

TITLE: "Where you From!": Gang Identity as Performance

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Abstract:

This paper investigates how young people in an inner-city ecology invoke the relevance of gangs by demanding, "Where you from!" Such a challenge creates a lively venue for performing identity and emotional manipulation, for both for the instigator who offers the challenge, as well as the respondent. Rather than conceptualizing young people as "gang members," and "gangs" as a static group, this analysis shows how the doing of gangs is strategic and context-sensitive. Such an approach provides an alternative to conceptualizing identity, and especially gang identity, as a fixed personal characteristic, but as a sensual response to a moment's vicissitudes.

Keywords:

gangs, identity, performance, inner-city, boundaries

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Over the past fifty years, social scientists have increasingly turned from essentializing identity as a fixed characteristic, to understanding identity as performance. Building from Goffman's (1959, 1976) seminal work on impression management, and Garfinkel's (1984) and Sacks' (1995) insights into identity as an accomplishment, identity is increasingly recognized not as an obdurate quality, but as a resource whose relevance is strategically, contextually determined. Yet aside from a few notable exceptions (Conquergood, 1994a, 1994b, 1997; Mendoza-Denton, 1996), such insights have not been applied to the study of gang members. This paper addresses that gap by exploring a central interaction ritual through which young people invoke the relevance of gang identity by demanding to know of others, "Where you from."

According to Cohen (1990:12), "That membership in gangs confers identity (...) could be the single most common proposition encountered in the literature on gangs." Yet this proposition is rather static, concerned with such questions as whether a gang is a primary or secondary group, why young people become gang members, what they do in a gang, or how they leave a gang. However, "gangs" do not exist as an autonomous entity, a force such as gravity, bidding members to do its dirty work. Rather, gang members have agency, and through that agency, they may invoke whether or not a membership category such as "gangs" is relevant in a given circumstance. Matza (1964) alluded to the point, in using the metaphor of "drift" to capture the nuances of delinquent activity. Yet the metaphor is not quite apt in regards to gangs, for at times, a young person definitely is a gang member, and at other times, the same young person definitely is not, without any necessary gradual escalation or deescalation in gang-related behavior. Instead, drawing from the metaphor of performance, this study examines a central mechanism through which gang membership is invoked as a members' reification practice, which may just as well dereify gangs.

The primary contribution of this study then, is in applying the performative turn to gangs. Young people in ecologies where gangs are active may modulate ways of talking,

walking, dressing, writing graffiti, wearing make-up, and hiding or revealing tattoos in playing with markers of embodied identity, to obscure, reveal, or provide contradictory signals on a continuum from gang-related to nongang-related (Conquergood, 1994a, 1994b, 1997; Mendoza-Denton, 1996; Garot and Katz, 2003). The demand, “where you from,” intended to resolve any ambiguity, actually becomes merely another resource to be worked in the contingent, variable effort in which young people everywhere engage in molding the self. This paper examines this emotional challenge to identity as a language game (Wittgenstein 1953), in an interaction ritual designed to create action and challenge face (Goffman 1967). I discuss this power of language in the doing of identity and emotional manipulation in a stepwise fashion, exploring first the anticipation of being hit up, and then the three turns of the interactional sequence. First, however, I elaborate on the chasm between the gang and performance literatures, discuss the methods of this study, and outline the basic features of “hitting up.”

Gangs and Performance

To be asked, “Where are you from?” is a highly common way of initiating an interaction with a stranger. As Harvey Sacks insightfully explained, certain questions like “What do you do?” and “Where are you from?” comprise “some very central machinery of social organization” (Sacks 1995:40). Through such questions, “a vast amount of stuff is handled by members” (Sacks 1995:41), in that they solicit categories as a basis for a wide range of inferences. Hence, they are especially prominent in the early parts of conversation, since following receipt of the category, “you feel you know a great deal about the person, and can readily formulate topics of conversation based on the knowledge stored in terms of that category” (Sacks 1995:41). Furthermore, the way the addressee of such a question responds reveals a great deal about local expectations, for there are potentially limitless ways to respond, but few are recognized as locally competent (see Garfinkel 1984, Heritage

1984:135-178). Whichever identities are invoked provide a vital resource for sustaining interaction.

D. Lawrence Wieder's analysis of "telling the convict code" provides the foundation for grappling with members' resourcefulness. In studying ex-convicts at a halfway house, he was "struck by the extent to which [the convict code] was verbally formalized" as a resource to justify a response or lack of response to his interview questions (2001:77). Such a code is often used by sociologists to describe the rules that organize prison subcultures, especially, "don't snitch," and Wieder wondered if the ex-cons had read the sociological literature on the convict code. Then, as he reflected on the paucity of information he was gaining from members, he realized, "the difficulty I was experiencing was produced by the same phenomenon I was trying to investigate" (2001:78). His study shows how members do not merely operate according to the sociologists' analytic descriptions, but interpret behavior according to their own theories, which they invoke as constituent features of their settings. As analysts and readers of prison subculture, we read the code as a proxy for the behavior of prisoners, who apparently abide by the code. Wieder, however, found that prisoners, or in his specific case, residents of a half-way house, do not simply "follow" the code. Rather, they use the convict code in order to "maintain, transform and elaborate" meanings in routine activities, in a similar way to how I found young people use gangs.

Descriptions of invocations of gang membership are a common topic in the gang literature. As Jack Katz (1988, 141) states, "virtually all ethnographies of street violence among adolescent elites describe fights generated by *interrogations* or spontaneous *declarations* of group membership on public streets." Such declarations include public pronouncements such as: "We're the Vice Lords, the mighty Vice Lords!" (*ibid.*, 142), "parading" "in apparent unison while displaying... insignia of membership" (*ibid.*, 142), as well as various means of undermining school authority. Katz does not, however, explore the practical dynamics of street elites' "interrogations," nor do other scholars of gangs. For

example, Brotherton (1994), while entitling his article, “Who do you Claim?” does not analyze such claiming practices per se. Others, such as Monti (1994) and Decker and Winkle (1996) determine gang membership for analytic purposes by asking respondents if they claim, without recognizing how such “claims” are highly variable and dependent on how the respondent reads the local context. This phenomenon is surely known by gang scholars, although it has not been analyzed as a topic, since “gangs” are analyzed as a phenomenon in themselves, similar to a club or an institution, rather than as a constitutive feature of a local ecology (see Katz and Jackson-Jacobs, 2004).

Moreover, to question a young person’s gang affiliation is not primarily of relevance to gang researchers, but to young people. “Who you claimin’?” “Where you from?” or “What you be about” (Conquergood, 1994a:27) are locally recognized interrogation devices, and central practices for demonstrating a gang identity and forcing the respondent to make an identity claim in terms of gangs. Thus ecologies of gangs provide fertile ground for grappling with how identity is done. Through dress, (Davis, 1992; Entwistle 2001; Garot and Katz, 2003) mannerisms (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Young 1980; Sudnow 1978), and language (Gumperz 1982; Schegloff 1992a; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995), individuals make and dispute claims to identity based in socially recognized categories, and such claims and contestations become the bases for sustaining interaction. While scholars have examined the performance of class (Willis, 1977; MacLeod, 1995; Granfield, 1992), race and ethnicity (Moerman, 1974; Cohen, 1978; Wieder and Pratt, 1989) gender (Young, 1980; West and Zimmerman, 1987; Butler, 1990; Thorne, 1993; Mendoza-Denton, 1996), and sexual identity (Queen, 1997; Yoshino, 2006), this study examines a central interactional mechanism for performing gangs.

Methods

Over a four year period, I participated and observed in and around Choices Alternative Academy (CAA), a small inner-city alternative school designed for young people

aged 14 to 21 who had dropped out of school for 60 days or more, in a six census-tract area with some of the highest crime and poverty in the Western United States. Initially, I was introduced to the school to survey school-to-work transition, and later I chose it as a setting where I could spend a sustained period of time with young people, and be of service to them. Built from a combination of federal and local funding, CAA is located in a large, highly populous, diverse county. Roughly half the students are Latino, half African-American, and some are from Asian-Pacific islands such as Samoa, or Central-American countries such as Belize. Students who are sent there often have histories of violence, drug use, truancy, dropping out of school, and teen pregnancy. I spent my time in the school hanging out in the classroom and on the yard, tutoring or finding other ways of engaging with young people. I rarely took jottings at the setting, but I did write extensive fieldnotes on the evening of each day's observations, following practices handed down by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995). For a detailed entrée tale, including dilemmas of managing relations with both students and teachers, African-Americans and Latinos, young men and young women, as well as a number of chapters on teachers' and administrators' perspectives on gangs, see Garot (2003).

After a number of weeks in the setting, I began to conduct interviews with students away from their classrooms. Eventually, I came to interview 46 students, six repeatedly, plus eleven teachers, two administrators, one security guard, and a community activist. I chose the young people I interviewed based on a number of criteria, seeking a racial/ethnic balance that would mirror the neighborhood, and represent variation along the continuum from gang-banger to non-gang-banger, nonviolent to violent. I also sought to interview students with a variety of interests, including those who excel academically, musically, in sports, or mechanically. The range of talents and abilities of young people who have been marginalized in educational settings of last resort, such as alternative schools and special education programs, is not only remarkable, but stunning, as is evident in many of interview excerpts below. I refer to those I interview as "consultants," as I use their accounts as

resources (Heritage, 1984) to report events I was unable to observe first-hand. All names of staff, students, the local gang, gang colors, and schools are pseudonyms.

Interviews were semi-structured, open-ended conversations, lasting from one to twelve hours, and were taped and transcribed. Sessions with students spanned their life-history (see Vigil, 1988), covering such topics as places the consultant lived, reasons for moving, descriptions of fights, drug use, experiences in school, intimate and familial relationships, hobbies, and experiences with gangs. Transcripts were provided for consultants when possible, checked for accuracy, and used as the basis for further questions. Interview excerpts with teachers and administrators are not included in the data which follow, as they lacked *first hand* experience with the phenomenon.

I coded and analyzed data according to the traditions of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and analytic induction (Katz, 1983), as formulated by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) and Becker (1998). Validity is assured first and foremost through an in-depth, long-term commitment to the field (see Emerson, 1987), leading to a rapport which facilitates honesty, an understanding of the reputations of consultants, and opportunities to probe non-obvious ways of checking statements in order to avoid compromising confidentiality. Some consultants revised prior statements once they came to know me better, and many were interviewed more than once over the four-year period. A second check of validity occurs during coding, as similar statements are juxtaposed, and statements which do not “ring true” are easy to spot. The data are reliable insofar as anyone else in this setting, at this time, with the level of rapport I gained, asking the questions I asked to those I asked, with a desire to listen, would likely find similar results. Taking the time to build such rapport and ask similar questions at other locales is the only way to find how generalizable the patterns discussed below might be.

“Hitting Up”

For the purpose of this analysis, the member who proffers, “Where you from” is the instigator, and the addressee is the respondent. In the inner city setting of this study, to be “banged on,” “sweated,” or “hit up” literally means that one young person approaches another on a street, in a park, school, flea market or other public place, and in the local vernacular, “tells” (not asks) the other, “where you from.” Anyone who lives in the locale of this study knows that the instigator is demanding to know the respondent’s gang affiliation. A variant of “where you from,” is “what you write,” used by taggers.

To “hit up” makes relevant a number of tacit assumptions in an immediate, instantly recognizable manner. First, the instigator must be a member of a gang, since “everyone knows” only gang members “hit up” (in fact, “hitting up” is the characteristic act that constitutes gang membership), and only a gang member would find it relevant to know the gang affiliation of a stranger. Secondly, the instigator is willing to engage in violence, due to the assumptions following from the knowledge that he is a gang member, as well as the known possibility that the respondent could be a member of a rival gang. In such a case, if the gang is claimed, violence is supposedly assured. Even if a gang is not claimed, “hitting up” is often a prelude to a robbery. Third, the instigator shows, by asking the question, that he perceives the respondent to embody a similar ecology or habitus, such that the prompt has meaning for him (Bourdieu 1984). Yet, the posing of the prompt also demonstrates that the instigator and the respondent are strangers, at least as far as their potential gang affiliations are unknown to each other.

An instigator may hit up a respondent for a number of reasons. The ostensible reason for a young person to hit up is to uphold his gang’s boundaries and punish intruders from rival gangs, thereby showing s/he is “down for the hood,” possibly leading to “props” (praise) from “big homies” (older, sponsoring gang members); however, this analysis shows that other motives may be found, such as commencing a robbery, a fight, or a shooting. As a folk

sociologist, the instigator is more likely to hit up based on fixed characteristics such as age (usually 15 to 25) and gender (instigators usually hit up those of the same gender), as well as temporary characteristics, such as clothing style, as one is more likely to be hit up others wearing clothing whose colors diverge from the colors of the neighborhood (although clothing alone is neither a necessary nor sufficient cause). Instigators may also look to hit up others who appear tough or “hard,” and who walk with long, lunging strides known as “mobbing,” associated with gang members (see Garot and Katz, 2003).

Two ranges of responses are considered possible by the respondent within the ritualized script of being “banged on.” The first range of responses is negative, in that the respondent does not make any positive claims on his own behalf. The most typical responses of this sort are “nowhere,” and “I don’t bang.” Such responses leave the respondent in a rather submissive, inferior stance in regard to the instigator, since the instigator has already implied that he is in a gang, while the respondent has literally stated that he is, “from nowhere,” and is claiming no identity for himself. This is important to consider in light of the subjective moral dominance established in robberies, discussed below.

Through a second range of responses, the respondent “claims” his gang. The respondent, however, does not know the instigator’s gang, and therefore does not know if his response may lead to violence by the instigator. Even if the instigator may appear small in stature, he may conceal a weapon such as a gun or knife, or he may have a host of friends nearby ready to assist him. Hence, even “hard core” gang-bangers often do not claim to be affiliated with a gang when they are “hit up,” especially if they are deep in rival territory. This phenomenon is known as “ranking out,” and will be discussed at length. Even if a respondent is not in a gang, he is often be accused of being a “ranker” by the instigator if he does not claim a gang. Such a term, “ranker,” is seen as synonymous with a host of other terms that impugn one’s masculinity, such as “bitch,” “punk,” “pussy,” “lemon,” etc. If a respondent is in a gang, he may fear that the fact that he “ranked out” will get back to his

gang. According to local gang lore, the punishment for “ranking out” ranges from “getting checked” (getting punched by or having to fight a fellow gang member), to receiving “discipline,” (fighting with a number of fellow gang members), to “getting the green light,” meaning that fellow gang members may shoot the “ranker” on sight (such notorious legends are often affiliated with Mexican Mafia, or La M—with a Spanish pronunciation).

However, the potential violence that may result from being hit up should not be overplayed, as many nonviolent outcomes are possible, even in highly volatile circumstances. In fact, we will see how “hitting up” leads to a peaceful, if tense outcome for two young rivals for one young woman’s affections. In such cases, the respondent claims a gang or a set that is friendly with the instigator’s gang. “Hitting up” may even bode the beginning of a friendship, as the instigator and respondent begin “calling” the names of those they know, finding common acquaintances. Alternatively, an instigator may be satisfied that the respondent is not a member of a gang, and not try to further antagonize him by calling him a ranker. Or the respondent may be called a ranker, and not desire to respond.

The attractions of hitting up and the shame of being hit up are reflected grammatically, for while the instigator is described through the active voice, as “gang-banging,” “hitting-up” etc., the respondent is left objectified in the passive voice, as that which is “banged on,” “hit up,” or “sweated.” As Molotch and Boden (1985:285) state, “Demands for ‘just the facts,’ the simple answers, the forced-choice response, preclude the “whole story” that contains another’s truth.” The only active verb to describe an action of the respondent, other than to “claim” a gang, is an action associated with losing face in respect to upholding a “hard” masculine identity: “ranking out.” There is no term for a person who is not involved in a gang, and does not claim it when he is “hit up.” *This highlights how “hitting up” marginalizes young men who do not claim a gang in such an ecology.*

Below, this paper examines the phenomenon of being “hit up,” “sweated,” or “banged on” in terms of four stages. First, I explore how young people in the inner-city anticipate the

prospect of being hit up on the horizons of everyday experience. I then explore variations in this process turn by turn, by first examining the vocabulary of motives (Mills, 1940) which respondents attribute to instigators in the first turn of the sequence, then exploring the ways respondents have of replying to this threat in the second turn, and finally probing the responses that may ensue from the instigator in the third turn.

Anticipating Violence on Everyday Horizons

The awareness of the possibility that one may be hit up creates an imposing crossroads on the horizons (Gurwitz 1966; Bittner 1967; Emerson and Paley 1992) of the experiences of young people in the inner-city. This section explores how such young people orient to the possibility of being hit up as part of their everyday course of affairs, through an exploration of their discussions of “hitting up” as a hypothetical event. As Shawn, a 20 year-old Belizean states,

“Wherever you go, there’s always somebody walkin’ up to you wanna know where you from, what you claim. When somebody come up and ask me where I’m from, I still gotta brace myself to whatever he wanna do. He could wanna ask me where I’m from just to see if I’m down for myself. Or maybe he wanna jack me, just askin’ me where I’m from.”

For Shawn, the possibility of being hit up is practically ubiquitous, as it happens, “wherever you go” making this interaction ritual constitutive of the local ecology. Part of the thrill of “hitting up” and the menace of being hit up is its unpredictability, since the respondent has no idea what the instigator may be planning. As Shawn states, “I still gotta brace myself.”

The two possibilities Shawn mentions: to see if he’s “down for himself” (able to hold his own in a fight), or to jack (steal from) him, do not necessarily follow from the more apparent reasons for the question: to determine the respondent’s gang affiliation. Yet, as we will see, some young men begin a fight by “sweating” a stranger. Thus, “where you from” becomes a test of masculinity, to see if the respondent is “down for himself.” I also discuss Shawn’s second reason for the prompt, “he wanna jack me,” below.

“If you live here long enough, you know that question by heart, and you know what to say,” according to Tim, a leader of the dominant local gang, “Central.” Such responses are rehearsed, and must be provided in a way to demonstrate local competence. Conversely, if you haven’t lived “here long enough,” you may not know what to say. In the following excerpt, Oliver, a 14 year-old Latino, turns the question on me.

“Well what would you say if somebody were to come up to ask you where you’re from?”

“I’d say UCLA.”

“Ahhh, tsk! UCLA, you just like a little bitch.” he laughs mockingly.

I laugh with Oliver. “What should I say?”

“What do you wanna say? You can’t say UCLA.”

“What would you say?”

“Just say nowhere.”

“Nowhere?”

“Yep.”

“And do they accept that?”

“Yeah. Or tell ‘em you don’t bang. Sometimes they will leave you alone.

Sometimes they’ll sock your ass and jack you for your money. They’ll do it.”

By responding in such an incompetent manner, my masculinity is threatened, Oliver implies.

Moreover, “you *can’t* say UCLA,”--it simply is not a locally recognized possibility.¹ When I ask Oliver what he would say, he advises how someone in my position should respond, with “nowhere,” or “I don’t bang,” although this response is also not without risks.

I was not the only person in this setting who might have some difficulty in understanding local expectations. Below, Antoine, an 18 year-old African-American, tells me about some of the disjunctures he experienced after arriving from out-of-state.

“When I first came out here, it seemed like I always had on the wrong colors and stuff. People would ask me like, ‘Where you from?’ I was like, ‘Louisiana.’ [The interviewer chuckles.] They were like, ‘Huh?’ So I guess they tried to bang on me, but I wasn’t knowing. I was telling them where I was from. They thought I was tryin’ to be funny about it.”

In this classic description of a breach, Antoine’s understanding of a “normal” and “natural” way to respond to this prompt contradicts what would be expected, eliciting my laughter.²

As his narrative continues, he tells me how his cousin had to school him in the local ecology, telling him, “Man, there’s Crips and Bloods out here.”

The standardized quality of the ritualized exchange that ensues when one is hit up is practically as obdurate as a script, which any locally competent member can easily cite and explicate. In the excerpt below, Richard, a 16 year-old African-American young man whose insights appear repeatedly in this text, provides a sense of this script as he sees it (for analytic clarity, I have moved each of Richard's points to a separate line).

“If you walk down the street with a black and red suit and this is a Crip neighborhood, it would be labelled not so much as disrespect, but not enough respect. So that would be a person that would be confronted first.”

“In what way? How would they be confronted?”

“If the person was, I have to say, between the ages of 15 and 25, 26, first, gang members would hit ‘em up, you know finger stuff.

And if they didn't respond to that, they run after ‘em. ‘Hey cuz, where you from? You know what I'm sayin'?

[They respond], ‘Well I don't bang.’

Like, ‘Whachu got all this on fo'?

‘I'm goin' to work.’

‘Nah cuz, I heard you's from this, I heard you from that.’

And if the person gets upset or gets angry, and shows a willingness to fight back, that's when the situation becomes violent, because the person that's doing, I guess you could say the interrogation, [he chuckles] already knows and can read the emotions of the person that's being taunted.”

Richard begins by making a point that wearing the “wrong” colors could be a prelude to being “hit up,” since it shows, “not enough respect.” Such a “mistake” does not necessarily lead to being “hit up,” as one may be hit up even when wearing the “right clothes,” but it does increase its likelihood. Richard then provides another necessary variable, age. Some young men speak of being hit up at a very young age, but this is rare,³ as it is rare to be hit up once one is visibly past adolescence. Richard is my only consultant who mentions hand signs as a precursor to verbally “hitting up.” Once the finger signals fail, the verbal prompt is given, and in his example, Richard provides the default response of one who is claiming not to be in a gang. Since the claim is counterposed by the clothing, the hypothetical respondent must account for this disjuncture. Richard then alludes to how violence might erupt, in the volatile space of the “third turn,” as the respondent may become angry, and the instigator who is conducting “the interrogation,” reads such emotions. Note

that in each of these cases, the consultant is speaking hypothetically. Below, we explore consultants' tales of actual events.

The First Turn

The young person who is hit up, like any victim of violence, struggles to attribute a motive to the instigator, and their vocabulary of motives are then "significant determinants of conduct" (Mills 1940, 908). Explanations of why one is hit-up revolve around accountable features of the local ecology, based on first, how well one is known, second, local gang and drug boundaries, and third, dress, discussed in turn below.

As Suttles (1968) notes, it is commonly overlooked that young people in the inner-city know each other. To ask another "where you from" shows that the other is unknown, but is of an age and an ethnicity to be potentially knowable. However, if one is already well known, he need not worry about being hit up in his community, as Everett states below.

"Have you ever had anyone ask you where you're from?"

"All the time. That don't bother me, 'cause you know it happens so much. Now, most of the time, when I'm around here, it's like never because everybody know me already, everybody know I don't gangbang."

While being known in one neighborhood may provide safety, it may portend negative consequences in an adjacent neighborhood. Below, Frank, an 18 year-old Latino who does not affiliate with a gang, tells how he feels safe with the members of the 18th Street gang who congregate on his block, because he socializes with them. However, Frank has to be wary when going outside his neighborhood, since rivals of 18th Street may see him, and associate him with their enemies.

"Since we live here so much, the gangsters kind of know us. So they kind of socialize, and if they see us, they're like, 'What's up.' We live here. But if we go to a neighborhood where they don't know us, they'll stop us and they might shoot, because now they're crazy."

"Is that 18th Street too?"

"No, over there is like BMX. We don't really go through like small streets neither, 'cause you never know who comes out of it."

"So why would they shoot at you? You've never been in a gang, and you don't ever gang bang."

“Cause sometimes, gangsters pass through your block. Since that’s 18’s block, they’ll probably see you. If you pass through their block, it’ll be like, ‘I seen that guy over there, and that 18th Street,’ and they’re gonna think you from 18 now. That’s what happens. Some reason, they’ll put you in the mix. And that happens kind of a lot too. And that’s why we kind of take care of ourselves, and just watch our backs.”
“Watch your back so you would go out with your brothers or your friends?”
“Just watch what street you go to. Don’t get into streets that look like they have gangsters on them.”

In the ecology of this neighborhood, where very little action is to be found (in the form of youth programs or other diversions), besides what young people create, Frank speaks of how simply walking through a neighborhood can take on the characteristics of a gamble. Frank fears going to BMX’s block, since he surmises that they have seen him, on “18’s block,” and thus put him “in the mix” of those involved with gangs. While such “mistakes” (compare Mendoza-Denton, 1996, 62) are common among neighbors, they are also quite common among the police (see Meehan, 2000). When I provide one local meaning for “watch your back” (see Anderson 1999), Frank gently corrects me, telling me that he means “watch your back” in terms of avoiding dangerous places.

Secondly, young people attribute being hit up to their position within local, shifting gang boundaries. In order to avoid being “hit up,” young men in this locale are cognizant of detailed cognitive maps of “safe” places and places to avoid (Conquergood 1994a; Roy 2004). Those who aren’t aware of such maps may be wary to leave the house. For instance, Brad, an 18 year-old African-American young man who attended military school for two years, describes facing such a situation below, since he was not current on the “rules.”

“I used to be scared of my neighborhood. I didn’t wanna go nowhere, because of the gangs and stuff like that.

“You knew about that street life before you went to military school.”

“Yeah. I’m saying, since I left for a certain amount of time, I didn’t know the rules, because the streets change everyday. There’s certain things you have to do, and you don’t do, and I didn’t know them at the time, so I was scared. It took time for me to learn the rules of the street again.”

“Can you give me some examples, what are some of the rules?”

“Like basically, know which street to go down, which street not to go down, who to talk to, who not to talk to, where to go. Where to ride your bike, stuff like that.”

“Did you ever make a mistake?”

“Nah. I stayed in the house.”

For those who do know the “rules,” or rather the social and geographic boundaries, they can be quite specific about the places they avoid. For Erick, a 16 year-old Latino, such a place lacks a name. He refers to it simply as “beyond.”

“Like over there, like Central and 23rd. I don’t go over there. That’s like a--whatchamacallit, what should I say--that’s beyond. I don’t really go there at all. If I go there, I don’t really try to show my face to nobody. I’ll just like hide if I go with my friend or something.”

Below, Richard explains how he adopts a quite complex cognitive map, judging the safety of an area by contextual cues, such as the number of children playing in the street, and relying on his street smarts to negotiate through areas that are borderlines between gang turfs (see Anderson 1990).

“When you’re going home from school, are there any places you avoid? Is it tricky negotiating the trip home?”

“I always try to avoid walking through any alleyways. I try to avoid walking on streets where there are three or less people.”

“Avoid that?”

“I avoid that. If you ever walk down a street and there’s only two or three people outside, most likely, the reason that they went inside the house is because they’re scared to come outside. If you walk down the street and it’s just empty, that’s not a good sign. So if you see a street where the kids are outside playing cans or hollering at each other from across the street, things like that, that’s good, very good, ‘cause that shows signs of life. That means that these people aren’t afraid of the area around.”

“What if there aren’t kids playing, but there’s groups of young men hanging out on porches?”

“Um, well that all depends.”

“Let’s say Friday afternoon.”

“If it was Friday afternoon and I was DEEP in Central territory, no, I wouldn’t do it. I wouldn’t walk down that street. I would care less. If I was on Cole, and the next street was Rand, and that’s like at the crossroads between the Blood and Crip neighborhood, I wouldn’t worry about it, because I would know I’m so close to the boundaries, they wouldn’t wanna start nothin’, because all you’d have to do is be like, ‘Well I know this person.’ It’s not too hard to find out who is who. And since I know how to talk, I know who people are, let him through.”

Here, Richard draws upon four sources of information in safely negotiating his way through the city. First, he avoids some places, such as alleyways, as a rule. Second, he reads the gestalt of a street as provided by contextual cues, such as the number of people outside, or whether children are playing (see Merleau-Ponty 1962). Third, he draws on his knowledge

of gang boundaries, knowing that “they wouldn’t wanna start nothing” on a dividing line, since it could quickly escalate. This is especially true if, as indicated in Richard’s fourth source of information, “I know this person,” as discussed above.

Young people not only form a cognitive map to avoid being hit up, they also hit up to form such maps. In some such cases, “hitting up” may have all the pragmatism of a business negotiation. Below, Bill, one of CAA’s drug dealers, discusses how this prompt provided an opening for his discussion with local gang members regarding where he would ply his trade.

“It was like, well I stayed in a Central hood. And it was like, I was bringin’ in the money like nothin, easy. And they [Central] asked me where I was from, and I was like, ‘I ain’t from nowhere. I’m just a money hungry mutha fucka.’”

After some negotiations, Bill arranged to move his drug business across the street, to a laundrymat just out of Central territory. He tells me how he kept his drugs in a baggy in one of the machines, so if the cops pulled up, he could pretend he was washing his clothes.⁴

Third, wearing the “wrong” clothes in the “wrong” area is also often seen as a pretext for being “hit up.” In the following conversation with Earnest, a Latino who works over 30 hours per week at a Latino grocery store and breeds pit bulls in his spare time, he tells of an instance of mistaken identification in response to my stock question: “So the whole time you were growing up, if anyone ever came up to you and said, ‘Where you from,’ what would you say?” He responds, “I would say, ‘I don’t gang bang’ and that’s it.” Yet, once when Earnest returns home after a day in school, the confrontation becomes violent, which Earnest attributes to his baggy clothing.

“They put mace on my eyes. They came up to me, they told me, ‘Hey, fuck 18th Street!’ They probably thought I was 18th Street, probably confused me. I used to dress with baggy clothes, not these jeans, [but] Ben Davis [pants]. They probably confused me. It was two guys, they came up to me and then they just told me, ‘Where you from homie?’ I said, ‘Nahh, man I don’t gang bang.’ ‘Why you dressed like that?’ ‘Cause I want to, man.’ They just took out like a little black bottle man and sprayed it in my eyes. It was right there by the Sports Arena, right there.”

While Earnest is Latino, Shawn, a Belizean, faces similar challenges with African-American gangs. Shawn, with whom I stayed in contact over the years, visiting at his house,

and inviting to my wedding, claimed an affiliation with the Crips, known for wearing blue. He faced a difficulty when problems with his father necessitated that he live with his sister, residing in a Blood neighborhood, where gang members are known for wearing red. In one of our early interviews in '97, he discusses walking down the street in her neighborhood:

“I knew there was gonna be some trouble now, ‘cause they had on red. As soon as I see that that’s apparently tellin’ me I gotta brace myself.”

“Mm hm. How many were there?”

“There were four or five of them. So he walked up to me he was like, ‘Blood where you from?’ I say, ‘I don’t bang.’ He was like, ‘You look like you bang to me, you havin’ all that flu,’ which is blue. And uh, I was like, ‘Nah man, I don’t bang.’ I said, ‘Would I be in neigh, would I be in your neighborhood, would I be in your territory if I was bangin’?’ He was like, ‘I don’t know but it seem like you bangin’ to the fullest.’ And so his homeboy took a swing at me...”

In sum, this section has explored how “where you from” is a resource to maintain group antagonisms, uphold gang boundaries, and enforce gang colors and clothing styles. Those who issue this demand enforce the “natural” quality of gangs, leading to such bizarre behaviors as wearing certain colors but not others, tilting the cap to the left but not the right, or tying the shoes in five holes but not six, becoming normative and accountable (see Conquergood 1997, 368). Inasmuch as demanding “where you from” is a resource to make gangs real, ways of responding to “where you from” often make gang affiliations disappear, as explained below.

The Second Turn

To be *told*, “where you from!” has a raw, intimidating power, which can leave a respondent speechless. Below, Tom recalls a time when he was “10 to 12,” visiting a nearby swimming pool.

“I went out there walking, and I had a big BK on the tongue [of my shoe]. At the time, British Knights, BK tennis shoes were real popular. BK stands for Blood Killer. I had those on, and as I walked out, I just hear, ‘Ah, Blood, look at this little dog! Whoop di whoop.’⁵ And all of ‘em turn around and I stopped, and like it just looked like everybody in that whole park was staring at me. I was nervous, man. I had butterflies in my stomach; my heart was racing real fast. He’s like, ‘Hey, little nigga, where you from? Where you from?’ And when I turned around to talk, I couldn’t even talk. You know how you get so nervous, it’s just like it tried to come out, but it couldn’t come out. My voice was real squeaky, and I remember them LAUGHING at

me. Then I was like, 'I don't gang bang, I don't gang bang.' They said, 'Ah man, leave that little nigga alone. He look like he about to cry.' I WAS!"

In this story, although Tom is not locally competent enough to know not to wear BK tennis shoes to the pool, he does know the meaning of "where you from." The reason for Tom's description of his shoes becomes clear in that it foreshadows Tom's feelings of disjuncture when he hears, "Ah Blood." At this point it is clear that he is providing a shame narrative, as he is "*before the community without being part of the community in any recognizable way*" (Katz 1999, 151). Through Tom's dramatic, colorful narrative style, we read how he senses his intimidation viscerally, in the "butterflies in my stomach" and "my heart racing real fast." Then, as if clarifying the nature of the confrontation, one of the men in the group "bangs on" little Tom. Then Tom presents his voice as apart from himself, stating, "But *it* couldn't come out." As Katz (1999, 145) states, "Shame... recognizes its provocation by a vividly sensed inability to respond" exacerbated when the young men laugh at him. Finally, he is able to utter the response recognized as appropriate in this instance, even though it is contradicted by the evidence of his tennis shoes, and the instigators abate their confrontation, apparently out of sympathy for his tears (see Garot 2004).

After this incident, Tom tells how he walked out of the park, but started running as soon as he was out of sight. Once he arrives at home, his cousins ask him what's wrong, but according to Tom, "I couldn't even talk." One of his female cousins sits down with him in a bedroom and gently solicits his story, helping him to cathect the shame (see Freud 1900, 177) he felt at being unable to speak, and in running away.

Such fear and shame are integral to the emotional power of such street interrogations, yet as young people become more mature and experienced, they become accustomed to this demand, and develop ingenuous ways of responding, avoiding such emotional turmoil. While the ostensive purpose of "banging on" is to force a respondent to reveal their gang affiliation, respondents take many features of the immediate ecology into account before

responding. Just as respondents consider preexisting relationships, geographic location, and dress as reasons for being hit up, they also take such factors into account in considering how to respond to this common, yet potentially life-threatening situation.

Despite the fact that certain young men may claim to be gang members at some times, they aren't gang members *all the time*. Young men who affiliate with gangs engage in many activities, in an engaging class, around a dinner table, or at the movies, where their gang identity is irrelevant. Gang members may also strategically disavow their membership in a gang by ranking out. To "rank out" means that when someone *tells* you "Where you from," you respond with, "I ain't from nowhere," even though, in some sense noted above, others may see you as a gang member at some times. Even Tim, a recognized leader of Central, could mention times when he'd "ranked out on his hood," and expressed disdain for those who didn't rank out on their hood. For instance, below he refers to an incident where the young person he "banged on" was "about to" admit his rival gang affiliation. For Tim, such a person is "stupid," because, "I could've shot him."

"Actually, he was from one of my rival gangs. He was about to say 'Yes,' or some stupid answer. I coulda shot him 'cause I [high pitched:] had the gun right there. Wouldn't nobody be stupid enough to say 'Yeah,' if you see the gun and someone asks if you from--are you from this place?--but some people are."

Four years later, I spoke with Billy, another leader of Central, who provided me with a similar justification for ranking out

"My friends way over there, and I'm way over here. And if I ranked out, who gonna know? My friends ain't gonna know I ranked out. My friends ain't gonna go over there they self. *If I feel this fool gonna take my life over a street, I'm cool, I ain't gotta claim that street just for five minutes.* Just for a second. When you get back to your home, then you know where you from. But you can be stupid and try to tell 'em where you from, and let your life get took, that's on you! But I'ma be the smart guy. Shit. I'm tryin' to survive! I'm tryin' to see mo' days. I'm tryin' to see stuff I ain't never seen before. I'm tryin' to have things I ain't never had before. Go places I ain't never went. I'm tryin' to live right now. I wanna be here for a long time, and I mean a long time. Right now, I rank out for five minutes, for a second. I rank out. OK."

While Billy repeats Tim's insight that claiming a gang is stupid, especially when one sees a gun, he also notes that his friends are likely not to know that he ranked out, since they would not go to that area where they would have to rank out themselves.

Nevertheless, many young men 'in the hood' define a "ranker" as tantamount to a coward, who is unwilling or unable to defend his manliness, or a "punk," the term for the object of homosexual predators in prison. Such a term applies to anyone who does not claim a gang affiliation when they are hit up, regardless of any "real" affiliation with a gang. Below, Jaime notes that many attempt to pose as a "badass" (Katz 1988) by looking "all gangstered out," but when push comes to shove, few, if any, are consistently able to "hold their heads up." Thus, Jaime, a 20 year-old Latino, expresses great disdain for such young people.

"They kicking it or whatever, and some big fools from somewhere else or whoever comes and hits 'em up, 'Where you from?' They gonna straight out be like, 'Nah, we ain't from nowhere.' Rank out, straight out. 'We ain't from nowhere,' put their heads down. I know what I'm telling you 'cause I seen it. Any mother fuckers they'd slap 'em. Like 'Bam!' slap 'em. They ain't gonna do nothing man. They just all gangstered out, all bald headed, looking criminal."

Below, Earl, an 18 year-old African American, who had been evangelizing as a born-again Christian for the two years prior to our interview, had discussed with me intimate details of his sex life, tactics for manufacturing and distributing illegal substances, and even possibly murdering a rival gang member. However, the only topic he was wary of mentioning on tape was "ranking out."⁶

"There was a lotta times when stuff went down--there was times man when I even rang--I even say this on the tape--I even ranked out on the hood once."

"Ranked out, what's that?"

"When somebody asked me where I was from, I told 'em I wasn't from nowhere, once, once. And that's no lie."

"When was that?"

"This was like, I'd been in the hood for a little while. I'd been in the hood for like a year. I ranked out on the hood. 'Cause some Dodge City Crips had asked me where was I from, and I remember I told 'em nowhere. Nigga pulled up on me in a car, asked me where I'm from, and they look like they heated [ie, with guns]. I told 'em "nowhere." And I admit man, I got heat from the homies by that."

"They found out about it?"

“Yeah, ‘cause I told ‘em, I talk to ‘em. I got heat from the homies, but I believe I got what I deserve.”

“What’d they do?”

“They gave me like a warning.”

“Which means--”

“I remember the big homies, they was like, they was tellin’ me that, ‘We should jump you nigga.’ [He laughs.] That was basically it. ‘We should take yo’ head off. You don’t EVER rank out on the hood.’ I was scared as hell.”

In this case, Earl is on the other side of a gun held by one like Tim. Yet, unlike Billy, he doesn’t present such “ranking out” as “cool” or “smart,” but rather as a most shameful act which he hardly dares to mention. For such a transgression of hood loyalty, Earl states, “I got what I deserve.”

Yet an ostensive gang member may find ways to respond to the challenge, “Where you from,” without ranking out, and without claiming an affiliation, as David demonstrates below.

“I was up at this gas station right here on Main. We went to get some air in our bikes. I had on all blue like I got on right now. Shit he just drove over to us. They was like, got a big ass gauge on me. That boy be like right in my face, [menacingly:] ‘Where you all from?’ I was like, ‘Nigga there’s Blood all around here, right? That’s right.’ I think fools didn’t shoot me because my homeboy that I actually hang with, he was one. Every time I see that market there, that’s what I think about, that shit.”

As a Crip who is wearing blue, David goes with his friend to a gas station in a Blood neighborhood to put air in his bike. A group of men drive up to David in a car, one of them pointing a 12-gauge shotgun at him. In response to the challenge, David refers implicitly to the common sense knowledge that, “There’s Blood all around here, right?” In other words, although he is wearing blue, he begs the question, “Would a Crip be so stupid as to be caught here?” Yet in retrospect, he considers that it wasn’t his quick wit, but his affiliation with a (nonpresent) Blood that saved him. Still, he cannot help but remember this traumatic incident each time he passes that locale.

Another variation on ranking out is presented by Roger, a rather hard core tagger, who speaks of ranking out as a strategic measure to employ at a new school when your crew

is still small. Once a fair number of members have joined, however, they may begin to “claim.”

“If I was the only one from GC right here, and I had lots of enemies, and they was to tell me ‘Where you from?’ I would tell ‘em ‘Nowhere,’ until I get a lot of fools in. Then if I get fools in, I just keep it fool [quiet] until we get deeper than them nigga’s. We’ll fuckin’ come out on them. That’s what we did at Jamison High. At Jamison I used to be from BBC and nobody like BBC; it was full of enemies. ‘Where you from?’ ‘Nowhere, nowhere.’”

Aside from simply ranking out, a number of consultants have artfully devised ways to subvert the either/or, shameful/prideful dichotomy imposed by the demand, “where you from.” While the most common response is, “I don’t bang,” or “nowhere,” this statement makes no positive claims for the self, capitulating that the only ecologically recognized alternative to gang banging is nothing. As we saw above, such a response may be just as likely to lead to violence as claiming a rival gang, since one may be accused of being a “ranker,” whether or not one is ostensibly in a gang. Some consultants, however, use that second turn space following “where you from” to lessen the chance that violence might follow. Below, Richard tells how he turns the tables.

“I get it almost everyday. ‘Hey, where you from? I heard you bang over here, I heard you bang over there.’ I be like, ‘Dang, I don’t gang bang MAN!’ He be like, ‘Well where you from, where you used to be from?’ I was like, ‘I never gang bang. I just moved out here from DETROIT. It’s kinda cool but you know what I’m sayin’, there ain’t no females around here you know where some at?’ Now generally, men will be men with the gang crap, if you change the situation, you change the subject of the matter. If you’re talkin’ about women, you know, obviously they’re gonna respond. [vernacular style:] ‘Well check this out. See what you do you go down over there on hunned fo-teen and Highland. You say whooolie who whoola and Chantell come out, you ask her to talk to her homegirl.’ You know what I’m sayin’? ‘Cause even though we don’t get along, you know we have to live together.”

As is evident, Richard, like most of my consultants who was placed in special education classes,⁷ is a veritable master of wordplay. As he continues, “Now if you can maintain a level head and you can know how to talk--I mean you have to really know how to talk your way out of situations--then you don’t get messed with. That’s why I don’t messed

with too much, ‘cause I use the skills that I honed so well,” he laughs, and cogently adds, “my lying tactics, to avoid confrontation.”

In the above segment, he uses three such tactics. First, he states, with a rather outraged, assertive tone (denoted by caps), “I don’t gang bang MAN!” Only when the instigator continues to prompt does Richard resort to his story, “I just moved out here from Detroit,” since if he said this immediately he would be seen as incompetent, and the resulting embarrassment could be problematic, as discussed in prior excerpts. Third, Richard then ingeniously uses his purported status as an outsider to inquire where he can find a “female.” Thus, he changes his potential antagonists’ focus from thanatos to libido, through his ingenious response to the prompt, “where you from.”

Another method for turning around the threat of “where you from” is provided to me by Buck, who gives the following advice:

“Most times now, I got an easy way to get past the gang bangers. All of ‘em have soft spots, so if they ask where you from, I tell ‘em the church I go to, ‘Westminster Church of Christ,’ and they’ll just sit there like, ‘Oh, I wanted to jack him, but he said God.’ Don’t matter who it is. Say, ‘Man, I’m banging for God.’ So if you say anything having to do with God, they gonna bow down, like ‘all right, all right.’”

In light of Buck’s statement below that he had been robbed four or five times a year, and lost about \$900 in jewelry, such tactics were learned at a price.

For a young man coming of age in the inner city, being hit up is a frightening prospect. However, as he becomes older, and has, as many of my consultants report, “heard that so many times,” the question begins to lose its drama and sting. The following two 18 year-old African-American young men, known for their academic intensity as well as their quiet dignity and composure, both express a loss of patience for this practice which they have come to see as juvenile, and refuse to allow their identity to be determined through the onerous and perverse rituals of gangs. Below, Gerome, who has only recently moved to the inner-city after coming to maturity in the suburbs, speaks of how he responded the one time he was “hit up.” As he states, his girlfriend is quite upset at this.

“Has anyone ever asked you, ‘Where you from?’”

“Yeah, I’ve been asked that,” he nods.

“What happened?”

“It just happened once. I was over here, going to catch the bus, and I was in a real bad mood, so I did something I shouldn’t have done. Two guys came up to me, and one of them asks me, ‘Where you from?’ I just kept walking right past them. He started to come after me, and he asked me again, ‘Hey, where you from?!’ I just turned around and pushed his back hard against a parking meter, so they left. I didn’t hear anything more from them, and nobody’s asked me since. I told my girlfriend about it and she was mad at me. She said, ‘What if they’d had a gun? They could’ve killed you.’ I know that, and I wouldn’t do it again. But that day, I was just pissed.”

Finally, consider the following account from Brad, who has simply lost all respect for young men who play with gangs, and has come to accept being hit up as a normal part of the local ecology.

“I used to be scared when they’d ask the question. I used to say, ‘nowhere.’ Now, I just look at ‘em and be like, ‘get outta my face.’ I’ve been asked that so many times, I’m pretty much used to it. I don’t care what they do to me. It doesn’t affect me no more. My heart used to be pumping when people asked me that question. But now it doesn’t bother me. You get used to it.”

Note how neither Jerome nor Brad diminish their identity by claiming “nowhere.” Rather, both denigrate the very basis of the threat, refusing to be forced to account for themselves in terms of gangs. Such actions diminish the relevance of gangs in such an ecology, obviating the face threatening, either/or, prideful/shameful dichotomy imposed by this interaction ritual.

The Third Turn

The “third turn” is a potentially volatile place in conversations, as the space where the first speaker may provide his response to how the second speaker interpreted his first utterance (see Schegloff, 1992b). Indeed, the third turn is precisely where violence is routinely structured to occur when one is “hit up.” Violence rarely simply emerges. Rather, rituals like “where you from” are local resources to provide the emotional manipulation that makes violence possible. Below, we explore not only how hitting up is used as a locally rational prelude to fight, rob, harrass, and shoot, but also how *young people count on the*

possibility of being hit up in order to invite such possibilities. Finally, I explore how “hitting up” may actually mitigate violence, by revealing alliances between potential antagonists.

Part of the attraction of hitting up is that the level of violence to follow the respondent’s response is unknown by the respondent, and may well be unknown by the instigator as well. The “wrong” response may lead the instigator to uncoil like a taut spring, in a manner in which even he may not be fully aware.⁸ The following description is an ideal-typical instance of hitting up, as Ben tells how he saw his brother beat up.

“I was walking with my 16 year-old brother, just walking down the street to catch the bus. And these guys come up to him, right, and then they ask him where he’s from. You know how they do, right? He says um, ‘Four-deus Crip,’ right. And then they just start beatin’ on him.”

Such an episode presents the likely purpose of the “interrogation,” to punish rival gang members. Yet, to be hit up can follow the prompt quite literally, regardless of whether the respondent claims a gang. Consider Terry’s account of how the instigators magically transform his negative response into a precursor to violence through a bit of clever word-play.

“It was me and my friend walkin’ down the street. We went to pick up a friend at middle school, and then it was like, ‘Where you all from?’ We was like, ‘We don’t bang.’ They was like, ‘Y’all about to.’ And they hit us, pushed us in our backs and then we just started fightin’. And then like a whole group of their gang came and tried to fight us, but the police had come, put everybody against the wall.”

Thus claiming a rival gang is a sufficient but not necessary condition for violence to ensue after one is “hit up.” Besides such fights, many young men speak of being hit up as a precursor to robbery, as Buck mentions below, describing a situation already alluded to by Shawn, Oliver and Richard.

“Did you ever have anyone ask you where you’re from?”

“All the time.”

“When’s the first time you remember that happening?”

“Eighth grade. I was at the bus stop, and I had on red shoes. I was in the wrong neighborhood too. They asked me where I’m from, and then I got jacked. I used to have something bigger than this [necklace]. I had a chain bigger than that. Every three months I got jacked. I got jacked like 4-5 times a year. All the jewelry I wore cost more than \$900 altogether, the bracelets, the watch, the rings, chains.”

“And they would start to jack you by asking you ‘where you’re from?’”

“Ask me where I’m from. If I say I don’t bang, they still want to get they knife. I’m not going to just give it up if they just have fists. I can run from a knife or fists, but not if they got a gun.”

In such cases, asking “where you from” can be understood as a way of “constructing a subjective moral dominance” over the victim, common in stick-ups (see Katz 1988, 169). As if guarding against the shame of being put into such a position, Buck provides justifications for his victimization: he will not allow himself to be victimized “if they just have fists,” and he can run from a knife, “but not if they have a gun.”

Instigators may also hit up respondents whom they know well, as a means of daily harassment. Such harassment is built off the foundation that while the harasser is pridefully from “somewhere,” the respondent, in glaring, shameful contrast, is from “nowhere.” Below, Frank tells of facing such taunts on his daily journey home from school.

“In the afternoon [after school] I used to pass through there, there used to be like gangsters. And I’m living in that block right there, living for four years and they still be messing with me. They like, ‘Where you from,’ telling us a lot.

As Goffman (1967, 249) noted, “If the victim still declines to join the battle, the aggressor may goad him with increasingly unpalatable acts, in an apparent effort either to find his ignition point, or to demonstrate that he doesn’t have one.” Through such tactics, instigators demonstrate not only the local salience of gangs, but the local *righteousness* of gangs.

Consultants also speak of more serious assaults following the prompt, “where you from.” For instance, in Johnnie’s nightmarish account below, he delivers the same response as Buck and Terry, but with more frightening results.

“They come outta nowhere. Niggas on bikes. We turn around, ping, started runnin’. And they caught up to me. At this point in time, I was, fuck it, I wasn’t in no bangin’ mentality. I could care less about the hood, fuck that, this my life. ‘Where you from homie?’ ‘I don’t bang.’ I just said it like that. So after that, then they shot at us. That was kinda eerie. I didn’t wanna go back.”

Johnnie is a consultant who can recite many events in his life of being a “gang banger,” but in this instance, he is not. Whether or not his assailants know of his previous involvements,

their question implies they do not. The shots are inexplicable to Johnnie, who has been made a pawn in someone else's action.

As eerie as Johnnie's experience, when violence occurs without the question, "Where you from," it seems especially random and unpredictable. As Frank told me, "The guys that shot me, they didn't ask me, 'Where you from?' They just came and shot at me. And so that's why it be hard for people to walk on the street without taking care of their back."

Young people in the inner-city are not merely hapless victims of "hitting up," however. Some may count on the *possibility of being hit up* as a resource for creating action (Goffman, 1967). Below, Marco tells how he claims a rival gang *in which he is not a member*, as a way of finding opportunities to fight. The gang Marco claims is 18th Street; Marco is actually a "member" of Vernon Locos.

"Sometimes I be missing fighting, and just be going to different neighborhoods and just saying that I'm from 18, just, so I'll be getting in a fight, picking a fight."

Note that such practices are premised on the expectation that someone will hit him up, to provide the opportunity for his claim. Four years later, Marco reflected on this practice, retrospectively emphasizing its negative qualities as, "exposing yourself."

"You told me before that you used to go into a neighborhood and claim a gang just so you could get into a fight with somebody."

"That was crazy. I used to go to neighborhoods to go fuck around with them fools 'cause I woulda had nothing to do! That's *exposing yourself*. Know what I mean?"

In the excerpt below, Tom brings home the primary point of this article, that the interaction rituals of gangs provide resources for young people in the inner-city. Tom is a large Belizean young man, standing over six feet tall and weighing at least 250 pounds. Compact for his size, he has earned the nickname "Tank" among his friends, and indeed his actions were often tank-like when he played on the defensive line of a high school football team, according to his believable accounts. Below, Tom "does being" a Crip by wearing blue when he goes to visit a cousin from Pyroos, the precursors of Bloods; both wear red (Sanders 1994).

“I was coming from there, and my cousin was from Avenue Pyroos, and I was walking to his house, which was a big mistake, because my favorite color was always blue, even before I got into the gang banging thing. I just always wear a lot of blue. I know you see me come here with a lot of blue on all the time. So this guy came up to me, and was like, ‘You all got on blue, where you from? Whoop di whoop.’ I said, ‘40’s Crip.’ He’s like, ‘This is Avenue Pyroos, right here.’ Like that, we got into it. Then when I got to my cousin’s house, I told my cousin and he’s like, ‘I’ma handle it.’ I’m like, ‘No, it’s cool.’

“Usually, say you’re my cousin, and I’m from 40’s, and they see you walking through the 40’s hood, and they be, ‘Where you from?’ You be like, ‘I don’t bang,’ or ‘I’m from such and such a hood.’ You guys don’t get along. But if your cousin tells them, ‘Tom’s my cousin.’ Then they be like, ‘All right. We’re gonna give you A PASS. We’ll leave you alone. And if they don’t, then you go back to your cousin and tell your cousin when they have their meeting or whatever, and that person gets disciplined. ‘Why you beat up my cousin, man? He told you he my cousin!’ And it goes like that. So that’s what my cousin was thinking when I told him. But I didn’t tell him anything. I don’t know. I kind of felt like I was invincible or something [he laughs].”

Tom, looking for a fight, wears blue to visit his cousin, knowing it may bring potential violence. Tom finds this violence (“we got into it”), but after arriving at his cousin’s house, his cousin is disappointed to find that Tom has been in a fight. Tom’s cousin wants to stick up for Tom, telling him, “I’ma handle it.” Tom implies that such “handling” could be justified as “discipline,” punishing a fellow gang member by constructing a fight with him within the gang. Yet Tom had not asked for the “pass” prior to entering his cousin’s “turf.” Still, Tom’s cousin might have found a means to use the notion of “discipline” as a resource for revenge against Tom’s attacker, even though they are in the same gang (as Shawn, another Belizean stated, “family comes first”). When Tom says, “No, it’s cool,” he’s reporting to me that he told his cousin he was in effect looking for a fight, for he does not desire that his cousin exercise “discipline.” Tom knew about the possibility of obtaining a pass, he knew what his clothes meant, but he still went. We can see this as a clear example of using gangs as a resource for 1) creating action, 2) showing off for a cousin, 3) reifying geographic gang boundaries, 4) reifying local meanings of dress, 5) affirming for a cousin that one can get by on one’s own (perhaps even “be a man”), and 6) building a reputation among one’s peers as a badass (Katz 1988). Through a thorough

knowledge of the local ecology, the anticipation of being hit up can create the same sense of action as actually “hitting up.” For others who choose to take “the pass,” however, they can apparently rest assured that their kinship ties will override their gang ties. *The frequency, duration and success of “passes” are surely interesting topics for further study, as an alternative to reifying the identity of young people as “gang members.”* It is important to note how various aspects of identity, such as kinship, or participation in sports or music activities, for instance, may conflict with or complement gang affiliations.

Nonetheless, “hitting up” need not lead to violence. In fact, it may consolidate friendship, or provide the opportunity for one. Below, Ken tells of how he was about to hit up some people walking towards him in his neighborhood, when he realized they were old friends.

“I was like by myself, and there was two of them. I almost hit him up. We was like this far from each other, and I saw this big smile on her face. I said, ‘I already know Betty!’ She hugged me, ‘Baby.’ She’s goin’ crazy. I was like, ‘I was about to hit y’all homies up,’ and she started laughin’. And I was like, ‘Do you write?’ and he was like, ‘Yeah.’ And I was like, ‘What you write?’ and he told me, and I was like, ‘This is GC.’ He was like, ‘It’s cool.’”

After their heartfelt reunion, Ken hits up Betty’s friend, but in a friendly rather than antagonizing way, asking “Do you write?” before asking “What you write” (the taggers’ version of hitting up). Hence, “what you write” simply becomes a request for information providing an opportunity for the two to share an anecdote, as Sacks (1995) describes. As Katz (2000, 184) notes, “It is at least as reasonable to believe that gangs limit violence as it is to believe that they increase violence.”

Below, another tagger, Mikie, is “hitting up” on the bus. Note, however, this is an alternative meaning of “hit,”⁹ meaning he is writing his tag on the bus with an extra thick marker, when another tagger spots him, perhaps envious of his stylus, and asks him where he’s from.

“I was on the bus. I had hit up, and he seen me hitting up, so he told me where I was from. I told him where I was from, and he said, ‘All right. Could I see your markers

so I could hit up too?' I just lent them to him."

Apparently, this instigator has no qualms with the crew Mikie claims, and thus they share a bit of taggerly camaraderie at the bus line's expense.

In some circumstances, the ritual violence that would be expected is mitigated through the ritual act of "hitting up." Below, Shawn tells how, in the middle of the night, after waiting for hours in the shadows, he hoped to confront his girlfriend in bed with another young man. Yet it is Shawn who is startled when he finds himself staring down his rival's gun, as he hears the demand, "Where you from!" Yet this rival in love is a partner in crime, from a set congenial with Shawn's.

"So at the time, OK we there, it was like, who is this who is this? He was like, he's from Uptown Crips. And I'm talking, AAB, All About Banging. He was like, is that Bloods or Crips? I said, 'Man, this is Crip.' He was like, 'I don't have no problem with you callin' my people from 30's.' So then he was like, 'Who your people?' And I start callin' some of my cousin's names and whatever, older cousins and younger cousins."

Shawn refers to "callin'," alluded to by Richard previously, where one mentions contacts and acquaintances as a way of name dropping and finding common affiliations. Since Shawn and his nemesis share the same gang (but different sets), the two are left utterly unable to consummate violence on this evening, or subsequently, even though Shawn is consumed by a jealous rage for weeks following this event, and his now ex-girlfriend continues her relationship with Shawn's rival. Perhaps she, like most of the young people I spoke with, was also using gangs as a resource, for by her choice of mate, she insured that Shawn would be unable to respond with violence. Perhaps they knew Shawn was waiting, and hit him up to defuse him.

Conclusion

The lives of children growing up in the ghetto have been likened to flowers blooming in the cracks of a sidewalk. In this paper, we have seen how gangs that appear to have the intransigence of concrete, are actually resources for young people to creatively work the

possibilities of the gang/non-gang alternatives, with the flexibility of a daisy. The statement, “where you from?” can provide gangs with the most powerful sense of permanence, while a “ranker” may simply make his gang disappear. Knowing how to work these alternatives in the appropriate circumstances comprise tools for molding identity in this ecology.

All young people growing up in such an ecology, regardless of whether or not they are “in” a gang, must be resourceful in using such tools in negotiating everyday life. To summarize, for the person hitting up, it is a tool to: 1) demonstrate gang membership, 2) create a local ecology in which young people must commonly expect to present an identity answerable to gangs, 3) establish and maintain the importance of friendship and kinship ties, gang boundaries, and dress as a gang signifier, and 4) provide a ritual prelude to ongoing harrassment, a robbery, a fight, or a shooting. For the person anticipating being hit up, it is a tool to: 1) strategically contextualize where and when a gang identity is revealed, 2) demonstrate street wits and smarts in providing a response to this prompt, 3) invoke the strategic importance of friendship and kinship ties, gang boundaries, and dress, to anticipate, interpret, and manipulate an interaction, and 4) avoid the possibility of ongoing harrassment, robbery, a fight or a shooting. In short, through hitting up, young people have found ways to imbue an inner-city environment with action and excitement, by holding each other accountable to the nuances of local knowledge.

Such an interaction ritual is also a powerful way of invoking the emotions that legitimize violence, in two ways. First, it provides an instantly recognized script to accomplish the shame and rage necessary for violence. Violence rarely simply happens. Rather, people draw upon an embodied knowledge of how emotions work (Katz, 1999) to create interactions for violence to emerge naturally as “gang related,” often through insulting another’s masculinity. Like a stick-up, the script for hitting up quickly accomplishes this, yet with heightened uncertainty. Secondly, the aggression of hitting up and shame of being hit up are cyclical and self-reinforcing (Retzinger 1987; Katz 1988, 12-51; Scheff 1990).

“Hitting up” is a ready resource for a young person looking to create action. For the young person who is hit up, if they do not claim a gang affiliation they are shamed, practically negating an identity by claiming simply, “nowhere.” Such humiliation is infuriating, and “hitting up” is then an available way for a humiliated victim to deal with their rage.

While I have focused on a number of instances in which one was victimized after being hit up, we should not overlook that many may hit up in order to avoid being victims. To protect one’s turf, in fact, whether in games of sport, the military, or “neighborhood watch,” is considered by many a highly honorable act. While gangs are commonly demonized, we should never lose sight of the fact that with a slight shift in perspective, the ways of gangs are not only familiar, but close to home. Indeed, if one looks again at the earlier quote of this paper from Harvey Sacks, one might consider the violence which non-gang members accomplish through the assessments, judgments and provocations that may ensue when one asks where another is from. To be from an inner-city area is a stigma many find hard to escape (Wilson 1987; Massey and Denton 1993; Gans 1995). To impose such a stigma, through dehumanizing representations of gang members as merely criminal, contributes to gang violence (see Becker, 1963). Instead, working to appreciate (Matza, 1969) how young people manage the many strains and tensions of their lives provides a fruitful avenue for future research. We may well find further ways in which gangs are both a source of tension and a tool to manage it.

Struggles over the ways gang members are depicted are not simply academic squabbles. Rather, in the words of one nonprofit organization: it’s about the youth. Our representations of gangs have real consequences. If we can appreciate how the rituals of gangs are cultural resources that must be understood, and can be used strategically by any young person in an ecology with gangs, then we might see how profiling young people as gang members to determine a “population” is problematic. Merely to call a young person a “gang member” reifies a highly situated and contingent grounded construction. To then

multiply this reification through statistical analysis is dubious. If, as a society, we would want to reduce gang membership, we would not refer to young people as gang members, and we would provide other challenging outlets for their creativity. Instead, we reify the importance of gang membership more than young people themselves. We should criminalize victimizing behaviors, and while the rituals of gangs may provide opportunities for such behavior, they also provide opportunities for the expression of *communitas*. The massive criminalization of youth merely for adopting a gang identity is a profound misunderstanding of what gangs mean to those who must engage with them, and a tragically unnecessary social loss.

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¹ This, of course, speaks volumes of the neglect of inner-city neighborhoods by universities, reflected in residents' disenchantment and even hostility toward institutions which are often within walking distance (see Anderson 1999, 56, 64).

²Young men are not the only ones to encounter such disjunctures, which can become a local currency for epitomizing life in this region. For instance, when I tell my dental hygienist, Greg, an African-American man of about my age, about my field work as he cleans my teeth, he tells me of a similar encounter he'd had with a neighbor he describes as a "gang-banger." Greg tells me that he is from Oakwood, Ohio, and "We don't know about this gang stuff out there." When he nonchalantly asks his neighbor where he is from, Greg tells me, "He looked at me for a long time with a questioning look in his eye, and said finally, 'Uh, what do you mean by that, like what state?'" "Yeah, of course," Greg replied. "Oh, OK," and the neighbor laughed and gave a response. On laughter in response to breaches from the natural attitude, see Garfinkel (1984) and Schutz (1962).

³When an especially young person is asked where they're from, it is likely to be sanctioned as a deviant act, as in the following interview excerpt with Doogan, an 18 year-old African-American young man.

"So when's the first time you remember someone telling you where you're from?"

"Kindergarten."

"What did you say then?"

"At that time I knew what he was saying, but I just ignored it because I was not involved. What is that gonna look like, a big 18 year-old kid asking a five year-old or kindergartner where he's from. That doesn't make no sense."

"What happened?"

“I was on the street and he asked me where I’m from. I looked at him like, ‘What’s wrong with you man? I’m five years old. I’m a little kid, and I got this big idiot up here.’ It’s like if I was to tell somebody now that some stupid idiot did that, they would probably wanna hang him, just for him bein’ dumb.”

⁴By and large, young men at CAA were in accord with Klein (1995, 6), that gangs do not equal drugs. For those hoping to find drugs, a multitude of sources are available which may or may not be gang affiliated. As Shawn states, “That’s what everybody do on their own. It’s out there, the drugs are out there--to me--like wild. Like wild rice growing. You have home grown, people doing their own stuff at home.”

⁵ My consultants often use “whoop di whoop” and “you know what I’m saying” to index threatening “gang talk.”

⁶ This instance brings to mind Katz’s (1983, 138) insight that members’ reluctance to provide information on various topics reveals their sensitivity to the ethnographer not as a sociologist, but as a fellow members of the setting.

⁷ Many commentators have noted the disproportionate number of students of color in Special Education classes (Fine 1991, 20), and the unsavory consequences for students placed in such courses (Varenne and McDermott 1998). Many of such students may well be gifted, but are warehoused away from other students for behavioral reasons.

⁸ A hot topic in psychology concerns whether individuals who engage in “deviant” acts lose “self control” (Megargee, 1966; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990). Yet, as Katz (1988) and Lyng (1990) show, such a sensation of “loss of control” is precisely the sort of seduction that

compels one to carefully plan and engage in a “deviant” act. In observing hearings in which juveniles are judged whether they are competent to stand trial as an adult, Alexes Harris (personal communication) has noted numerous cases in which violence, and even murder result from “hitting up.”

⁹ My informants seemed to have no end of contexts for the term “hit.” Aside from referring to being told “where you from,” “hit” is often used as a metaphor for sex, as when, for instance, a young man objectifies a passing young woman by asking his friend, “You wanna hit that?” (see Gardner, 1995; and Duneier, 1999, 188-216). The same question was used during weightlifting sessions, in which we were all testing our masculinity on the stage of the workout bench, and one young man would ask another, in reference to the weight, “Wanna hit that?” or “How much did you hit?” “To hit” is also used for taking a puff of a marijuana cigarette, as well as in more standard meanings involving punching, an automobile accident, or making contact of a bat to a baseball.