The following is an excerpt from my book, *Gangs, Edgework and Identity, in a School and on the Streets*, forthcoming from New York University Press.
Robert Garot

Over the past fifty years, social scientists have increasingly turned from essentializing identity as a fixed characteristic, to understanding identity as fluid, contextual and shifting. Through dress, mannerisms, and language, individuals make and dispute claims to identity based in socially recognized categories, and such claims and contestations become the bases for sustaining interaction. Prominent, one might even say the dominant literatures in grappling with the complexity of such topics as gender, race, ethnicity, and nationalism all recognize the importance of understanding that these categories are not fixed, but are strategically moulded in the ways we present ourselves, and are always subject to the variable interpretations of our audience.

Adolescence is especially recognized as a time when one needs to experiment with identity, as the choices one makes in terms of career and family may have long-lasting ramifications. Being sorted, or sorting oneself into a category too soon may lead to future regrets. Even our legal structure recognizes this, providing a separate system for the young, so that they need not pay too great a price for early mistakes.

Yet such insights become overlooked when we speak of inner-city youth, and especially when we talk

about gang members: fear clouds our thinking.[i] When we feel threatened by those commonly referred to as monsters or chicks,[ii] it seems irresponsible or even dangerous to appreciate the artful nuances of their ways of performing identity.[iii]

This is unfortunate, for such fear may well play a constituent role in maintaining the very conditions which lead to the behaviour we seek to redress.[iv] Out of fear arises segregation, isolating the poor into depressing, neglected neighbourhoods, far from decent jobs, goods and services.[v] Schools, depending primarily on local taxes for survival, become run-down and dilapidated.[vi] The media often contributes to such stereotypes, referring to those who must reside in such areas as the "underclass," and wildly publicizing freak events such as the "wrong way murder."[vii] Out of such multiply marginalizing geographies of fear, gangs flourish, but not necessarily for the reasons we think they do.[viii] Typically, gangs arise to meet the many challenges left by the neglect of officials,[ix] assisting their families and neighbors to survive.[x] As Michael Ungar, an expert on childhood resilience, insightfully notes, the characteristics that researchers define as providing the capabilities for young people to survive in difficult circumstances "are potentially available to some children through deviant pathways to health . . . One need only think of how gangs offer youth a street family, a sense of belonging, even hope and opportunities for 'decisive risk-taking' that impoverished families struggling with addictions and

under-funded schools may not."[xi]

Perhaps then, if we look closer, not to obviate the obvious role of structural forces, but to appreciate how people survive despite them, we might begin to see beyond our culture of fear, to appreciate young people in the inner-city just as we appreciate young people anywhere else, for their potential, their creativity, their resourcefulness, and yes, even their dangerousness.[xii] Inner-city youth are humans, after all, with all the wonderful, mysterious, and frightening characteristics that we have long come to associate with our troubled species.

When people ask how I was able to study gang members, I tell them that mostly, I have Emily to thank. When I entered her classroom in a small inner-city alternative school and the rest of the students ignored me, Emily came and asked for help, easing the painful awkwardness of my not belonging. Her long black hair flowed over a lacy, off-white long-sleeved blouse with a little tie around the collarbone. Her voice was sweet, even dainty, and I was flattered that perhaps she was flirting with me as we worked out the questions on her grammar worksheet. As I returned to her alternative school over the next four years, I was relieved that she continued to seek me out for help, and send friends to talk with me.

When I asked students if they'd like to be interviewed, Emily wanted to be the first. At a quiet spot in the front office, on two badly stained,

overstuffed and very comfortable old beige chairs, I placed my tape recorder on the table between us and she told me a tale that continues to haunt me, over ten years later. She began by showing me how those lacy sleeves hid huge and ornate tattoos in medieval script, spelling out BLVD up her right arm and the name of the boulevard on her left. In the 45 minutes of our interview she told me a classic tale of redemption through love. After seeing her brother and mother shot at 15, she spent three years staying away from home, smoking weed, getting drunk, smoking PCP, sniffing glue, writing on walls, getting tattoos, and beating into a bloody pulp any females intruding into the neighborhood from rival gangs. Then an older man at the local liquor store asked why she was gang-banging, and began to gently court her, encouraging her to change her style of clothes, her way of talking and presenting herself. According to Emily,

> "He's an ex-gang banger. He knows what's going on. He said, 'I ain't gonna die for something that ain't even mine.' See, he knows. And I still went into the fight, I wanted to be in the gang banger life. But then, little by little, when I started going out with him he told me, 'Oh I don't want you to dress like that, please?' Because I liked him, I wouldn't dress like that. So then I would follow him all the time. I forgot about my homeboys. I stopped going over there. I would just, I would always be with him. And then he would tell me, 'I

don’t want you to smoke weed no more.’ I was like ‘Whaa? You met me when I was smoking weed.’ He was like, ‘I don’t want a girlfriend that be smokin’ weed.’ I was like, ‘All right.’ So I stopped smoking drugs.”
“You just stopped altogether?”
“No, it takes little by little. Sometimes I’ll tell him that I don’t smoke, but when he wasn’t around, I would smoke. But see sometimes he would sneak up and come to my house, and I’d be hiding, and he’ll notice. And he told me, he said, ‘Next time I catch you like that, when I surprise you when I see you at your house, don’t ever talk to me again in your life.’ And I took it serious. So now, I’ve already been with him for two years. But for a year it was pretty hard. Now it’s easy.”
“Yeah.”
“Now he sees how I’ve changed.”
“Uh huh.”
“He’ll be like, ‘Damn, you’ve changed a lot since when I met you.’”

As the year progressed, she became pregnant, and this pulled her further from the gang lifestyle. According to Emily, this is a common way out of gangbanging.

“As time passes, my homegirl Lil’ One, she got pregnant, so she didn’t go around no more. My homegirl Dimples, well she found her boyfriend and they moved to Delano, and my sister, she got

> pregnant, so she stopped messing around. Like all my friends got pregnant. [….] You know when I was gang banging, I would say, 'If I ever get pregnant, I will stop gang banging,' like my homegirls and my sister did."

We commonly think of gang bangers as vicious thugs, and why shouldn't we? Gang bangers work hard to cultivate that image. Yet no human being can be so easily summarized. In many settings, being a vicious thug is simply not an option. Vicious thugs often change their ways.[xiii] Yet whether one is gang-banging or distancing oneself from gang-banging, both require a detailed attention to the skills of presenting oneself, in order to avoid potentially life-threatening situations.

Emily could never *entirely* be a gang-member, nor a nongangmember. Even before she joined her gang, her brother was involved, and at times she and her sister were so afraid to leave the house for fear of her brother's enemies hanging out at the foot of the steps to their apartment, that they dropped out of school, and convinced their father to move. Even as a gang member, sometimes she might want to see a movie with a friend in a part of town where her enemies lived, and not be bothered with, as some put it, "the whole gang thing." Or she might be at the dinner table with her grandparents, or at a field trip to a major university, like the one she took with me, where she looked around with a sense of emptiness, not finding anyone, whatever their ethnicity, who looked like her.[xiv] And even after

all her talk of conversion, sometimes I saw her standing on the sidewalk after school, looming large with a squared, arms-folded stance and eyes squinted in a way that made my blood run cold.

Over four years of participating with students at Emily's school, and interviewing 45 of them in sessions lasting from 1 to 12 hours, I found repeated tales of such balancing acts, belying threatening metaphors of gang members as monsters, a plague, or a virus. Instead, I see such young people as edgeworkers.

In 1990, Stephen Lyng developed the notion of edgework to describe the superior athlete, especially in dangerous sports such as motorcycle racing, parachuting, or mountain climbing. The central phenomenon is one of straddling the boundary between being in control and out of control, in order to, however transiently, lose the everpresent burden of the self experiencing itself. Lyng was careful to distinguish his term from Erving Goffman's term, "action." In 1967, Goffman wrote about how action involves "activities that are consequential, problematic, and undertaken for what is felt to be their own sake;"[xv] yet not all action is edgework. For action to be edgework, it must involve skill and control, not mere gambling or thrill seeking. Edgeworkers carefully cultivate their skills, and then take great pleasure in pushing these skills to their limits. We may well be loath to apply the image of such privileged joy-seeking to the lives of what many refer to as at-risk youth. After all, they need our help and guidance. We ought to instead employ our sociological

gaze to understand the causes of their troubled lives, towards developing *programs* that make *them* more like *us*—more hard working, more polite, and more conscientious about their futures.[xvi]

But what one finds in spending time with *them*, is, in the infamous words of the old comic strip, "them is us." Emily, for example, was almost painfully polite, and very hardworking.[xvii] But, like all of us, she also had a desire for something more. Granted, most edgeworkers do not begin their pursuits of the margins of existence out of a profound sense of grief, or at least this has yet to be explored in the literature. But Emily, unlike the edgeworkers Lyng described, lacked access to the social and financial capital to skydive, race motorcycles, or mountain climb. For her, though, this wasn't a deficiency, for her neighborhood provided all the access one would wish to dangerous endeavors, if only one would cultivate the right friends, wear the right clothes, and learn to speak the right jargon to pull it off. In other words, her edgework didn't simply happen as a result of global causes, such as deindustrialization, any more than the closing of factories could explain the edgework of Lyng or Thompson. Rather, she carefully cultivated skills, and even when she decided to distance herself from such practices (much as Lyng did after his horrific motorcycle accident),[xviii] she still took pride in them, and was at times seduced back into that world she knew so well.

In his introduction to his collected volume on

edgework, Lyng states, “Edgeworkers (. . . ) always recognize one another.”[xix] Perhaps it is the confirmation of such recognition—the joy of meeting another gangbanger/edgeworker—which is most appealing about this ritual interchange. Consider Tom, who cried like a baby when Bloods made him wise to his BK shoes, yet cut an instantly recognizable figure once he came of age. A large Belizean young man, standing over six feet tall and weighing at least 250 pounds, he was compact for his size, earning the nickname “Tank” among his friends. 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.[xx]

> “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.’
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> “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 [he laughs] or something.”

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 them 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) doing edgework, 2) creating action, 3) showing off for a cousin 4) reifying geographic gang boundaries, 5) reifying local meanings of dress 6) affirming for a cousin that one can get by on one’s own (perhaps even “be a man”) and 7) building a reputation among one’s peers as a badass. Through a thorough knowledge of the possibilities for performing identities in this 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.

My forthcoming book, *Gangs, Edgework and Identity, in a School and on the Streets*, is an effort to recognize that achievement, the dynamics out of which it grows, and the ambivalence involved in the moment to moment thrill and responsibility of being able to choose to wear the lacy blouse or the baggy pants, the carefree smile or the menacing glare. It is a choice that is fundamentally American.[xxi]

[i]. See Glassner (2000) and Thompkins (2000). Zatz (1987) and McCorcle and Miethe (2001) examine the how fears regarding gangs have led to moral panics.

[ii]. Surely the publishing industry has a role to play. Witness such catchy titles by the same name by Bing (1991) and Sikes (1993). See Conquergood (1994b, 1997) for a critique of the use of onerous metaphors. As he states (1997:373), "It is difficult for most citizens, progressive educators included, to see anything of value in street culture because our perceptions are skewed by prevailing media metaphors that depict gangs as malignant microbes, "plague," "cancer," "blight," "disease," "scourge," "virus," "infestation," "epidemic of violence," or vicious animals, "wilding packs," "superpredators," "roving," "prowling" beasts of prey from the "urban jungle" seized with "pack frenzy" or violent terrorists, youths who "menace" and "terrorize neighborhoods" creating "explosions of biolence" and "little Beiruts" in the inner city." Hallsworth and Young (2008:184-185) note, "The term gang does not designate a social problem in any neutral sense; it denotes and, in a tautological way, explains this problem simultaneously. It is a blinding and mesmerizing concept that has a seductive dimension many cannot resist. This is because, in one simple beguiling term, we find embedded a convenient and simple thesis about why things are as they are. The term gang signifies not this or that group out there but a *Monstrous Other*, an organized counter force confronting the good society." As George Lakoff (1991:95) famously noted, "Metaphors can kill." Also see Ibarra and Kitsuse (1993) and Spector and Kitsuse, (1987).

[iii]. Decker and Curry (1997:514) are especially adamant that gangs be seen in exclusively criminological terms, claiming, "Gangs facilitate the commission of crime. To ignore that is to ignore, or worse, to excuse the violence gang members commit against each other and their communities." For an alternative, see `Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2004)`.

[iv]. Jock Young (1999, 2003, 2007) presents an incisive analysis of such dynamics. According to Young, the marginalized are over-immersed in the allure of the material trappings of the dominant culture while simultaneously denied its fruits, both included and excluded in what Young refers to as "social bulimia." Young (2003:394) describes how the excluded face a social world full of "the liberal mantra of liberty, equality, and fraternity yet systematically in the job market, on the streets, in day-to-day contacts with the outside world, practices exclusion."

[v]. Massey and Denton (1993). Such segregation also leads to a decline of housing values, insuring that the poor will stay poor. See Jackson (1985), Oliver and Shapiro (2006) and Conley (1999).

[vi]. Kozol (1992).

[vii]. See Gans (1995) on the perpetuation of stereotypes in the social sciences and the media. See Ashmala (1999) for an extended discussion of the publicity surrounding the case of an apparently innocent white man and his young daughter shot in a inner-city area after taking "the wrong offramp." Overlooked was the irresponsibility of a white man bringing his 4 year-old along for what turned out to be a drug deal gone sour.

[viii]. See Vigil (1988, 2003) on gangs arising out of "multiple marginalities;" see Silby (1995) for how we perpetuate "geographies of exclusion."

[ix]. Venkatesh (1997; 2003).

[x]. Kotlowitz (1992), Edin and Lein (1997) and especially Brotherton and Barrios (2004). Irwin (2004:475) states that, "patterns of exclusion cutting across multiple contexts [. . .] leave youths with few opportunities but to become violent." Nonetheless, many such youths have the wit and resilience (Rutter, 1987) to avoid such outcomes.

[xi]. Ungar (2007:89).
[xii]. Appreciation is a guiding motif throughout this study. See especially Matza (1969) and Becker (1963).
Notes
Notes to the Preface
[xiii]. On cultivating and distancing oneself from the vicious thug image, see Colton Simpson (2005).
[xiv]. See Mendoza-Denton (1996).
[xv]. Goffman (1967:185).
[xvi]. We may well speak of the at-risk industry. For an overview, see Gottfredson (2001).
[xvii]. Last I heard, she was working a double shift, managing a fast food establishment.
[xviii]. See Lyng (1998).
[xix]. Lyng (2005:3).
[xx]. Sanders (1994).
[xxi]. See Nightingale (1993).