the trait of naturalism. Now the masses line up accordingly without sovereign direction. This illustration of “group think” (borrowing from Orwell) is a primary source that influenced the beat hipster and consequently every counterculture that followed.

However, while this image paints a very sinister view of business culture, I must note that conformity is not just a result of some conspiracy to brainwash the masses. The reason many people sought the security of conformity was due to a number of circumstances stirring anxiety among the public: the disillusionment of a population rocked by the two most devastating wars in human history, the desperate economic conditions of the great depression, the cold war, the red scare, rapid changes in social mores... Mailer captures the zeitgeist of 1950's, and describes how the hipster became a product of it:

It is on this bleak scene that a phenomenon has appeared: the American existentialist—the hipster, the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war ... or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct (at what damage to the mind and the heart and the liver and the nerves no research foundation for cancer will discover in a hurry) , if the fate of twentieth century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self ...

Thus the non-conformist, Horkheimer and Adorno's "eccentric loner," becomes romanticized as America's new champion, combating the tyranny of social control that had replaced the traditional forms of oppression.

However, this model for resistance is fundamentally flawed; the hipsters of the beat era never really sought to change society, only to live above and beyond its banal ideal of existence. And while the generation that followed, their protégés the hippies, may have been influential in opening social space for cultural diversity, the main advances in human rights were not gained through the civil disobedience of doing drugs or sexual freedom, but in the acts of nonviolent protest and activism. By labeling conformity as the all-inclusive “bad guy,” the only solution that counterculture provides is to opt-out, which essentially does nothing. But the most important aspect of the failures of counterculture to produce any significant social change is that subversion gets communicated through lifestyle and commodities rather than action. The age old tactic of divide and conquer gets transformed into divide and sell as social conflicts get battled out in shopping malls rather than a court of law. And due to hip’s failure to address the underlying problems that catalyze its emergence, it appears to just get trapped in some kind of Hegelian loop, repeatedly trying to address the same central problems inherent in modernity, and not only failing to do so, but reinforcing them in the process.

Peace, Love, and the Pursuit of Commercial Hippieness

Thomas Frank describes this loop in his book *The Conquest of Cool* as a perpetual dialogue between marketing and youth culture. Once advertising began to mimic countercultural critiques of mass culture, avenues for social activism became blurred. However, contrary to the conspiracy theories that vilified business culture as the pillars of social control by enforcing the rules of mass conformity through the picturesque visions of banal suburban perfection depicted in their ads, Franks asserts that “Consumer capitalism did not demand conformity or homogeneity; rather, it thrived on the doctrine of liberation

and continual transgression that is still familiar today” (20). Frank provides a more advanced view of the relationship between business culture and consumers that recognizes it beyond the simple top-down or bottom-up dialogue, rather an oscillating dialectic between the two.

Franks argues that those situated in the business community were growing equally weary of the limits of conformity. “The old values of caution, deference, and hierarchy drowned creativity and denied flexibility; they enervated not only the human spirit but the consuming spirit and the entrepreneurial spirit as well” (Frank 28). Frank’s image of co-optation is not one of reluctant resistance from the business side and argues that industry welcomed the upcoming youth culture with enthusiasm since “targeting slightly different products to specific groups of customers is significantly more effective than manufacturing one uniform product for everyone” (Frank 23).

So in many ways, Norman Mailer’s division between hip and square provided the ideal vehicle to shuttle us into this age of hyper-consumerism. By providing authenticity as the ultimate answer for the existential dilemma, Mailer provided business culture with a new model for planned obsolescence, built around the mythical notion of hip:

To be an existentialist, one must be able to feel oneself—one must know one’s desires, one’s rages, one’s anguish, one must be aware of the character of one’s frustration and know what would satisfy it. The over-civilized man can be an existentialist only if it is chic, and deserts it quickly for the next chic. To be a real existentialist ... one must have one’s sense of the “purpose”—whatever the purpose may be... (Mailer)

The overly-civilized man is the image of a wannabe, a fake, thus the ultimate commandment of the hipster becomes “thou shalt not be bourgeois” (Frank 29).

Rebellion for Sale—The Commodification of the Symbol

By echoing the voices of youth culture and rebellion, advertising was able to foster an illusion that personal freedom and rebellion were bound up in matters consumption. In this illusion, countercultural style creates a perpetual loop of “hip consumerism:”

The countercultural style...so conveniently and efficiently transforms the myriad petty tyrannies of economic life – all the complaints about conformity, oppression, bureaucracy, meaninglessness, and the disappearance of individualism that became virtually a national obsession during the 1950s – into rationales for consuming. No longer would Americans buy to fit in or impress the Joneses, but to demonstrate that they were wise to the game, to express their revulsion with the artifice and conformity of consumerism. (Frank 31)

This ideal of being “wise to the game” creates an alternative hierarchy dictated by cultural capital and compromises previous theoretical models of class struggle. The social sphere can no longer be understood in linear models of power directly correlated with wealth, but begins to take the form of a plurality of dimensions in which categories of class, race, and gender are situated throughout. This complexity not only serves to reaffirm the age-old myth of meritocracy, but muddles our conception of how power functions in modernity.

In “Social Space and the Genesis of Groups” Pierre Bourdieu reveals the way the modern social structure resembles a complex web of hierarchies within hierarchies where

a variety of forms of capital are created, withheld, and exchanged. He describes society as functioning as a multidimensional variety of fields, where economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital function to determine the positions of agents. However while this may appear to provide a certain amount of social mobility, Bourdieu describes how this movement is limited by a “monopoly of legitimate naming” (731). The divisions between “high” and “low” art are merely nuanced manifestations of class struggle, and get further divided throughout the various social spheres, constructing a battle ground centered on myths of legitimacy. Those that possess a certain amount of the various forms of capital, reserve “the power to name,” or set the definitions of value in our society. This is a central component influencing the evolution of subcultures within our society; since value takes on a subjective role, subcultures reserve the right to name their own defining features.

This “power to name” that Bourdieu describes is illuminated in Dick Hebdige’s description of punk culture in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*:

The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of life. [... With items such as] safety pins [...] we can see that such commodities are indeed open to a double inflection: to ‘illegitimate’ as well as ‘legitimate’ uses. These ‘humble objects’ can be magically appropriated; ‘stolen’ by subordinate groups and made to carry ‘secret’ meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination. (Hebdige 17-18)

Hebdige's model describes how symbolic deviance gets interwoven back into the dominant order through two forms of incorporation: "1. the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass produced objects; 2. The 'labeling' and redefinition of deviant behavior by dominant groups—the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form)" (94). When deviance gets expressed through style, it moves through society as a form of insider trading utilized to subvert the dominant order. However, consumerism provides a medium to incorporate deviance into the mainstream, consequently watering down the rebellious message that the symbolic gesture intended to communicate. As Hebdige points out, style magazines steal from the subculture and alter it into marketable commodities; the media begins to highlight these non-conformists in traditional spheres, juxtaposing them with their families and thus presenting the unspoken argument, that these people are just like you and me, and businesses that profited from the last "fad" are modified to exploit the new one. Once the style is co-opted by the mainstream, it loses its revolutionary appeal. And as business culture continues to incorporate "alternative" fashions throughout the 80's and 90's, a reciprocating dialectic is formed, gaining momentum with each new trend.

Part 2: Posthipsterism—A Relativism Whose Relation to Reality is Relatively Relative

"what exactly is postmodernism, except modernism without the anxiety?"

— Jonathan Lethem

Society has changed dramatically over the last century. Revolution appears to be the stuff of fairytales in a world where everything has been tried, catalogued, and marketed for disposal. What used to be taboo—premarital sex, taking drugs to feel better, tattoos, living eccentrically—is for the most part socially acceptable. Throughout this dialogue I have

discussed several characteristics that have continued to inform hip's evolution: authenticity, non-conformity, decadence, autonomy... However, of all of these features, one appears to be the central component that spawns hip, the ability "to see." This "knowing" is derived both from seeing things as they are, and seeing an alternative. Hip lies in the recognition of your place in the social order and having the ingenuity to remold it into something else, something better, a legitimate status in the social field. Unlike the Ben Franklin model that requires hard work and perseverance, hip can be achieved in an idea. However, if the social hierarchy is no longer determinable, than what becomes of hip?

As the title to this section suggests, this venture into the contemporary concept of hip is not only a bewildering endeavor but at many times falls prey to postmodern traps that lead to utter nonsense. The most difficult challenge I encountered in this project was trying to build an accurate definition of what exactly it meant to be a contemporary hipster. I thought I knew. With the growing popularity of "hipster bashing" in media over the last decade, I had a mental checklist for the common signifiers: unruly facial hair, PBR, trucker hats, quirky glasses, skinny jeans, and pretty much any "trendy" fad long ago exterminated by the fashion firing squad. But I also know several people that would fit into mass media's general description, but I don't necessarily think of them all as hipsters (although some indeed fit very nicely); to further complicate the matter, none would ever admit to being one. So how does one go about defining something that appears to be indefinable?

All modern definitions of a contemporary hipster involve some variation of being stylish or knowing the latest fashion. But this description fits just about any person in American society that takes an interest in their appearance. And to which of the latest

styles does this refer? The ones defined by high end fashion designers at the beginning of every season on the runway? How about the trends set by celebrities? Are we talking about teen fashion, college fashion, business fashion, hip-hop fashion, Sporty, Preppy, Ethnic, Eclectic, Geek chic, Industrial, Kitsch, Macabre, Mod , Pinup, Pop, Post-apocalyptic road warrior, Psychedelic, Rasta, Rave, Vintage, Rock, Rockabilly, Grunge, Rustic, Ska, Skater, Street, Surf, Punk, Cyberpunk, Dieselpunk, Steampunk...? In this age of information, we've begun to invent categories for our categories to such an extent, attempting to research anything that pertains to culture becomes an endless quest in a house of mirrors.

Since the definitions provided by the "authoritative" dictionaries were too vague for my purposes, I moved on to the *Urban Dictionary*, hoping to get the public consensus on the matter. Unfortunately, my mission became even further compromised:

1. Hipster: Hipsters are a subculture of men and women typically in their 20's and 30's that value independent thinking, counter-culture, progressive politics, an appreciation of art and indie-rock, creativity, intelligence, and witty banter...
2. Hipster: Definitions are too mainstream.

These top two definitions model the paradox that occurs whenever you try to define the contemporary hipster. How do you go about defining something that by very nature undefines itself? The course that the term has taken online over the last decade reveals the ambivalence that the modern hipster has produced in the masses. There are 438 definitions listed in the *Urban Dictionary* (as of February 10, 2014), plus thousands more that are derivatives of it such as histerbilly, hipsterectomy, hipsterlectual...But while the

definitions range from romantic, to disinterest, to pejorative, only one single marker remains constant: “not mainstream.” The central goal of a hipster is to avoid fitting into any predetermined mold. However, if they were successful, then how is it that we have learned to identify them? Moreover, how is it that it has materialized into the common markers appearing in urban centers across the country?

Although the tropes referenced in mass media appear to be common markers of some hipsters, I think they are merely superficial stereotypes that not only fall short in describing this cultural phenomenon, but also downplay the significance of what this subculture has to say about the current cultural climate. Many attempt to write off the modern hipster as just another youth subculture, but failing to produce the moral panic of its predecessors, it seems to be a pretty poor excuse for rebellion. Furthermore, the fact that several people that I identify as hipsters range from 20 to 50 years old problemizes this theory, suggesting that there may be factors beyond the age old concern of “being cool” that draws people into this cultural movement. But if there is something more than what is it? If subcultures arise as a response to the social climate, then what can be said about the modern hipster?

The Polemics of Style: Pragmatic or Political

In the interest of remaining impartial, I may be appearing to give the hipster more credit than he is due. I don't intend to paint them as the postmodern champions here to save us from the evils of capitalism. I'm sure most hipsters are far too preoccupied in their own identity-crafting to bother themselves with the worries of modernity. Indeed, not all cultural variations are intended to be rife with political significance, but regardless of

intent, there are real conditions influencing the birth of subcultures and the hipster aesthetic could just as easily be associated with pragmatic motivations as political ones. Yet, I would question whether actions inspired by practical incentives are any less political considering their connection to the economic disparities that exist within our culture.

For example, when I was thirteen my parents moved from Louisville to Oldham County, and in the process, transferred me from the security of a uniform clad Catholic school to the jungle of aesthetic identity expressed in the public school social hierarchy. Needless to say, I went through a stage of culture shock and was hopelessly unprepared to deal with the multiple dimensions of social strata present within the public school dynamics. At that time, Oldham County consisted of a majority of affluent residents who were far more up-to-speed with the latest fashions and had the pocketbooks to back them. So I had to develop a means of survival. I couldn't afford to storm the mall and demand my legitimacy in the social order with the cultural credit of American Eagle or Abercrombie & Fitch. Luckily, I had access to a closetful of my dad's old flannels and found refuge in the subgroups of Grunge.

Similarly, isn't it possible that many hipsters actually choose their aesthetic simply because it's affordable? What better way is there to divert the social stigma of being poor than by claiming to be above the mainstream values? In "Behind the Mustache: The Cultural, Racial, and Class Implications of the Hipster," Alex Sayf Cummings and Ryan Reft reveal that for some, there may be more to the hipster aesthetic than people think:

Perhaps hipsterdom streams from many sources of refusal, mixed up with consumerism. The love of thrift store shopping surely involved a love of

kitsch and a competitive spirit (pulling just the right retro cardigan out of the 1.29/lb pile). Yet no doubt many young people opted for thrift duds because they didn't want to pay full price for new clothes or simply did not want to participate in the crass machine of sweatshop-made fashion...For some struggling bohemians, shopping at the GAP was a fiscal impossibility in any case, while for others frequenting the thrift store was a deliberate choice.

Like the beboppers reinventing music to carve themselves a legitimate space in the social strata, couldn't hipster be doing the same, utilizing the only resources available to them? The thing about the middle-class in this age is that in many cases there is nothing middle about it. In "America's Sinking Middle Class," Eduardo Porter reports that according to the Census Bureau, the average household makes "the same as the typical household made a quarter of a century ago." Porter notes that while advances in technology over the last two decades should have signaled a significant leap in the quality of living for the American population, the vast majority of the wealth has been funneled elsewhere:

In 2010, the Department of Commerce published a study about what it would take for different types of families to achieve the aspirations of the middle class — which it defined as a house, a car or two in the garage, a vacation now and then, decent health care and enough savings to retire and contribute to the children's college education. It concluded that the middle class has become a much more exclusive club. Even two-earner families making almost \$81,000 in 2008 — substantially more than the family median of about \$60,000 reported by the Census — would have a much tougher time

acquiring the attributes of the middle class than in 1990. The incomes of these types of families actually rose by a fifth between 1990 and 2008, according to the report. They were more educated and worked more hours, on average, and had children at a later age. Still, that was no match for the 56 percent jump in the cost of housing, the 155 percent leap in out-of-pocket spending on health care and the double-digit increase in the cost of college.

Additionally, polemics in the media over the last few years suggest that people are better off avoiding the debt of higher education since it no longer guarantees a spot in the workforce. In “Are Recent College Graduates Finding Jobs” Jaison R. Abel, Richard Deitz, and Yaqin Su studied data over the last two decades to see if these accounts held any water:

Our analysis reveals that, by historical standards, unemployment rates for recent college graduates have indeed been quite high since the onset of the Great Recession. Moreover, underemployment among recent graduates—a condition defined here as working in jobs that typically do not require a bachelor’s degree—is also on the rise, part of a trend that began with the 2001 recession (1-2)

These days, people with college degrees seem to be more likely to be working at a coffee shop if not standing in line at the unemployment office. With this in mind, it makes sense that the majority of hipsters are thought to be white, middle-class, and college educated. Granted, hipsters are far less desolate than the impoverished; however, if the middle classes are struggling, what kind of burden does the widening economic gap put on those

that were already at the bottom? Moreover, how effective is the hipster response at addressing issues of social inequality?

In *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske describes how consumerism provides a field for class struggle to become resolved championing pop culture as a medium for social change. Using Certeau's "guerilla warfare metaphor," Fiske describes an idealistic view of how the dialectic of class struggle gets played out through the reappropriation of commodities. For example, the feminist movement is able to redefine gender norms through their reappropriation of cultural objects in ways that upset norms that uphold patriarchal sovereignty. This is due to the autonomy of the object once it's entered the cultural realm. "At the point of sale the commodity exhausts its role in the distribution economy, but begins to work in the cultural. Detached from the strategies of capitalism, its work for the bosses completed, it becomes a resource for the culture of everyday life" (Fiske 35).

Likewise, while hipsters refuse to imbue their cultural objects with any meaning, the fact that many of their aesthetics are employed androgynously has challenged gender normativity in ways that have opened social spaces for tolerance. In "Hipsters are Agents of Social Change," Anna Leach writes "Hipster places are places where it's fine to be gay. It's almost, dare I breathe it, a positive thing. You can take your straight friends to gay hipster nights, and your gay friends to straight hipster nights. And it's cool – everyone's fine about the whole thing." By challenging norms of masculinity, hipsters have somewhat watered down social stigmas and upset the roles of heteronormativity that have historically marginalized members of the LGBT community.

Similarly, the baseball cap reveals the autonomy of the sign and how it becomes imbued with social significance. Due to its practical purpose as a sun visor it became a popular promo giveaway during the 80's to agricultural workers, thus becoming a signifier of 'blue collar' culture. Hence what's now known as the "trucker hat" became stigmatized as a status symbol of the working poor. Then sometime in the 90's skateboard style reappropriated its meaning with the iconoclast, as the daredevil pranksters of the reality series "Jackass" brought the trucker hat into the audience of pop culture. Currently, it's taken on the role as a staple of the hipster aesthetic, ironically thumbing its nose to the America that would so easily downgrade the working class. However, one has to wonder whether these guerilla tactics help or hurt social progress, considering its ability to camouflage certain aspects of inequality in our culture.

While making fun of homelessness may once have been a universal taboo in American society, since hipsters are assumed to have a choice in their aesthetic, they supply a means to make fun of poverty in a socially accepted manner. For example, the "Hipster or Homeless" website is a web-based social site that invites users to post pictures for others to engage in a sort of game, guessing whether the people in the photos are hipsters or homeless. While meant as a means of parodying hipsters, a latent consequence of this website is that it masquerades the social significance of poverty under a veil of comedy. The photos uploaded by users, being comical depictions of what may be a hipster or a homeless person, allow participants an opportunity to laugh at something that in reality should incite feelings of empathy or anxiety about inequality that exists in American society. While satire can provide an effective rhetorical device, due to the hipster's unwillingness to imbue their aesthetic with meaning creates an empty gesture. And since

they've adopted an aesthetic associated with economic disparity, they construct a sphere where it is socially acceptable to make fun of poverty. This is a central problem with post-modern discourse. From one perspective, it seems to open the possibility for positive social change; deconstruction opens a space for the marginalized to reinvent themselves. However, this void also offers the opportunity for anybody to fill it with whatever meaning they choose, and this most certainly is not always positive.

An Epidemic of Mass Hipsteria: The Myth of Identity Theft

Style functioned as a social signifier long before the barons of capitalism discovered their entrepreneurial spirit. Native Americans, for example, had been differentiating themselves from other tribes and marking hierarchy within their own groups with makeup and headdresses centuries before Christopher Columbus hit the sea in search of the new world. But there is a significant difference in how the social signifiers of style operate in modernity. While Native Americans had to earn their status symbols through brave acts or wisdom, capitalist society provides the freedom to buy status and construct your own identity. However, this has shifted the competitive spirit of human nature from the social to the symbolic, thus perpetuating a society of hyper-individualism based on image rather than action. Since identity and status is projected through visual markers, it can easily be spotted, copied, and mass-produced, making possible what Frank refers to as “hip consumerism, a cultural perpetual motion machine in which disgust with the falseness, shoddiness, and everyday oppressions of consumer society could be enlisted to drive the ever-accelerating wheels of consumption” (31). But is it societal expectations defining the modern hipster myth or business culture?

In “Demythologizing Consumption Practices: How Consumers Protect Their Field-Dependent Identity Investments from Devaluing Marketplace Myths,” Zeynep Arsel and Craig J. Thompson describe how they are actually a product of both. While the term hipster was initially applied to contemporary subculture by the media, its meaning is propagated from several different factors, with aspects from both the commercial purposes of marketing agendas as well as ideological responses from social groups. The mythical icon of the hipster emerges in an ongoing dialogue between the two, which never fully capture what it really means to be a hipster, only because a hipster doesn’t actually exist.

Arsel and Thompson connect the indie subculture to the modern myth of the hipster and map its move in the media spotlight, from hip to stigma, over the last two decades through a public narrative that began in 1994:

On August 8, 1994, the cover story of Time made declarations like “Everybody’s hip” and “Hipness is bigger than General Motors” (Lacayo 1994, 48). Suddenly, a mainstream cultural authority was making a connection between countercultural consumerism and the largely dormant hipster myth. The article nostalgically celebrated the Beat Generation as the embodiment of the hipster movements’ iconoclastic, anticonformist spirit; it criticized the commercial mainstreaming of hipness by baby boomer consumers who seek to defy their mortality; and it posed the question that would become central in subsequent cultural dialogues about hipness: “If everyone is hip ... is anyone hip?” By the end of the 1990s, leading business media such as Brandweek, Fortune, and the Wall Street Journal were all discussing the

hipster as a commercially significant cultural category (Kinsella 1999; Lee 1996; Miller 1996; Munk 1999; Pope 1998). Yet little agreement existed on just what the hipster label actually signified, beyond being a hot marketing topic. (795)

The authors describe how the blooming indie scene that was beginning to take root in the mid-1990's had gained enough ground by the end of the decade that it supplied the perfect host for the hipster icon to infest, turning what was a free flowing cultural movement into a media dictated phenomenon: "In a dialectical fashion, indie provided a cultural reference point that helped marketers (and consumer culture in general) clarify the hipster icon by objectifying it through concrete consumption practices" (795). By the end of the 90's, American Apparel and Urban Outfitters, along with several other niche markets, began to respond to the growing mass of consumers, bringing the indie subculture into the public spotlight. As the larger manufacturing outlets began to attempt to tap into the burgeoning group of consumers through marketing ploys, the hipster became defined as the "cultural caricature" that we are so familiar with today (796). "...the millennial hipster increasingly came to be represented as an überconsumer of trends and as a new, and rather gullible, target market[...]that consumes cool rather than creating it" (796).

The negative connotations that surfaced from this back and forth dialogue between the social world and the marketing world are what created the pejorative image of hipster hypocrisy and resulted in a sort of mass hipsteria. Nobody wanted to be hipster because it had been cultivated into this image of a mindless consumer with no real authenticity. The indie culture became a victim to the labeling authority of mass culture in a way that

resembles the plot from *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Indie culture identity had been snatched, and anyone that even remotely resembled a free-thinking individual with an interest in alternative culture was stigmatized as a “pod person” of the capitalist culture, thus resulting in a paranoid game of finger pointing both from outside the indie subculture as well as within as members attempt to protect their cultural capital.

Arsel and Thompson use Bourdieu’s theoretical model to show how this battle gets played out as the participants “employ demythologizing practices to insulate the field of indie consumption from the stigmatizing encroachments of the hipster myth and, in doing so, protect their field-dependent capital from cultural devaluation” (803). The study found three ways in which the participants responded to the stigmas imposed on them by the commercial figure of the hipster icon and that these methods of demythologization correlated with the amount of cultural capital each had vested in the indie scene. However, rather than defending the hipster image, each method further perpetuates the pejorative image of the hipster.

The defense of “aesthetic discrimination” no doubt helped cultivate the elitist image of a hipster. Those that seek to label them as hipsters are accused of being “uninformed outsiders who lack the sophistication needed to discriminate between the superficial and emulative orientations of hipsters and those who consume the indie field with a more self-directed and refined aesthetic sensibility” (Arsel and Thompson 799). In the cases of “symbolic demarcation,” the “scenester” myth is developed as a way of othering the hipster icon outside of the group under symbolic attack. Both these methods show how and why hipsters themselves participate in the practice of marginalizing the hipster image. But

while the first two defenses seek to place the hipster stereotype outside of their cultural group, the third strategy of “proclaiming (mythologized) consumer sovereignty” vilifies the people within their own group as hipsters, affirming the stereotypical images while venerating their own “indie consumption practices as authentic reflections of their self-directed interests and tastes” (801).

The indie scene was not necessarily a countercultural entity with political motivations until mass media forced them to defend their cultural field, creating an atmosphere where consumption becomes defined as activism rather than a source of pleasure. By imposing meaning onto the hipster through mass marketing tactics, society performs the duties of social control, helping to maintain any subversive power the hipster may gain in the social arena. But although this identifies the ways in which the pejorative image of the hipster came about, it says little about the cultural climate that influenced the other characteristics this subculture demonstrates. While marketing tactics may have some pull in influencing social formation, they cannot account for all the features that subcultures adopt. So what are these other cultural factors shaping the hipster identity?

Nostalgic for Nostalgia and Opting in to Opt Out

In light of the economic and environmental quandaries produced by hyper-consumerism, people are beginning to question the consumer driven value system. The introduction of the “whistle-blowing documentary” into popular culture, such as *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Supersize Me*, *Food Inc.*, *Outfoxed*, etc., has not only inspired a new wave of distrust for authority in American society, but has also brought about a widespread awareness of the serious consequences of our consumption practices. Likewise, our

massive exposure to information provided by the internet, supplying an abyss of conflicting perspectives, further muddies our ability to decipher opinion from fact. These factors combined promote an era of heightened uncertainty and this seems to be a significant factor outside of the appeal of authenticity influencing the consumption habits of the modern hipster. The anti-capitalist drive to consume independently-produced music and products, the “sweat-shop free” threads of American Apparel, and the DIY reuse of artifacts aimed for the dumpster could very well indicate an ethical consumer-consciousness.

But more than likely, the hipster is better represented as a manifestation of nostalgia. The resurgence of records and cassettes, the typewriter, the fixed-gear bike... all suggest a luddite-like longing for a time when their identity was safe from the clutches of “the culture industry.” The lumberjack beard and red-and-black flannel are reminiscent of the rugged individualist of early American history, where the new world offered a landscape of possibilities. In “What was the Hipster,” Mark Grief notes, “Women took up cowboy boots, then dark-green rubber Wellingtons, like country squires off to visit the stables.” These symbols come prepackaged with “pastoral innocence,” denoting a time and place long past if it ever even existed at all.

I think it’s a safe assumption to say that Americans in general are nostalgaholics. The entertainment industry is able to reproduce the same stories we grew up on, reselling the familiar in a fancy new package. Despite the predictable storylines I equally enjoyed the recent productions of *Charlotte’s Web*, *The Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and *The Bridge to Terabithia* as my kids, not due to the quality of the reproduction, but the fuzzy feelings of whimsy that the films elicited from my childhood memories. Carebears, My Little Ponies,

Cabbage Patch Kids, Heman, Smurfs...all the 80's icons have been resurrected over the last decade to tap into consumer desires of the Gen-Xer's building families of their own. The scrapbooking cults that surfaced in the 2000's have moved to the new technological mediums of social media such as Pinterest, Facebook, and Instagram. We not only remember things in the rosy-glow of nostalgia, but we now have ways of constructing these images in solid form, our lives photo-shopped, cropped, and assembled in perfection.

However, there is a looming threat of meaninglessness present in modernity due to our expanded world view. How can one be different or original, when everything has already been done and we have Google to prove it? We live in a cut and paste world, where literally every possible identity is available at the click of a mouse. Likewise, it feels as if our identity is under constant assault. How can one protect his or her identity in an age where visual expressions of self are subject to public domain? There are no copyright laws for taste, and modern marketing tactics capitalize on this myth of identity theft. Likewise, while culture jamming can be viewed as tactical resource for anti-consumerist agendas, it can easily be co-opted to prompt alternative forms of consumption, further perpetuating this Orwellian-like state of paranoia. We live in an age that not only promotes skepticism, but encourages us to be skeptical of our own skepticism, and we are simply not equipped to deal with this perpetual cycle of dislocation.

In *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson discusses the landscape of the postmodern terrain claiming, "If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose

effectivity is undecidable" (6). In the postmodern space we are not merely alienated anymore, but we have become alienated from our own alienation:

My implication is that we ourselves, the human subjects who happen into this new space, have not kept pace with that evolution; there has been a mutation in the object unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject. We do not yet possess the perceptual equipment to match this new hyperspace[...]. (Jameson 39)

Thus we get the hipster, the ultimate embodiment of post-modern identity, a rebel that rebels against nothing and everything concurrently. Far more lost than any lost generation, the hipster is the existentialist response to a confused mass of information and uncertainty. It is a generation of deconstructionists with no idea what they are deconstructing, walking works of Derrida liberated from authorial intent. They are texts disconnected from history, whose original meaning is lost in a cacophony of aimless populism. Like past hipsters, they seek the position of being "in the know," but must constantly reshape what they know in order to stay one step ahead of the "faceless masters" that seek to steal this capital, and thus this knowledge is ephemeral (Jameson 17).

This fleeting temporality cultivates a constant state of nostalgia. Only, as Jamison notes "nostalgia does not strike one as an altogether satisfactory word," for it portrays a more sullen and morose image (19). This new nostalgia is more whimsical, such as the longing a child may feel while reading about fairies and unicorns. Indeed it is impossible to mourn a thing which was never had in the first place. Disconnected from our own history and submerged in a world of "simulacrum," we sense our alienation without knowing what

we are alienated from. And as a response we've become a community of artists attempting to reconstruct themselves, a collective dialogue of narcissism. It never really occurred to me how absurd the social media identity was until recently when the Facebook "A Look Back" videos started surfacing on my newsfeed. This app randomly picks photos from your profile and constructs a highly aesthetic commercial of your life with the backdrop of a nostalgia inducing melody. As I was watching these, I really began to realize how we all enthusiastically participate in the myth-making drive of consumerism. By constructing half-truths to put on display, we've upped the ante for "keeping up with the Jones." We've created a whole imaginary world that rewards hyper-individualism over social action. However, some people are less complicit than others, and their response is bitter irony.

Hip Dialogue: Parody or Pastiche

Irony shares many of the concrete characteristics of hip, so it's fitting that the modern hipster has adopted it as their language. Like hip, irony is a form of insider trade. It requires a sight of something that is not obvious to everyone. While hip is "to know," irony is the medium to communicate that knowledge. However, while irony can be attributed as a prime characteristic of the modern hipster, they cannot claim it exclusively. Irony has pervaded every aspect of American culture so extensively that it has become the norm of 21st century discourse, permeating contemporary culture to an extent that any person that attempts to present his or herself with any ounce of sincerity runs the risk of being received with skepticism. So what is it about modernity that requires a veil of satire in contemporary discourse? R. Jay Magill takes up this question in *Chic Ironic Bitterness*, suggesting that it is due to a need for detachment from the shaky realities we face.

Magill claims that irony provides a tool to communicate sincerity in a world riddled with marketing and agenda. The popularity of news sources such as “The Daily Show with John Stewart” relies on a skilled use of satire in “finding a way to credibly and legitimately critique in an age where serious critique is often incredulous or clearly partisan, where political cynicism in the minds of millions is always and already prepared to disbelieve anything thrown at it directly” (Magill 27). Magill dubs contemporary culture as an era of “ironic sensibility,” noting two primary manifestations of this social character (30). There’s the ironic character who is politically charged and seeks to confront his moral dilemmas on a daily basis. And there is irony’s detached and indifferent evil twin: Cool. While the ironist appears to be apathetic, his inner self is a romantic, longing for a better world, and his satire is meant to challenge the world to rise up to his expectations. On the other hand the cool character is far shallower; rather than confronting the world it retreats in apathy:

...cool is the resolute ability to maintain a certain cosmopolitan detachment, to be unruffled, unmoved; to be cool is to be poised. It is to hold oneself and to have the ego introjected as a monitoring tool that at once keeps tabs on the responses and dissembles exteriorities...The attitude of cool has since enabled the self-management of emotional life; cool thus negotiates a dual situation: on the outside is the need to relate to others, and on the inside is the need to maintain control over emotions so they conform to accepted standards of expression. (Magill 47-8)

While cool may have once been a virtue, it now has now been perverted by postmodernity. For those such as Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, even Fredrick Douglass, cool was

utilized to combat stereotypes that projected animalistic aggression, to rise above these expectations and refuse to legitimate the labeling authority of the dominant. Now cool serves the status quo, demanding a retreat into apathy in order to “save face.”

While irony may have once served as a powerful tool of rhetoric, as in the works of Jonathan Swift or Mark Twain, it has been watered down if not erased completely in its current form. Even if the hipster’s attempts were political, intending to parody with purpose, as Jameson notes, his attempts are null in postmodernity due to “a breakdown in the signifying chain” (26). Disconnected from both sender and receiver and liberated from its history, the text becomes pastiche, a “blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” (17): “In this situation, parody finds itself without vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, that wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language.” (17). However, if the hipster represents an empty text, one that fails to portray any significant meaning, then how has he elicited such an odious response from his audience?

Hipscrimination: No Label, No Entry

Despite the innocuous nature of the hipster, he appears to be no less offensive. Yelp has developed a “Hipster Heat Map” to help consumers avoid hipster heavy hangouts, the iPhone Appstore provides a “Punch a Hipster” app as an outlet for anti-hipster aggression, *Diehipster.com* provides users a space to post pictures and publically berate the hipsters they encounter in the public, and a recent poll conducted even reported that “27% of voters said they thought hipsters should be subjected to a special tax for being so annoying”

(*Public Policy Polling*). But in reality, what does it say about us, that we would consider supporting an “obnoxious tax,” even as a joke?

Although these were no doubt developed for their comedic effect, one has to question the moral implications of doing such a thing after imagining it in a different context. Think about the backlash that would occur if the term hipster was replaced with other historically pejorative terms related to race or sexual orientation. Indeed, hipsters are vastly different than these scenarios in that they willingly choose their aesthetic. One can easily change their style while race and sexual orientation are most definitely not optional. However, it is a marvel to wonder how has it become so socially acceptable to participate in such hateful pastimes. With websites devoted to rewarding people for hipster bashing, is it any wonder that we struggle with the phenomenon of cyber-bullying in public schools? Furthermore, it begs the question, what is so threatening about the hipster that warrants so much hostility?

One reason the hipster is fair game for public slander is due to the elitist persona often attributed to the hipster as shown in the fifth most popular definition on *Urban Dictionary*: “A hipster is someone who is smart enough to talk about philosophy, music, politics, art, etc. with you all day long, but not smart enough to see how big of a tool s/he is. The only sure fire way to tell if someone you're talking to is, in fact, a hipster is to ask them ‘are you a hipster?’ If they respond no, and turn their cassette [sic] player back on, you can be sure you're dealing with a hipster.” While hipsters may declare their superiority from the top of a shaky tower of soapboxes, there is another theory suggesting that the reason hipsters generate so much animosity is due to the way they hijack their styles from other

cultures rather than creating their own. In the video “Are You a Hipster” posted on *YouTube* by the *PBS Idea Channel*, they suggest that hipster hate is generated from the fact that hipsters manipulate cultural artifacts that don’t belong to them and in doing so appear to be profiting from something that they never actually had to work for:

This is why people draw the angry spiteful line in between hipsters and other subcultures. Subcultures like nerds have to work for their “cred” to attain cultural capital within that group. Hipsters just cherry pick the stuff they think is neat. People see hipsters as devaluing cultural fashions by cashing in on their capital without embodying their meaning.

In *The Sacred and the Profane: An Investigation of Hipsters*, Jake Kinzey similarly vilifies the hipster as an uninventive copycat:

[...]it seems as if nothing they do is really *new*[...]They decontextualized and take fashions and ideas from cultures that they have little knowledge of to make their lives into “a work of art.” This [...] has the peculiar effect of making their “aesthetic lives” into something like a postcard of Andy Warhol's *Campbell Soup Cans*: a copy of a copy, mass-produced and unoriginal. (3)

Really though, sure the hipster may resemble a walking catalogue of counterfeit, but fashion is perhaps the most cyclical industry extant, and everybody else seems to fall in line accordingly or suffer the consequences from not obeying the status quo. But while the majority of the population seems to be all too happy to hop on the treadmill of planned obsolescence, this same majority is ironically the central voice of condemnation.

When I had heard about the 2009 conference sponsored by *n+1*, “What was the Hipster?,” I had hoped to find out how what it was about the hipster that inspired such an abhorrent reaction. Unfortunately, as I read the transcripts my hopes were dashed. The entire discussion became a sort of trial by jury, where everyone played the dual role of defendant and prosecutor. As Rob Horning, a member of the discussion noted in his article “The Death of the Hipster,” everyone there “had a stake in defining ‘hipster’ as ‘not me’” thus resulting in a “sputtering confusion” (80).

I think that hipster hate may be a projection of something we see in ourselves. In its perfected form, irony functions as a mirror, revealing to us the things that we don’t desire to openly acknowledge about ourselves. The same way *A Modest Proposal* inspired shame for the decadence that was masked by a sense of self-superiority towards the Irish, by critiquing the hipster, we are forced to recognize that we too are participants in the same shallow game. We wish to see the hipster as a pawn of consumerism, something to which we are too wise to fall prey, but in judging the hipster, we do so with an interest in distancing ourselves from the “wrong” kind of consumption, revealing that we are more invested in the mythological competition of style than the hipster himself. Thus, hipsters are the scapegoat for everything we hate about modernity because they provide a walking reminder of how we are the complicit slaves of late capitalism.

Horning appears to pick up on the idea that the hipster is actually an imaginary construction, appearing to be the only person willing to acknowledge what this phenomenon may say about us:

The hipster, then, is the boogeyman who keeps us from becoming too settled in our identity, keeps us moving forward into new fashions, keep us consuming more “creatively” and discovering new things that haven’t become lame and hipster. We keep consuming more, and more cravenly, yet this always seems to us to be the hipster’s fault, not our own.

The problem with critiquing the hipster is in doing so we are actually revealing more about ourselves. If we critique too harshly, then we confirm that we are just as, if not more, shallow for getting hung up on superficial signifiers of materialism.

Additionally, the suggestion in the *YouTube* video that nerd culture actually somehow earns its respect more than hipsters is just another capitalist driven myth. Arsel and Thompson’s study even mentioned how the nerd icon was pitted against the hipster icon in an Apple marketing tactic to appeal to the “cool” crowd:

Apple’s high-profile “I’m a Mac and I’m a PC” advertisements were quickly and widely read as a competitive repartee between the uncool businessman nerd and a prototypical culture-savvy hipster (Stevenson 2006). Soon, consumer-generated send-ups of this campaign were being posted on YouTube and other social media sites, generating considerable traffic. In these ad parodies, the Apple hipster was portrayed as superficial, narcissistic, pretentious, and indolent, whereas the PC nerd represented a paragon of commonsense virtue, maturity, industriousness, and imperviousness to faddishness.

My question is: If nerds are anti-trendy and hipsters are anti-trendy, then who the heck is buying all the iPhones? It just goes to show all the energy wasted in our culture on trivial nonsense. Furthermore, although hipster discrimination is unarguably far more insignificant than some of the more serious forms of prejudice inherent in society, it nevertheless deserves our scrutiny, if not for the reason that it trivializes bigotry, then for its misdirection and distraction from the more pressing concerns that exist in our society.

Part 3: Christian Hipstermentalism—A Rebel with a Cause

“There are no facts, only interpretations.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche

If I have successfully established that the hipster is a paradoxical and weird phenomenon, I think that it is safe to assume that the idea of a hipster Christian takes this weirdness to a whole new level of strange. I never really had any strong opinions about hipsters or hipster Christians for that matter. Being a social chameleon I had come to be acquainted with several members of both genres and neither style nor Christ ever really dominated any of the conversation. So I always just viewed them as regular people, doing the regular things that people do. That is, until one night I was knocked out of my state of oblivion. While having a beer at a local pub with some friends I happened to notice at the table of hipsters next to us, they were consulting their bibles while drinking their brews. Just then it struck me just how bizarre this whole hipster Christian thing was. Was this staged irony? Were they trying to make a statement? They just appeared to be a regular group of friends enjoying some light-hearted conversation. But I couldn't stop thinking, “What is with the Bibles?”

There is something very unsettling about this postmodern disruption of the sign. This suspension of meaning makes it hard for one to evaluate situations and has a way of rendering you motionless. Leaders on all sides of the political spectrum are struggling with the paradoxes of postmodernity, either by arguing for “back to basics” campaigns or more progressive ideals of change. But regardless of ideological affiliation, everyone seems to agree with the general consensus that shifting times are indeed upon us. Political sways over the last decade seem to suggest that American society is shifting to a more liberal outlook, specifically in regard to same-sex marriage. With the recent remarks of Pope Francis, I think it’s safe to assume that even the traditional institution of religion is responding to this cultural climate. Could the hip churches springing up across the nation be another sign that the fundamentalist sectors of religion is also letting loose on some of its central dogmas?

In *Hipster Christianity: When Church and Cool Collide*, Brett McCracken surveys the top hipster churches in the country and explores how contemporary churches navigate the postmodern terrain asking the central question “whether or not Christianity can be, or should be, or is, in fact, cool” (12). He discusses the main problems that arise with the merging of the church and the hipster that not only reveal the paradoxical weirdness of this whole phenomenon, but the complicated issues that traditional religion faces in a society rampant with rugged individualism. As I’ve pointed out in previous chapters, hip is grounded in ideas of liberty, civil disobedience, and individuality, and it is very much vested in the material world. Christianity seeks to transcend the ego and worldly concerns while hipsters are grounded in the self and cultural capital. It also promotes vanity and pride, features that really have no place in a religious setting. Another problematic aspect

of melding culture with religion is that hip moves with the cultural currents, and this ephemeral quality is a serious threat to values grounded in tradition.

The combining of culture and religion is a fairly new phenomenon. Up until about 1970, fundamentalism was quite comfortable in the square sphere of society, taking a stand against the moral degeneracy it saw in the beat and hippie subcultures. But by the end of the 60's, Christian leaders began to mirror the movements of consumer capitalism, interested in finding ways to reach out to countercultural youth movements:

Since around 1970, the idea of cool Christianity has in some ways reoriented the way evangelicals go about the business of being evangelical. They no longer focus on being safe and protected from culture, but being in culture—relevant to it, savvy about it, privy to what's "in," and totally comfortable with cool. (McCracken 76)

In many ways the idealism of the era provided fertile ground for the emerging church to take root; many hippies disenchanted with the empty hedonism of the sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll lifestyle would seek refuge in the purpose that the gospel offers. Equally, for those facing the threat of utter nihilism in the bleak end of an era of optimism and possibility, jaded by the Cold War and the failures of the anti-war movement, the assassinations of two of the most adored public figures in American history, riots, Cuban missile threats, etc., Christianity offered a strand of hope.

McCracken describes how a hippie outreach program that began in coffee shop known as The Living Room would sow the beginnings of Christianity in pop culture. The Jesus People Movement supplied the humble beginning of the Christian music industry

which began as non-profit in 1971, but would be thoroughly commoditized by the 1980's. Likewise, more and more evangelical leaders began to actively pursue cool in the interests of appealing to youth culture during the 80's and 90's igniting a "Purpose Driven, megachurch, seeker-sensitive zeitgeist" in the Christian community that would eventually drive many members away (88). In the article "Hipster Faith," McCracken describes this kamikaze course from Christ to kitsch in the Christian Evangelical youth movement:

...evangelicalism in the '90s had a firmly established youth culture, built on the infrastructure of a lucrative Christian retail industry and commercial subculture. Huge Christian rock festivals, Lord's Gym T-shirts, WWJD bracelets, Left Behind, and so forth. It was big business. It was corporate. It was schlocky kitsch. And it was begging to be rebelled against. (26)

Much like secular society, Christians became wise to the ruse of commodity capitalism, and began to grow weary of the empty and artificial spin of the "quick sell." But while the big business of Christianity may supply an outlet for the anti-establishment aspect of hipsterdom, it still doesn't describe its allure to secular society. While this rebellious aspect may appeal to those already within the Christian community, it still doesn't seem to be edgy enough to appeal to secular outsiders. So how does the church continue to tap into secular culture?

I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life...of a Hipster?

I've begun to realize that hipsters and Christians actually have a lot in common. The original idea of being able "to see" or "to know," can be easily translated to wisdom that Christians claim to profess. In many ways Christianity can be read as an exclusive practice.

The simple question “Are you saved?” automatically denotes an insider/outsiderness quality, implying that the person asking already has access to a privileged position. Then again, considering that it’s openly available to anyone that’s interested, shouldn’t it fail to produce the rebellious allure that hip has to offer? And it seems that the conservative aspects of Christianity would be a major turn-off to the secular desires of a hipster. Furthermore, the hipster is someone who wants to differentiate himself from the crowd, to be a trendsetter not a follower. So how do you go about convincing them to join the pack-mentality of the church?

McCracken describes how the emergent church is not only changing its image, but also co-opting secular values to appeal to a wider audience. Giving a survey of the top hip churches in the country he identifies some common markers that are appealing to a postmodern outlook:

The emerging church disdains rigid, systematized ways of looking at things. It loathes most of the twentieth century’s most significant “isms,” including fundamentalism, foundationalism, ethnocentrism, totalitarianism, fascism, consumerism, and so on. In fact, the idea that life can be reduced to or understood through any “ism” is essentially what the emerging church (ironically, under the guidance of postmodernism) rebels against. Isms represent the hegemony, “the man.” They represent unchecked power and dangerously reductive ideological influence. And for emergents, contemporary evangelicalism is one of the worst offenders. (136)

This aspect not only addresses the skepticism inherent in today's culture, but shows how the emerging church is able to co-opt secular values.

With this freedom, church leaders are able to revamp the church to appeal to this rebellious aspect of youth culture. The second most prominent characteristic in the emerging church is that Christianity is made out to be "edgier and less safe" (137). This materializes as painting Jesus as the original rebel against the establishment or using shocking rhetoric in the sermons. However, in the emergent church this can easily cross the boundary between hot and not if not done carefully. McCracken has a chapter on "wannabe hip churches" that lose their appeal in trying too hard to be hip either "with skate parks and bowling alleys inside their "Xtreme!" youth group buildings" or the fortysomething-year-old pastors sporting clothes from Hot Topic (179). Just like in secular culture, hip has to appear natural or it loses its appeal. Hip never has to actively recruit its followers; it just simply does so by natural consequence. This appears to be a highly problematic aspect for religious institutions interested in coopting hip to draw in new members. If going out and "spreading the good news" is marked as taboo even by its own members, how is it that they can hope to grow their congregation?

Guerillas for God?

One of the most intriguing aspects of the Sojourners is that you would never know that they were Christians unless you asked them outright. It's not as if they are ashamed of their faith, they just don't choose to rub it in everyone's faces or try to convert every "heathen sinner" they meet. The Sojourners reflect a lot of the changes in rhetoric that McCracken describes in his book. "Christian hipsters cringe at megachurches, altar calls,

and door-to-door evangelism” and they are doing everything they can to separate themselves from that image (McCracken 88). The outcome is that they appear to be much more tolerant and less judgmental of secular society. This is one of the ways that the hipster church really reflects a postmodern influence. They’ve recognized that society is far too complicated to rely on simple binaries:

Emergents do not like binaries. The idea that something must be this or that, and cannot be both, troubles them. A great fault of modern Christianity, they argue, lies in its emphasis on certain binaries: in vs. out, sacred vs. secular, good vs. evil, and so on. Though in truth, binaries may sometimes exist, they are never as black-and-white as modernity makes them out to be. Thus, while many emergents acknowledge a distinction between Christian and non-Christian, they are very reticent to assume any sort of final judgment as to how or where we can draw such a distinction. Their emphasis is not on who is saved or unsaved, in or out, but rather on the transforming power of the gospel for everyone. (McCracken 141)

Similarly, the Sojourners seek to co-exist with the communities they inhabit. In the article “Smells Like Holy Spirit,” Stephen George reports that the pastors at Sojourn are “trying to create a new church model, one a little lighter on the whole sacred/secular dichotomy.” In “Southern Baptist Numbers Dip” Peter Smith reports that “the church uses such things as art exhibits and neighborhood outreach to meet people because ‘we [Sojourn] don’t expect everyone to come into a church service’ ‘It’s not about being cool or hip or anything, it’s about being relevant and real,’ he said.” Remember the first rule of “Fight Club,” Sojourn

seems to operate in an eerily similar manner. In “Holy Rock-n-Rollers,” Joseph Lord reports that from 2006 to 2008, the 930 Art Center, owned and operated by Sojourn Community Church, hosted a wide range of musicians consisting “not only local bands but to high-profile acts, too.” But, this is nothing like the Christian pseudo-rock concerts of the 90’s, not only because the musicians and artists consist of both Christians and secularists, but also because nobody actively engages in recruiting new members at the events. The organizers of the shows claim “that members of their respective churches will - and have - discussed Christianity with curious concertgoers, but only when approached with questions” (Lord). So is this covert Christianity and guerilla marketing, or just a sign of emerging tolerance?

This is the Gospel According to Hip

While Sojourn leaders insist that they have “no underhanded ploys to gain new members,” it nevertheless appears to be working for them (Lord). This seems to be one way that the emerging church is coping with culture’s interests in individuality. Rather than expecting culture to change in respect to the gospel, they simply infuse Christ into every aspect of life:

“Christians, and people in general, have the tendency to compartmentalize their lives; 'I have my work over here, I have church over here, my social life over here,'" Janes, a bearded, bespectacled member of Sojourn, said while nursing a cup of coffee at Sunergos. "We believe that God is sovereign over all of those things. That includes art, music and entertainment. The reason we celebrate creativity in culture is because God himself is the creator. He created us in his image; it says that in first book of Genesis. Therefore, we are

inherently creative people, so we like to celebrate that creativity through art and music." (Lord)

This really isn't any new idea. When I was a practicing Catholic, every mass ended with a reminder to let Christ influence our actions in the world. Then again, this seems inherently different because it's not only about letting the Gospel guide your actions, but it somehow transfers every individual action as a direct expression of God. This is how secular culture is so easily adopted by the Hipster Church, because regardless of content, it always points back to God. Therefore, religious members are allowed to share the values of secular society.

McCracken describes how just like hipsters, Christians long for authenticity in their lives. Like much of secular society, the Christian hipstermentalists hate the works of Thomas Kinkade. "For Christian hipsters, Kinkade represents much of what is wrong with Christian art... His paintings are just so happy and naive and fake" (McCracken 162). Hipster Christians are less frightened by "worldly" things. They don't wish to be mindless followers of the faith, but to actively think about their relationship with God and their purpose in this world. They recognize that even secular art can be thought provoking and didactic, and like life, "art is messy and morally complicated" and may help us work through these dilemmas (163). And this is a reason why Sojourn is so appealing in Louisville's community, because they have co-opted many of the secular values of urban society and converted them in a way that appreciates people for their "God-given" talent.

So as George notes "the appropriate question is not whether they're actively trying to convert people — it's whether they have to." What started out in 2000 as a small group

of friends meeting weekly in a Bardstown Road apartment has turned in to a multi-campus mega-church. In fact, the congregation “quadrupled in size, from 300 or so to more than 1,200” in the 2 years prior to the publishing of this article in 2008. In the 2012 article “New Calvinism finds Southern Baptist fans” Peter Smith reports that Sojourn Community Church “has become Kentuckiana's newest large church, with attendance approaching 3,000 at four campuses in Louisville and Southern Indiana.”

But Smith also reported in 2010 in “Reluctant Megachurch” that Sojourn had never intended to become so large:

‘We were against “The Man,”’ recalled lead pastor Daniel Montgomery. “Most of our visions of 'large' were churches that were primarily driven by attendance, building, cash.” Not that Sojourn didn't want to reach people. But the twentysomethings worshipping in rented spaces around the Highlands figured they would grow to 150 members -- 250 tops -- and then subdivide, starting new churches elsewhere.

But other than aligning themselves as “anti-establishment” and heavily vesting themselves in the local art and music scene, Sojourn has managed to gain in popularity because of their willingness to practice what they preach. As McCracken notes:

[...] activism fits perfectly into the hipster value system: of always being active and fighting some foe (whether it's “the man” or the scourge of world poverty). Christian hipsters are no different. A defining characteristic of the new generation of cool young Christians is that they are aggressively on the

side of activism, of social justice, of getting their hands dirty to serve others and help the world [...]. (148)

Like the many companies offering new organic and “green” products in response to the cultural climate, Sojourn has tapped into the environmentalist aspect of our zeitgeist. Nevertheless, the question remains; are all these changes that Sojourn and other hipster churches suggesting a veer towards a New Christian Left? Or are they just cosmetic?

Buyer Beware

While some emerging churches are adopting more progressive and liberal views, McCracken reports that they are still the vast minority, but he does suggest that “the dawn of a new political era for evangelicals may come sooner than you think” (160). However, this new emphasis of social justice and activism could have a very positive impact on society. One fellow community member who doesn’t necessarily agree with Sojourn’s belief system voices that she generally sees them as a positive force in the community:

“But I do appreciate the individuals there and that they try to actually follow Jesus when it comes to poor people, the elderly and community building. They work very, very hard on neighborhood projects. I don’t have a problem with the fact they are in my neighborhood, and I’ve worked on lots of projects with Sojourn people outside of the church and find them enthusiastic and helpful.” (George)

By planting themselves in the run-down communities, Sojourn has done much in respect to urban renewal. And many of their members purposely relocate to these areas so they are

fully vested in the work they do. Regardless of this positive image, not everyone shares this enthusiasm about Sojourn's presence in the community.

Despite their edgy look, Sojourn is actually very much on the conservative end in the hipster church movement. As George writes "In its purest form, Sojourn is a Southern Baptist church, and the message here is not a particularly progressive one. Pastors counsel a strict adherence to scripture, which means abortion is murder, men are the natural-order leaders and homosexuality is a sin from which gays need to be converted and redeemed." Although these feelings may not be openly expressed in the public, they do in fact still exist within the church community. As Smith reports "Sojourn practices 'church discipline,' meaning that members and elders call one another to account for their sins" and "The church's opposition to sexual activity outside of marriage stands out both in the arts community in which it's involved and in the surrounding neighborhoods with large gay populations." In an interview, the head pastor and co-founder of the Sojourn Community Church, "said it's a matter of biblical principle, just as the church preaches against anger or consumerism":

"We are all broken sexually," he said. "The call is going to be the same for all people -- faith in Christ, faith and repentance. I believe churches that don't communicate what the Bible believes about human sexuality in relationship to same-sex attraction and relationships aren't communicating the whole gospel. They aren't communicating that change is possible." (Smith)

Their conservative views also adhere to strict ideals of the traditional gender roles, both within and outside of marriage. Women are not allowed leadership roles, which members say “this has prompted some people to leave, but others embrace it” (Smith).

The article in the *LEO* stirred a lot of controversy in Louisville and for good reason. The Sojourners truly believe that gay people can be “changed” through the healing powers of Christ. However, while this does strike a chord in me due to the potential bigotry and discrimination that this promotes, they do have an interesting point about diversity and tolerance. In “Erosia Xtra,” a response to the *LEO* article, one Sojourn pastor writes:

The river of tolerance and diversity flows both ways. We want to live at peace with this city — with those who agree and disagree alike. Only when we’re able to get past polemic and start to converse with people, real people not stereotypes, will we be able to have that kind of peace. Only when we’re ready and willing to live at peace with people we disagree with will we be able to build a better, richer city.

Society is a complex place, and a very evident result of this complexity is the hipster Christian. As McCracken writes, “They are torn between the very liberal, humanistic impulses of academia and progressive culture on one hand and somewhat archaic, inescapably old-school Christian values on the other” (101). Where do you draw the line between church and culture, especially when cultural cues are in direct opposition of the fundamental dogmas of the church?

Religious Jenga: Which Blocks to Keep

Culture has obviously had a big impact on the emergent Evangelical church but it seems to reside in the cosmetic for the most part. The emergent church appears to fashion itself like a hipster, cherry-picking traditional values and combining it with culture, producing some monstrous combination of bricolage and pastiche. While I respect that Sojourners have their own opinion, indeed I am grateful to live in a country that allows religious freedom, I am skeptical about the fact that they can allow so much restructuring in their institution and yet not allow for change in the values that discriminate based on sex and gender. Why is it that they can choose to throw out Leviticus 19:28, "Do not cut your bodies for the dead, and do not mark your skin with tattoos" yet keep Ephesians 5:22 "Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord"?

Perhaps the most baffling aspect of the hipster Christian is how educated, progressive minded women voluntarily submit to institutions that seek to silence them. I think this points to the opt out response of a hipster and the dangers of nostalgia. In *Homeward Bound: Why Women Are Embracing the New Domesticity*, Emily Matchar argues that the growing disenchantment with late-capitalism is causing a longing for a simpler lifestyle and influencing women to engage in an unusual form of rebellion: domesticity. Matchar claims that "the emergence of the hipster homemaker" is partly a response to our shaky economic conditions, but also due to the failures of the women's rights movement to promote institutional reform. "Things were supposed to be different...Feminism raised women's expectations for career satisfaction but the larger culture didn't rise up to meet these expectations. In fact, American culture at large has failed working mothers" (162). Matchar claims that many urban career women are realizing all the unnecessary work they

do just to keep up with consumption habits and are “Rejecting an all-consuming work culture in favor of slow pace do-it-yourself in fused stay-at-home wives” (159).

In many ways Christianity can also be viewed as a form of opting out. Dropping out of the mainstream is merely one step closer to giving everything over to God. While I can understand the comfort that’s available in the faith that “everything happens for a reason,” there are very harmful aspects of this retreat. The determinism that fundamentalist religion encourages displaces personal responsibility and can promote complacency in the face of injustice; likewise, if someone believes they are acting virtuously, determinism allows them to recognize it as divine influence. This would be fine, but in the cases where homosexuality and female empowerment are seen as sins, it’s just a small step away from justifying acts such as hate crime or domestic violence. While Sojourn has never displayed any of this hostility, one must address that this possibility exists considering that if they operate under the same mentality that helped influence operations such as the KKK.

As Jamison notes “a history lesson is the best cure for nostalgic pathos” (156). We must not allow the rosy veil of romanticism hide the mistakes we’ve made in the past. While there may be a urgent necessity to reevaluate our way of life in light of the self-imposed holocaust that we seem to be triggering by our consumption habits, we need to recognize that shopping at thrift stores or making our own soap is not going to inspire the amount of change that is required to undo the mess we’ve made with modernism. Opting out requires a position of privilege to opt out of, and unless we address the structures reinforcing this system that we are unhappy with, we can never hope to change anything.

However I do think that Sojourn has provided proof that people want to be involved, and all that may be required is a space for people to come together and a little guidance. Sojourn has shown ways in which we can promote community activism and may be the key to figuring out how to inspire a new wave of positive social change in in our generation. But, I would like to stress that this cannot occur if we continue to support ideologies that serve to discriminate and marginalize people on unfair grounds. If religious groups such as Sojourn can choose to deconstruct scripture and interpret it in ways that are more relevant in modernity, then they should really reassess the harmful practices they choose to uphold.

Conclusion

“Where there is no hope, it is incumbent on us to invent it.”

— Albert Camus

This project began as an attempt to redeem that hipster. For me, there was something very disconcerting about the absolutist response to this subculture and I had hoped to uncover some hidden virtue in the hipster, a seedling of hope sprouting in the wastelands of modern society, some sign that we may be far less damned than predicted by T.S. Elliot. Regrettably, what I found was that the hipster is a materialization of a sickness present in postmodernity. If people look back at this age and read both the hipster and hipster hate as a text, I think they will see a society far more consumed by hypocrisy than any Canterbury Tale. The hipsters and the haters are two sides of a double-edged sword slicing away at a mythical assailant. Unfortunately it appears that the dialectic of class struggle has been replaced by the far more superficial dialectic of consumption.

However, while the hipster may not be any significant champion for social progress, he is not without virtue. While the elitist stance of the hipster may be slightly hypocritical,

it nevertheless has inspired a new wave of healthy consumerism. They've helped defray the taboo of thrift shopping and dumpster diving which promotes conservationism. Their ambition for authenticity has brought consumers back to the local-based economy, which has several beneficial factors. It signifies the return of something we've lost in capitalist culture. The barter and trade of the local market is an opportunity become grounded in community, something which is very much absent in the free floating suspension of postmodernity. Likewise, the environmental benefits of shopping local are extremely important in the age of climate change, air pollution, "plastic islands," oil spills...

Additionally, hipsters have provided an aesthetic that challenges traditional roles that are not so healthy in promoting equality. The hipster female portrays a more intellectual appearance for women and gives young girls the option to opt-out of the bubble gum branding that seems to begin at an earlier age with each passing decade. When I was growing up, brands didn't become an important factor until I reached middle school, whereas Justice and Bobby Jack began to show up on my daughters' Christmas lists by age six. Now that they've entered middle school Victoria's Secret "Pink" and Aeropostale have become the common requests and the hipster provides me a way to direct my girls away from superficial styles that portray women as sex objects. Similarly, the "hipster fem" aesthetic donned by men has challenged traditional norms of masculinity and has opened the possibility for tolerance, particularly in respect to the LGBT community.

However, there are also many problematic aspects that we must address as well. The problem with counterculture is that it recognizes a problem, but fails to produce an answer other than opting out. In order to opt out, you have to be positioned to opt out from,

which denotes privilege. While a hipster may shop local or purchase organic, the fact of the matter remains that since the 60's, antimaterialism has been late capitalism's biggest cash cow. Furthermore, most people don't have time to grow their own vegetables or the income to shop local, and by opting out of the mass market, the hipster just creates an alternative market that cultivates elitism and fails to recognize the underlying structural problems. By the same token, the hipster lifestyle promotes a false sense of "do-gooder-ness" in its practitioners that allows them to ignore some of the more pressing issues we face in modernity. While they may promote healthier consumption habits, in reality it is more of a latent cause and thus more closely related to the "slectivist" model that's become a trend in our culture. Just like the pink ribbons for breast cancer or "liking" a charity on social media, while this may help raise awareness, it essentially does little in respect to social action and is counter-productive in the fact that it supplies the false sense that it does.

Additionally, we need to recognize the imaginary threat of identity theft and rather than running from this invisible assailant by recreating ourselves we need to meet it head on and recreate the world instead. While the class consciousness that Marx called for could have been effective at some point in the early stages of capitalism, this is no longer the case. Capitalism has evolved faster than we can keep up. For the most part, oppression has moved out of our sight into the third world, and the fact that livelihoods depend upon the submission to the globalized economy is one example of how colonialism has evolved with it. Just because slavery is no longer enforced by a whip doesn't mean that it no longer exists. The whip has merely been replaced by the threat of starvation and until we recognize our own place on the top of this social hierarchy, change cannot occur.

But this mission is not to be confused with the traditional aims of Marxism. As Jameson notes, “capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has happened to the human race, and the worst” (47). What we need to do is further develop this hip ability “to see” and utilize it to promote positive social change. This vision is what Jameson refers to as a “cognitive mapping” and is an attempt to “renew the analysis of representation on a higher and much more complex level” (51). In Lacanian terms, it’s a revision of the “symbolic order” that reconnects us to “the Real,” a mending of “the signifying chain” that has been broken by postmodernity (26). Only then will we gain the ability to see through the “hysterical sublime” that envelopes everyday life (34).

If a simpler life is what we long for, then we need to opt in for change, rather than opting out to serve ourselves. Religion could be a powerful tool for promoting positive social change, but the refusal to give up harmful customs hurts society rather than heals it. Poststructuralism has opened the possibility to create new meaning, but with this comes great responsibility. Both religion and rationalism have served as catalysts for the most egregious atrocities in human history. But we mustn’t allow this to prohibit us from moving forward; nor must we fall into relativist traps. I believe both the hipster and the Christian have much to teach about society and about ourselves. The hipster is a symbol of the liberty and autonomy we have in forging our own identity. In the Christian there can be hope for community. We need to find a place in the middle, between head and heart, and hopefully create a better future without taking our eye off the past. The fact of the matter is that we are all hipsters in some way, shape, or form, and until we accept this, we’re doomed to remain in the perpetual cycle of postmodernity.

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