

TITLE: "It's the *Way* you Wear Them:" On Embodying Gang Identity

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Abstract:

This paper examines how the body and dress are resources for young people in inner-cities of the United States, for manipulating and performing the boundaries between such dichotomies as gang/non-gang, safe/dangerous, and overt/covert. Such nuances belie the simplistic pathologizing perspective on gangs, which associates certain styles of dress with behavior. In recognizing dress as one among myriad methods by which young people perform identity, we might move toward appreciating young people's resourcefulness, rather than criminalizing them for stylistic choices.

Sitting in a discussion with me in a careers class, Billy complains, “Why can't the guys wear braids at school?” “Why is it so important to you?” I ask him. “It's my hair!” he says with some indignation. “Yeah, it's your identity!” Mario says. “Your identity,” I say, nodding.

The manner in which one dresses is a highly charged, important decision for human beings everywhere. Dress is literally how we wear the social. It is a tacit invitation to interaction with current or potential friends, and a barrier to interaction with those who might think, and thus dress, differently. Dress thus marks, stratifies, and facilitates interaction, yet it is usually overlooked and unremarkable.

Often, in discussions of inner-city youth, we bemoan the fact that so many pay so much attention to, and spend so much money on clothes (Anderson, 1999; Holloman et al., 1996; MacLeod, 1995). Yet clothes are much more than status symbols, efforts to transcend the appearance of poverty. They are also ways of molding an identity by marking the self, thereby signaling to others what one stands for, and the kind of people with whom one wishes to associate (Blumer, 1969). This paper will show that while dress may be one aspect of embodying gang membership, the ways gangs are embodied are intractable to social control. I will ground this examination in a brief review of how the embodiment of fashion is understood by sociologists as a means of constructing and situating identity.

Fashion, Ambiguity and Control

Theories of fashion place ambiguity at the core of fashion's messages. For Simmel (1904:296-299), fashion represents the tension between unity and differentiation, “satisfying the demand for social adaptation,” simultaneous with “social demarcation.” Fred Davis (1992:18) extends this analysis by exploring how fashion frames subjective tensions of “youth versus age,

masculinity versus femininity, androgyny versus singularity, inclusiveness versus exclusiveness, work versus play, domesticity versus worldliness (...) conformity versus rebellion.” Davis posits that the ways fashion resolves these tensions become collective resources for representing social identities (see Blumer, 1969).

Such ambiguities of fashion are severely curtailed with uniforms. As McVeigh (2000) discusses in his analysis of the seeming ubiquity of uniforms in Japanese society, “Uniforms--especially student uniforms--are a disciplinary link between the individual and the political structures and their allied economic interests” (p. 2). He then analyzes uniforms, “as tangible symbols of the ability of enormous and extensive politico-economic structures to shape bodily practices, and by implication, subjectivity and behavior” (p. 3).

Davis is helpful in showing how fashions' statements, like music, resist “the attribution of unambiguous meanings,” yet he does not connect these multilayered meanings to “bodily practices and subjectivity” as McVeigh does, discussing the ways fashion is embodied. The work of Joanne Entwistle (2001) is quite informative in this regard, drawing on Goffman (1959, 1971) to show how actors orient to and perform in the social world, and Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964) to highlight how “our bodies are what give us our expression” in that world (1964:5). For Entwistle, “approaching dress from a phenomenological framework means acknowledging the way in which dress works on the body which in turn works on and mediates the experience of self” (2001:44).

Discourses and agencies of social control are loath to acknowledge the creative potential of fashion. Even as contemporary trends in art and clothing are often pioneered by the marginalized in U.S. inner-cities, extolled in museums, fashion magazines and runways, they are

criminalized in police training manuals, soliciting suspicion from the cop on the beat.¹ *Yet there is no fixed way of dressing like a gang member.* Rather, gang members signal affiliation through seemingly minor and easily overlooked markers: a certain color worn in a certain way, a

¹ Nearly every student in an honor's course which I taught at UCLA had been profiled by the police, who took their picture and added them to statistics on "gang members." Such ludicrous numbers are maintained with painstaking precision, documenting minute changes from month to month to justify continued social control funding (see Foucault, 1977; Cintron, 1997; Meehan, 2000). As an example, see http://www.lapdonline.org/crime_maps_and_compstat/content_basic_view/24435. See Ferrell (1995) and Becker (1963) for a cogent discussion of the politics and criminalization of style.

The ways students are allowed to dress in schools in the United States is also a recurrent topic of public interest, as well as a legal issue. In legal journals, a debate rages between those who argue that school dress codes infringe on students' free rights of expression and those who argue that dress codes should be implemented and enforced for safety and security reasons (DeMitchell et al., 2000). The landmark 1969 case of *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District* established that students had the right to wear a black armband in school to protest the Vietnam War, under the first amendment. While the majority opinion (7-2) established that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate," the two dissenting opinions foreshadowed what was to come. In citing these dissents, DeMitchell et al. (2000:41) note, "schools are not open forums" like a public park, and thus school boards "should exercise their discretion to establish reasonable dress code regulations that help to maintain an environment conducive to learning."

Federal Circuit Courts of Appeal split over how this discretionary power should be exercised. For instance, in cases involving hair length and style, the Fifth, Sixth, Ninth, Tenth and Eleventh Circuit Courts "often dismissed the cases, finding no Constitutional rights involved" (Gullatt, 1999:40). The First, Fourth, Seventh, and Eighth Circuits, however, have cited the First Amendment (speech and expression), the Ninth Amendment (denial of other rights not enumerated in the Constitution), and the Fourteenth Amendment (actions affecting citizens by the states) in finding hair length regulations unconstitutional. Nevertheless, "Since *Tinker*, the Supreme Court has decided two other significant public school speech cases: *Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser*, and *Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier*, both of which have resulted in curtailment of student expression" (Weisenberger, 2000:52). Following President Clinton's lead (U.S. Department of Education, 1996), public school officials have similarly become more restrictive and conservative in their regulation of student dress (Gullatt, 1999). In a survey of 240 randomly selected elementary, middle school, and high school principals, DeMitchell, Fossey and Cobb (2000) found that 51% of principals had adopted a dress code policy, and that principals serving older students tend to show more support for dress codes, but not necessarily for a school uniform. Hence, advice for principals implementing dress codes are common in journals catered to this population (Essex, 2001), as a means for fostering school safety (Curriculum Review, 1999).

hat tilted to the left or the right, a certain brand of shoes, the advertisement of a certain product or sports team, the width and color of one's shoe laces, whether clothing is ironed or not, and how it's ironed (see Conquergood, 1994).

Nonetheless, dress alone is insufficient to signal gang membership, in at least four ways. First, a wannabe could be fully decked out as a gangster, and yet not be recognized as such (at least not by actual gang members) no matter how he dresses (see Garot, 2003). On the other hand, a reputable OG (original gangster) doesn't need to dress in any specific way to please anybody—reputation makes an outward demonstration of allegiances superfluous. Second, the combination of clothing, along with accessories is very important for creating an overall gestalt, “gang member.” A young person may well look like a gang member to an outsider, but if certain key aspects of their ensemble are missing, such as the combination of clothing, or clothing along with a certain haircut or item of jewelry, they may well be overlooked by gang members. Third, these characteristic markers are fluid and changing, much too quickly for anyone to regulate. One way of “representing” works in this neighborhood but not the next; one style was vogue last week but not this week. Such changes may be responses to authority; as the police or schools come to identify certain styles as “gang related,” young people change the style.³ Fourth, the most important aspect of appearing as a gang member is not in the clothes, but in *how the clothes are worn*. How one embodies their clothes, by sagging them, or walking with a certain inimitable style, or cocking the head just a little bit, is impervious to legal regulation, easily escaping supervision, and is the fundamental way of marking gang membership, no matter what

³ Such potentially infinite, perverse loops between the panopticonic gaze of authority and the wily creativity of youth are prefigured by Foucault (1977, 1978).

color, style or brand one is actually wearing. This is the primary source of frustration students have with dress codes: *they reflect a deep misunderstanding of how young people create meaning and live it.*

The imposition of “safety” as a reason to control young people’s stylistic choices is also perverse, as it imposes a meaning which may be far off the mark from what the young person intended. Even in the so-called most “dangerous” neighborhoods, safety or danger is typically far from the most important signifier of dress. Rather, like most young people, kids in the inner-city often dress in a certain way in the hope of appearing attractive to the opposite sex. The tricky side of this for many young men is that dressing like a gangster is one powerful way to look attractive. Yet young men are not helpless in this matter, as Frank will teach us below. Even if the police, teachers, and some young women cannot tell the difference between a young man who is dressed as a gang banger and one who *acts* like one, other gang members can. Also, for kids in the inner-city, dress has all the vibrant meanings which dress has for anyone, anywhere else: a way to signal interests, a way to appear fashionable, or simply a way to look nice. Narrowing down the meanings of dress to a mere safety issue is an insult to the range of young people’s interests, their creativity in expressing those interests, and their sophistication in judging matters of dress for themselves.

We will see below how students' embodiment of dress, intractable to regulatory efforts, is inseparable from the signification of dress. The data are based on a period of participant observation conducted 1997 and 2001 in an area with the highest crime and poverty in a large, heterogeneous, highly populated county in the Western United States. I interviewed 43 young people whose ages range from 14-21. Interviews were open-ended, lasting from one to twelve

hours, and were taped and transcribed. All names are pseudonyms.⁴

Dress and Youth Identity

Many commentators complain of intense jealousy among young people, who use clothes for a class-based fashion statement, occasionally shooting each other for a pair of sneakers.⁵ Despite the drama of such rare occurrences, I often noticed young men, usually African-American, praising each other's choice of clothes, or describing where they purchased their clothes and how much they cost. This affiliative, affirmative stance around clothes is exemplified in a gesture that has also been enacted in a number of recent African-American films: to "flip (or pop) your collar." As Bill, one of the security officers explains to me, after I'd seen many young men doing it to each other and to me, "Oh, well," he smiles, trying to find the words. "It means you're sharp, you got it together," he says. Despite such a respect for fashion, I did not notice the converse--students putting each other down for dressing down. In fact, I often noticed students at school simply wearing sweat pants and a sweater without any apparent negative consequences.

However, the meanings of dress for young people in the inner-city do not simply revolve around fashion statements. Dress also may indicate affiliations. As many others note (Vigil, 1988, Huff, 1996) gang styles involve particular modes of dress. Yet, importantly, *dressing like a gang member does not mean one is a gang member, and many "gang members" do not dress as such*. Dress is an important marker of place, and serves as a resource for using skills to skirt

⁴ For a detailed methodological discussion of the entrée and such issues as the relevance of race for members and for myself, see Garot (2003:24-75).

⁵ Anderson (1999); Holloman et al. (1996); MacLeod (1995). An ongoing lament among criminologists is that policy is often based on such dramatic, albeit extremely rare instances, overlooking mundane, ordinary meanings, and how crime is often a mundane, ordinary event

dangers, and flexibly molding identity. Schools are not “cracking down on gangs” through dress codes that inhibit “gang styles.” Gang membership may or may not be superficially signaled by clothes; it is just as well signaled in ways that schools have no authority over, such as a student’s tattoos, and their ways of walking and talking. A more significant question is, so what if a student is in a gang? Should young people be judged by their social ties or their actions?

Dress and Boundaries

Wearing the “wrong” clothes in the “wrong” area is often accounted for as a pretext for being “hit up.”⁶ 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, tells of such an instance of mistaken identification. Once when he returns home after a day in school, the confrontation becomes violent, which he 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. Shawn faced a problem

(Felson, 2008).

⁶ “Hitting up” can be a highly threatening, emotionally charged event by which one demonstrates gang affiliation, by demanding to know the gang with which another person is affiliated,

as he rides the bus from his sister's house, where the abiding color is red, to his school, where it is green. One afternoon, after I bought him lunch, we sat in my car in front of his sister's house, where the brick wall in her back yard was tagged with red paint after Shawn moved in, which he understands as a bit of a threat. "I guess they want to see if I'll cover it up. I don't touch it," he said. He said he has to watch what he puts on in the morning, because he can't wear Crip colors by his home, but he can't wear Blood colors at school. As he talked, I considered his choice of shirts is telling: a long-sleeved collared shirt with thin blue, red and green stripes, over black pants secured with a jamaica-colored knit belt. I asked him if he could wear blue jeans around his neighborhood. He told me he has many pairs of nice blue jeans, but he can't wear them on his way to school, so he usually wears black pants. I asked if Bloods wear blue jeans. He says they do, but that it doesn't matter too much if you're already a Blood.

In describing the need for a gang intervention program in Cleveland, Michael Walker and Linda Schmidt note how students like Shawn would carry their clothes in bags, so that they could change into the proper colors as they cross gang boundaries (Walker and Schmidt, 1996). Yet, as Shawn notes, a known "Blood" may well dress like something else, secure that his reputation will outweigh his stylistic choices. He would likely be overlooked by a police officer looking to identify "Bloods" by their colors, and erroneously pick up somebody like Shawn, who's simply trying to blend in, and make his way safely to school. In one of our early interviews in '97, Shawn discussed walking down the street in his sister's 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?" I ask.

analyzed in detail in Garot (2007).

“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...”

While these incidents occurred outside of school, they were just as liable to happen inside of school, especially with a new student. Regardless of whether students are correctly identified by their antagonists as gang members, such occurrences are typically interpreted as good reasons for delimiting students’ dress at school. However, although dress is specifically referenced in these narratives, dress alone is insufficient to specify gang involvement. Young people working within the context of a staging area, like a school, will find ways to index markers of affiliation or disaffiliation, whether or not they may be dress related.

Dressing “Cool”

One of my most insightful informants on matters of dress is Frank, who describes below how he adopts some gang styles because they’re cool, but modulates them so that they will not be recognized by gangsters as being gang affiliated. About thirty minutes into our interview, I tell him,

“You said that they were gonna jump this guy or they were giving him a hard time ‘cause he looked like a gangster, he was dressing that way.”

“Yeah,” Frank says.

“Do you, in the clothes that you wear, do you try to not to look like a gangster?”

“Yeah, mm hm. Even though I dress baggy but, I don’t really like to wear baggy ass clothes. Some baggies I’m definitely against you know. Me, just this baggy, but not like a gangster. I just dress like normal you know. Not normal, but you know baggy, but not looking like a gangster, just like that. There’s some guys that dress baggy but looking like gangsters you know, with the creases up and buttoned shirts and everything.”

“Creases in the t-shirts,” I add.

“Yeah, and then in the pants, and that’s what makes them look like gangsters and bald headed you know? And that’s what helps me a lot, that I’m not bald headed. But if they see a bald headed guy with baggy clothes, they gonna think he’s a gangster. But that’s

why they'll cruise the bald headed guys with clothes baggy and white shirts. [...]

“Uh huh. So you can wear your clothes baggy but not too baggy.”

“Baggy, but yeah, not too baggy you know. And you gotta be careful about how you dress baggy. Like there's some baggy with Nikes, creases and white shirt, they'll think that's a gangster right there. But if you wear your, some Filas or baggy with no creases you know just iron them without no creases, and a white shirt, it would be like, no, he ain't no gangster.”

For Frank, a folk sociologist of dress, no one item or color determines gang affiliation, but rather a whole gestalt gleaned from all elements fitting together (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Working the ambiguities between “normal” and “gangster,” he is grateful for his curly hair, which he is certain not to cut too short, and he is careful to iron, but not to crease his t-shirts. Hence, as he tells me elsewhere in the interview, by appearing somewhat like a gangster he can appear cool and attractive to girls,⁷ but avoid being mistaken as a gangster by those who can read the ambiguities. Unfortunately, the police and teachers are rarely among those who can decipher such fine distinctions (Anderson, 1999).

In our follow-up interview four years later, we sit in his car in front of the school, 9:00 in the morning after his all-night security shift. With his baby cooing in the back seat, Frank tells me how he subsequently increased his sense of safety by allowing his hair to grow into a long pony-tail down his back. Unfortunately, he had to cut this in order to get, ironically enough, a security job. This was a difficult change for him, since, as he puts it,

“I'm still missing my hair, man. To be honest, I used to love my hair.” Not only that, but, “To me it's like they changed my image. That was me, with the long hair. The way

⁷ As Jaime, another Latino consultant states, “I think, you know ‘cause a time came that girls, they started liking more gangster guys, you know, Mexican girls like, you know, Latinas. It was like, they would just be attracted to like gangsters, you know, bald headed, wanna see your big pants creased up, you know. They think those mutha fuckas look clean and shit, think they look nice, you know, young girls I guess. No, most of ‘em they still think that they like gangsters.” Or, as Antoine, an 18 year-old African-American states, “It seems like all girls, they like a little thug in their man.”

I dressed kind of went with the hair, you know? Now when you cut your hair, you gotta look for a way that goes with you. It doesn't really look right when you had long hair and then you just throw it out."

"So how did you dress before?"

"I used to dress more New Yorker style."

"What is that?"

"More baggy probably. Something that will really look good with the hair. But like when you bald, you gotta look for some clothes, because if you dress too baggy and your head looks bald, they think gang. And that's what I think about it."

"So your clothes aren't as baggy anymore?"

"Not anymore. They're smaller. Once in a while, like some baggy pants, but I don't really like to wear them, because my head looks clean. You get gangsters looking at you."

"So now that you're balder, you have to wear tighter clothes."

"Yeah. Don't even try to provoke the gangsters."

"Just by being baggy and bald. That's funny that that would provoke them."

"Yeah, I know. It's crazy."

Of course, school dress codes have no inkling of such nuances. The code at Frank's school specifies, "no baggy clothes," although it does not specify creases, and it cannot specify all the possible combinations of "baggies with Nikes," "baggie with Nikes and bald," or "Ben Davis baggies." In visiting Frank's school, I never noticed that bagginess was made an issue, although it is forbidden according to the dress code. At times, staff focused on young mens' earrings; at other times, braids for African-American young men and black and white for all students on Tuesday and Thursday were the only items singled out as forbidden among the multiple items in the code. Uniforms could be seen as one way of avoiding this problem altogether, yet as my consultants explain below, even the most conservative dress can be seen as gang related, depending on how it is worn. On the other hand, for those who do not comport themselves as a gang member, gangs have little relevance. For instance, Antoine, an 18 year-old African-American young man, tells how his embodiment shows those who are in gangs that gangs are not relevant for him.

They come up to me, be like, ‘You know, you should be from so and so.’ I be like, ‘Man, you know that’s not me, man.’ I don’t even act or talk or look like a gang banger really, you know. So that’s not me, ‘cause I wasn’t raised like that.

Or, as Ben stated, when I asked him to explain why he thought no one would ever try to recruit him into a gang, “Look at me. I don’t really look like a gang banger.” Ben’s round shape and friendly demeanor simply precludes gangs from approaching him. Hence, dress alone is insufficient to specify gang involvement. As Norma Mendoza-Denton states, “in order to be ‘mistaken’ for a gang member by other members, [one] would have to follow highly stylized rules of speech, hair, makeup [for girls], style of clothing, and even have a certain gait, in which case there wouldn’t be much of a ‘mistake’” (Norma Mendoza-Denton, 1996:62).⁸ Moreover, young people working within the context of a staging area, like a school, will find ways to index markers of affiliation or disaffiliation, whether or not they may be dress related.⁹

Yet young people are often unsure about just what the markers of gang membership are.

Below is another of Tim’s teachable moments in a class in which little else is happening.

Tim shows how the way you wear your hat gives away your gang affiliation. He puts his hat with the bill on the left, and says that is one gang (he mentions the name), he puts it with the bill on the right and said that is another gang. “What if you have it in the back?” someone asks. “Front or back means you a square,” Tim says with a smile. “What was it again?” someone asks. Tim goes through it quickly, putting his bill to the left, saying ‘Crips,’ (for instance), to the right, ‘Bloods,’ and then front and back, ‘square.’

On this particular day, students have the opportunity to “school” each other on gang matters.

⁸ As one of my consultants, Erick, tells me, “You can tell some gangsters--I know you’ve seen gangsters, they walk like, you know they all bad, you know, like they’re limp or something. I walk normally. I don’t really walk like, you know all hard or nothing. And then you can tell, the way they talk, the gangsters, you can tell how they talk, like ‘Fuck this shit,’ and this and that, and you know. I don’t really talk like that. I don’t gang bang or nothing. I’m cool, you know. I’m straight, you know.”

⁹ See Anderson (1999) on staging areas.

Here, Tim provides a lesson on the significance of the direction of the bill on one's cap. Such "schooling" is a quick and ready substitute for a teacher's lack of lesson plans, and in response, the teacher "does being elsewhere," in a virtuoso performance of civil inattention as he probes his attendance sheets (Goffman, 1959).

The Skills of Embodiment

Aside from consulting a sensitive folk sociologist like Frank, other interviewees who are especially perceptive about issues concerning dress are those who leave gangs, and are thus working on consciously molding their identity. Most books on gangs have a section on leaving the gang, describing how members "mature out" of a gang, or may be "courted out" in a hazing ritual (Vigil, 1988). A less common focus of such studies concerns the work which gang members must do on themselves to become conscious of pre-reflective ways of presenting the self, in order to change those ways and appear as one who is not gang affiliated. A number of my consultants were quite adept at describing such processes. Like Agnes, Harold Garfinkel's famous transgendered interviewee who discussed her work to "do female," these young men are able to discuss their conscious efforts to mold their identity, "doing non-gang."¹⁰

Both young men are 18, of stocky build and medium height. Earl, the first interviewee, is an African-American interviewed in 1997, and wears a red shirt with a black collar, a short zipper cinching the top, black pants and leather loafers. The other, Johnnie, is CAA's premier rapper, an Asian-Pacific Islander from a family of ten, who wears a red t-shirt sporting a surfing logo, baggie jeans, tan worker boots and a gold chain around his neck, about a centimeter wide, interviewed in 2001. Note how both young men speak to the difficulty of leaving gangs not in

¹⁰ Garfinkel (1967). This insight led to the extremely rich insights into gender as performance.

terms of severing potentially combustible social ties, but in changing the way one embodies their clothes.

“You can’t really say you from the hood no more,” Earl says. “Once you give it up, that’s it.”

“Was that hard?”

“Yeah at first, but that was one o’ the small minor things. It wadn’t too hard for me to give up bangin’. It was hard for me to give up the way I dress! That took me almost a whole year to change the way I dress.”

“Cause you had to buy new clothes?”

“Nah. Because I had to choose the way I wore my clothes, you know. New clothes automatically come, it’s just the way you wear ‘em, you know. ‘Cause see I could have on a t-shirt right now, like you wearin’ a t-shirt, and I could wear the t-shirt the way you wear it, but it’s the WAY that I wear that t-shirt. It’s the way I act when I wear that t-shirt. ‘Cause I could wear a t-shirt and some jeans, like you wearin’, and I could have my jeans pulled all the way down below my butt, you know. And be wearin’, what kinda shoes you wearin’.”

“Just boots.”

“Some boots like that. And wearin’, and saggin’ it, and be lookin’ like a gang member. I have to wear it the way you wearin’ it right now, with my pants pulled up, shirt nice, you know, pressed.”

“I don’t have it tucked in or anything” I laugh.

“Well it’s not tucked in but still, you know, pants pulled up, and it’s the way you present yourself. It took me a while to learn that.”

As Earl states, it is not his dress, but how he wears his dress which he had to learn to change as a non-gang member. He artfully describes how the clothes I wear, with a few alterations, could appear to be gang affiliated, *depending on how one wears them*. While “the clothes came automatically,” Earl took over a year to learn how to wear the clothes, and even then, found to his surprise that others still pointed out when he looked like a gang member. Earl is sensitive enough to know that while clothes may be readily changed, the embodied habitus is more intractable, and must be repeatedly, reflexively brought to conscious attention Bourdieu (1984). Can schools regulate the *way* one wears their clothes? Is it in their interest to do so?

See West and Zimmerman (1987).

Below, Johnnie provides insights similar to Earl's, during our three hour interview in 2001, as he tells how, like Earl, he worked to dress in a non-gang fashion.

“Only problem I really had was the area it was in. It was around Bloods. I wasn't no Crip or anything, it's just I didn't like 'em. Not that I don't like 'em, but I was sure they wadn't gonna like me, how I carry myself. So one day—”

“Tell me about that, the way you carry yourself. What was it about the way that you carried yourself?”

“A lot is based on how a person walks, how he talks, and if he has long hair, the way he wears his long hair, the colors he wears, you know.”

“Do you dress differently or walk differently than a Blood walks?”

“I walk as somebody who would be affiliated with, you know what I'm sayin', a gang or some'in.”

“Oh, OK.”

“Mother fuckers got walks. Walk nerdy. Nigga walk like this [He demonstrates, taking long, lunging strides, swaying the shoulders back and forth with the arms swinging wide, making large claims on space.], hell no. You know what I'm sayin', them niggas, they mob like, you just bangin' or some'in, and you got that hard core walk, 'like wait up homie, where you from?' [hit up]”

“Right.”

“I wadn't trippin' off that. That was never no big issue to me, but it was an issue concerning my safety. I didn't wanna get smoked. I didn't wanna get shot.”

Johnnie did have to change what he wore, but more significant than that for signaling his affiliations, and for his safety, is how he embodies his clothes (Entwistle, 2001). The key to his discourse is his demonstration of “mobbing.” By its very presence, it *invites* the gang-relevant question, “Like wait up homie, where you from?”¹¹ “Mobbing,” typically done in a large group, is the signifier of gang affiliation par excellence; yet no school codes outlaw this type of behavior. Large, lunging strides, dominating public space in an age-old manner as described in Katz's (1988:114-163) discussion of “parading,” are the *sin qua non* of gang identification.¹²

¹¹ As Goffman (1967b:252) states, “Minor behaviors can be employed as a serious invitation to a run-in or show-down. One type of truncated act should be mentioned specifically. It is the use of the style of standing or walking as an open invitation to action to all others present.”

¹² Also available to non-gang members—especially suburban white kids, as a way of doing being a badass. See Katz (1988:80-113).

Teachers definitely do recognize such embodied practices when they see them, and sometimes they try to correct them. Below, Ms. Reynolds corrects Johnnie's posture as he reads a passage about Harriet Tubman for African-American History Month.

Johnnie stands at the podium, reading about Harriet Tubman to about 70 people. After he finishes, Ms. Reynolds walks up to him, explaining that this is a "teachable moment." She tells him to stand up straight, and not lean on his forearms. "Do you want me to read the whole thing again?" he asks. "No, just the last line," she says, so he reads it again, as if forcing himself to stand up straight, and a couple kids smile and "whoop" for him when he finishes.

For Earl and Johnnie, such a demeanor had to be learned, to avoid the sorts of hassles which accompany appearing like a gang member.

Conclusion

An earring, cornrows, baggy pants, t-shirts, t-shirts with creases, t-shirts with creases and Nikes, tattoos, mobbing: adults rarely have a clue about what these styles signify. They only know their own gut level fear in the eyes of a student who appears somehow defiant with his hair in braids, or a diamond stud in his ear. To overcome that fear, school staffers attempt to express authority, but in so doing, they encourage rather than dispel rebellion.

Some might argue, rules should be further elaborated, and more consistently applied. Yet such would lead to an infinite regress (Garfinkel, 1967). Even if each and every possible detail of student dress could be specified and enforced, it would not begin to address the ways in which students do gangs. For gang affiliations are not merely marked through dress, but through the body (Entwistle, 2001). By enforcing dress codes, school officials are trying to outlaw an embodied way of being in a disembodied way, seizing on features of dress in a desperate effort to find something concrete to regulate. Such regulation only alienates students, leading them to

strengthen their counter-school “oppositional cultures.” Once school staff members focus more on developing a meaningful pedagogy rather than merely controlling students, concern for enforcing dress codes becomes as meaningless for them as it is for those under their tutelage (See Friere, 1970; McNeil, 1988).

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