Ethnography

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Provocative looks

Gang appearance and dress codes in an inner-city alternative school

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ABSTRACT ■ We examine how the appearance of students in an inner-city US high school is articulated and contested by staff and students. Implemented to battle distractions of student culture that are thought to interfere with the school's mission of developing the inner and more abstract aspects of character and competency, school dress codes ironically sustain a collective focus on the outermost, material layer of the self. Provoking and responding to the attention given to their dress, body adornment and hairstyle, the students elaborate their appearance into a living flesh of the self.

KEY WORDS ■ appearance, conflict, delinquency, deviance, education, embodiment, fashion, gangs, inner-city, phenomenology, school dress codes, self, sociology of the body

> 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 [Garot*] ask him. 'It's my hair!' he says with some indignation. 'Yeah, it's your identity!' Mario says. 'Your identity,' I say, nodding.
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> During a field trip to a local college, Silvio, Deidre, two African-American young women and an African-American young man are gathered around a public computer in the student commons. I watch Silvio get into Yahoo and do a search for 'Retro Jordans', and then stare at the pictures of the shoes. He just bought a pair of Jordans from Niketown; I notice him wiping them off with a napkin throughout the day.

Social commentators have often complained that inner-city youth pay too much attention to clothes as status symbols that transcend the appearance of poverty (Anderson, 1999; Holloman et al., 1996; MacLeod, 1995). But the meanings of clothes in signaling where one stands socially and with what kind of people one naturally associates (Blumer, 1969) is a thin part of the social reality of appearance as managed by low income, high-school-aged youths in contemporary US cities. For them, clothes have vibrant implications in everyday interactions.

Inner-city school authorities are at once preoccupied with and yet not well attuned to the nuances of students' appearance. Out of fear that students may be representing gang-orientations, urban schools have increasingly enforced limitations on student dress, some even prescribing uniforms. Critics have responded by arguing that the effort to control student appearance contradicts pedagogical concerns (see McNeil, 1988). In this article, we develop an ethnographic foundation for policy discussions by exploring the rich and varying meanings of appearance in and around an inner-city alternative school.[1]

At times it appears that the enforcement of dress codes can incite student antagonism towards school, but the social realities of dress are more complex than simple 'blame-the-authorities' perspectives may suggest. Students come to school already invested in their appearance in myriad and deeply significant ways. What happens in the school setting does not initiate the importance of dress, make-up and body adornments, but neither do efforts at repression diminish the significance of appearance. Instead, students and school staff tacitly collaborate in reinforcing the meaning of these outermost layers of personal identity. The school examined here sustains students' already energetic efforts to make superficial appearance into a kind of organic center of the self, one that reaches out to sense the world and reverberates almost constantly with anticipated and infinitely interpreted meanings.

What the phenomenological tradition offers to this sociological investigation is encouragement to appreciate how interaction, when it becomes

densely concentrated on some part of the self, is not only richly symbolic but is also a way of shaping the very body of the self. For the young people described below, interactions over appearance are dramatic, frequently charged with meanings of sexuality, with risks of violence, and with proud and humiliating emotions of ethnic and class identification. As we appreciate more and more how these young people focus their consciousness and interaction strategies on appearance details, Merleau-Ponty's (1964) conception of '*le chair*', or the flesh, becomes indispensable. In contrast to the implications one receives from the symbolic interaction tradition, the students described here do not simply manipulate appearance like a puppet master controlling some artificial extension of themselves. It becomes clear that they live in and through their appearance in ways that are obviously profound for their immediate experience, if ambiguous in the consequences for long-range biographical trajectories. We explore in this study how appearance, used repeatedly, in widely varying situations within and outside of school, and almost continuously within an aura of ambivalent meaning and charged implications, becomes a probing/feeling center of the self.

We begin with brief reviews of the US legal context for mandating dress codes in schools.

Schools and dress codes

It may seem that the matter of student dress is of interest only to micro-sociologists fascinated with symbolic trivia, but national identity is often worked out on just such microscopic matters. In the US, 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 for reasons of safety and security (DeMitchell et al., 2000). We will see that students have great concern for what might seem to be minor, artificial, even silly features of personal appearance. It will be useful to keep in mind that the highest authorities in the land share in and help sustain this focus.

Within US law, the landmark case of *Tinker* v. *Des Moines Independent School District* (1969) established that under the First Amendment to the US Constitution, students have the right to wear a black armband in school to protest the Vietnam War. While the majority opinion, joined by seven justices, held that students do not 'shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate', two dissenters foreshadowed what was to come. As DeMitchell et al. (2000: 41) note, the minority opinion was that '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'.

In cases applying the *Tinker* decision, federal Circuit Courts of Appeal split over how this discretionary power should be exercised.[2] When the dispute was over 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, 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. The dominant judicial mood has swung toward the earlier dissenting view: the Supreme Court has upheld restrictions on student expression in two cases since Tinker (Weisenberger, 2000: 52).[3]

If Republican-appointed judges have led the movement to restrict students' symbolic expression, the view that school authority depends on such repression is not a partisan matter. Following President Clinton's education leadership (US Department of Education, 1996), local public school officials have 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 et al. (2000) found that 51 percent 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. Advice for principals implementing dress codes is common in journals catering to this population (Essex, 2001). The rationale is utilitarian: dress codes are said to foster school safety (*Curriculum Review*, 1999).

The sociology of dress and fashion

The ambivalence of US Courts of Appeal in attributing constitutionally protected value to matters of dress and grooming is echoed by theories of fashion which place ambiguity at the core of fashion's messages. For Simmel, fashion represents the tension between unity and differentiation, 'satisfying the demand for social adaptation', simultaneous with 'social demarcation', especially for the upper classes (1904: 296–9). Fred Davis extends this analysis by exploring how fashion frames tensions of 'youth versus age, masculinity versus femininity, androgyny versus singularity, inclusiveness versus exclusiveness, work versus play, domesticity versus worldliness . . . conformity versus rebellion' (1992: 18). Davis argues that the ways in which fashion resolves these tensions become collective resources for representing social identities (see Blumer, 1969).

Ambiguities of fashion are severely curtailed with uniforms. As McVeigh 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' (2000: 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' (2000: 3).

Fred Davis shows how ambiguity is at the very core of fashions' statements; like music, fashion resists 'the attribution of unambiguous meanings'. Yet, in a limitation that indicates where symbolic interactionist sociology ends and phenomenological sociology must begin, Davis does not connect these multi-layered meanings to 'bodily practices and subjectivity' (Entwistle, 2001). For an understanding of how fashion is embodied, the work of Joanne Entwistle is informative. Drawing on Goffman (1959, 1971) to show how actors perform in the social world, and Merleau-Ponty (1964: 5) to highlight how 'our bodies are what give us our expression' in that world, Entwistle writes that '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).

We first describe some everyday situations in which the dress code is invoked at a small public high school in a major urban center on the US West Coast, Choices Alternative Academy (CAA), an institution that serves drop-outs, students that the criminal justice system has placed on probation status, pregnant teenagers and other 'at risk' youth. We then indicate how students' embodiment of dress is inexorably signifying and remains intractable to school officials. The wearing of clothes is not like a posting of signs, the content of which can be easily regulated. Wearing clothes is an activity with nuances that are infinite in the hands and eyes of sufficiently motivated performers and audiences.

The contested embodiment of the student self at CAA

CAA was built in the early 1990s by a conglomeration of federal and local officials to serve drop-outs between the ages of 14 and 21 who live within a six census-block area with the highest crime and poverty in the county. Approximately 300 students are enrolled; 61 are on probation; about 200 show up on any given day. The data presented are based on one and a half years of participant observation conducted over a four-year period. Robert Garot interviewed 46 students, six repeatedly, plus 11 teachers, two administrators, one security guard and a community activist. Interviews were open-ended, lasting from one to three hours; they were taped and

transcribed. All names of staff, students, the local gang, gang colors and the school are pseudonyms.[4]

The dress code and its enforcement are common sources of conversation among staff at CAA. Typically, such talk simultaneously damns the morality of contemporary teenagers while nostalgically extolling the morality the speaker had experienced as a teenager. An example occurred one day in January. Garot is hanging around with a security guard at CAA, Mr McClain, as he talks with Isa, a caregiver from the daycare center,[5] and Diane, a roving aide. McClain, a large, tall man with the body of a football linebacker, is wearing jeans and a generic blue sports jersey. Diane is wearing a black blouse and slacks. Garot is in blue jeans and a long-sleeved, collared, grey cotton shirt. All are inside a 10-foot chain link fence that runs in front of the school's office, while Isa, whose blue blouse with jeans under a full apron identifies her as a daycare worker, passes by outside. All the staff members are African-American. Isa and Diane are in their 40s; McClain is in his mid-20s. Garot is white.

As Isa is passing from the parking lot to the daycare center, she comments that it is a shame that so many of 'these girls have babies', an ironic statement since her job is to serve their children. Her comment is pitched indiscriminately to Diane, who is emerging from the office, and to McClain and me.

McClain says it's no wonder. In hushed tones, and with his hand shielding his mouth, he adds, 'Do you see the kinds of clothes they wear up here in the summer?'

Isa: Oh, I know! (eyes wide and eyebrows narrowed in disbelief).

Diane: (nods in affirmation)

Isa: (says she can't stand the clothes these girls wear nowadays, with their) titties hanging out and all that. Back in our day, a boy'd get a whippin' if his butt was hanging out like a lot of these boys have it. Yesterday (now looking at me, pointing her finger) I saw a boy with his pants right here! (motions just above the knee). How can he walk?!

RG: It's like wearing a skirt.

Isa: You just couldn't do that in my day!

McClain: Mm hm (voice and eyebrows rising)

Isa: You'd get a swat!

Diane: With holes in the paddle.

Isa: It all went downhill when they made that illegal. Now, anything goes, because they can get away with it.

McClain: Freaky deaky. They got them studs in they tongues and all that too!

Isa: (slaps her hand in the air dismissively, as if shooing an insect) They just don't listen anymore, but you bet they do to me! (with a stern, unflinching look in her eyes). These other teachers will be calling a student, and they don't pay any attention. If I call you, you better not NOT come! They know that!

All nod their heads and chuckle as Isa makes her way to the childcare center and Diane heads toward the classrooms.

In this scene, the conversation moves from childbearing, to dress, to punishment, to authority in a seamless flow. By deconstructing this fluid talk to bring out the tacit imputations that link otherwise independent points, we begin to see the vast power that clothing has in this setting. Through a kind of bracketing operation, we can bring out the practical accomplishment of this conversation as an aesthetically cohering unity.

Isa begins with the moral observation that it is a shame so many of 'these girls' have babies. Her comment instantly creates a morally cohesive group, erasing the separation created by the chain link fence between Isa and the others. Immediately McClain picks up and uses her generalization about 'these girls', adding the causal socio-demographic proposition that they become pregnant because of the collective fashion of wearing seductive clothing. Just as quickly, Isa invokes the lack of discipline 'nowadays'.

Isa effortlessly jumps from youth clothing styles to a putative failure of moral authority in the adult world. Then her comments return to adolescence and to the field of clothing, smoothly switching gender focus by mentioning how boys wear their pants low. In the process she mocks the male youth style in which long shirts cover boxer undershorts, thereby linking herself, and her presumably agreeing audience, with an adult and morally superior world.

Note that while many leaps are made in the conversational flow, leaps between age cohorts, across gender lines, and from observations on fashion to demographic explanations to a critique of moral authority, none of these transitions are experienced as problematic *because clothing and the body remain the constant themes*. The great power of embodied clothing is indicated by its ability as a theme to sustain such multiple provocative themes and broad conversational jumps. Put in other words, the topic of the embodiment of clothing gives emotional coherence in the immediate group to what, considered as isolated statements, would be disparate if not illogically related remarks.

Isa further attributes the current dress style to the demise of corporal punishment. At once she asserts that what youth does in adorning the body should be opposed. Her comments imply that the young people in question and the adults present in this conversation share the understanding that morality is built through a focus on the body.

The view that current social problems of youth are due to a relaxation of an earlier severity in corporal punishment is commonly expressed by CAA staff and administration. After segueing smoothly from talk about clothing to a comment on tongue studs, Isa concludes with the observation that, 'they just don't listen anymore . . . they don't pay any attention', and she affirms her own authority forcefully, if abstractly. Her techniques for obtaining respect are asserted as irreproachable but are left somewhat mysterious.

This performance by Isa demonstrates her moral authority and binds into common accord staff members whose paths do not cross everyday. For instance, although McClain was not alive 'in Isa's day', he affirms that students could not dress in such a manner at that time, raising both his intonation and his eyebrows. Diane and Garot both find themselves practically finishing Isa's sentences as Diane adds, 'with holes in the paddle', and Garot adds, 'It's like wearing a skirt'. Isa's remarks create cohesion not only in the collective affirmation of their substance but in their collaborative production. The staff members and the researcher jointly embody Isa's line of talk about discontinuity between the moral embodiment of generations, *creating moral community as a lived matter* and not just as a collectively affirmed moral position.

Note also that by creating a common position with regard to dress, the staff overrides its own hierarchical and functional differences. The speakers create a *faux* generational commonality over the some 20 years that divide their ages, and they create a common posture as sensible, moral adults confronting 'freaky' youth, a posture which makes irrelevant the differences among their duties in the scene, which range from pedagogical to custodial to, for the researcher, irrelevant. The final word in this rapid, highly participatory, animated, and quickly passing conversation, is one of power: youth must obey their elders.

This little set of people, thrown into proximity by working in various capacities at the same site, transcends differences in age, sex, race and hierarchical position, becoming a group through *collectively embodying a social philosophy about the embodiment of clothing*. What makes them a group is a shared body of opinion, *a body they share more clearly in the sensuality of the conversation* – its rapid flow, shared animation, emotional excitement – than in any direct deliberation on the many, quite complex relationships of the wide-ranging propositions involved. The immediate effect of their comments on youth clothing, indeed the only effect that one can assert with certainty about their discussion, is the effect their comments have on their situational relationships. Their construction of a common moral body is doubly masked, first by the stimulation of an astonished focus on the ways of youth, and second by their offering a way to lead society out of the current mess that youth clothing indicates. From their method of

critiquing youth clothing it follows that, if corporal punishment were used to make youths dress more conservatively, there would be fewer teen-mothers and, by inference, fewer of the problems that flow from teen motherhood.

In interpreting teenagers' actions, staff members tend to conflate issues in this manner. In striking contrast, for the teenagers themselves, dress has highly distinct significances. Indeed, for the young people to invest as much energy, care and attention to their dress as they do, they must implicitly insist on the significance of subtle differences that are washed out and left unobserved by the generalizing comments made by adult staff members. The students make their clothing proclaim values every bit as general as those the adults see as involved, these being values of personal liberty, self-expression and identity. But they express values specifically by making differences where the adults see only a common crudeness.

Thus each exploits the other to sustain the resonant embodied significance of clothing. The youths turn the disdain, if not the outright repressive efforts of adults, into resources for giving their clothing significance as defiant gestures. The adults mine the meanings of youth clothing to forge a common body of opinion that, at least momentarily, yet in an emotionally profound way, masks multiple social differences among themselves. The ways in which student dress is linked to adult power is, to say the least, complex, but it is not without systematic patterns that permit sociological comprehension.

Policy enforcement in three dimensions

Students at CAA receive their first impression of the dress code at orientation. An administrator goes over the rules for the school, which consist primarily of prohibitions of what might be perceived as gang affiliations. As stated in the school's orientation manual (Choices Alternative Academy, 1997), these include: no colored shoe strings, no sagging pants, no hats or earrings, no sports logo on shirts, no BK or CK tennis shoes,[6] no sunglasses, and no belts with letters or colors. As students began to bring more sophisticated technology to school, the code was expanded to exclude beepers, CDs and Walkmans. During orientation, the administrator recites the list, adding, 'And no green because as you know, those are Central's [the local gang's] colors.' Some of the African-American young men say 'Shhh', or 'ha', smiling knowingly.

In order to capture the lived reality of dress codes as they are enforced in this setting, we need to appreciate their three-dimensional significance. The dress code does not just cover students in detail, it reaches intimately into their concerns, runs all over their bodies in provocative ways, and

inevitably implicates the enforcer's passions. The dress code is based on a pedagogical/punitive philosophy that would open the inner self to learning by creating a body externally shaped to evoke the appropriate self. Everyone involved understands that three-dimensional matters are at stake, although their understanding is more implicit in their conduct than something they articulate.

One way that the members of this setting appreciate the three-dimensional pretensions of the dress code is by treating the rules as superficial. Signs and announcements concerning the dress code are often dismissed both by students and staff in a way that makes clear that they are not allowing the rules to penetrate them. Sometimes, the principal uses the public address system to convey rules such as 'No boys are to be allowed to come to school with braids.' Garot hears this one day while sitting in Ms Rivers' class, and he asks Maria, a student sitting next to him, 'Why not?' Maria, rolling her eyes and smirking, whispers: 'They think it's gang affiliated.' Sometimes individual teachers announce the dress code to their class, as when Ms Rivers announces that Tuesday and Thursday are black-and-white day. 'Everyone has to wear black and white, or else you won't be allowed in', she says. 'And no CDs or Walkmen are allowed on campus.' 'Why not?' a young man in the front asks. She responds: 'I'm just reading what it says here.'

A second indication of the three-dimensional significance of dress code is that enforcement virtually always proceeds from already developing passions among the enforcers. In class, Garot never noticed a teacher chastise a student for a dress code violation if that student was working calmly and quietly. However, if a student is rebellious or obstinate, then issues of dress may come to the fore. Suddenly the student may be made accountable, often quite dramatically, with a teacher's threat. In effect the dress code is used to try to repress, put a lid on, stamp down on, flatten out or otherwise convert three-dimensional student 'outbursts', 'loud' and 'in-your-face' behavior into two-dimensional forms of conduct.

Often the involvement of the enforcer's emotions is only apparent when enforcement begins. The emotions of the enforcer do not necessarily proceed from student behavior itself. On one occasion Garot arrives in Mr Merritt's class and inadvertently provokes the teacher to chastise Chris, a young man he has been tutoring. Chris has been sitting at the back table of the class with friends, chatting and laughing. Garot's arrival in class put at stake the teacher's reputation for controlling his class; Garot soon senses that, unwittingly, he created a potential shaming situation for the teacher by entering to observe the class. Mr Merritt immediately uses Chris's earring as a pretext for having him settle down and work with Garot. 'And get that earring out of your ear or I'm going to take it out and you won't be getting it back!' says Mr M, referring to a small diamond stud earring in Chris's left ear. 'I've

told you before!' Reluctantly, wincing with annoyance, Chris removes the earring.

Third, the three-dimensionality of the dress code is indicated by the use of some other emotion as a vehicle for enforcement. Later in the fieldwork, after Mr Merritt had been promoted to Vice-Principal, Garot noticed that he often used threats veiled with humor to call out students' dress code violations. For instance, on a spring day in May, Garot sits on a bench, eating a donut and leaning against a fence adjacent to the childcare play yard as Mr Merritt walks across the yard during the 20-minute break between morning classes labeled 'nutrition', and calls out to David, 'I'm thinkin' about gettin' me some earrings!' David stops during his basketball game without making a big fuss, removes the earrings and puts them in his pocket. Later, Mr Merritt chastises another player in the game, Philip, for his closely braided hair. 'I couldn't find my comb this morning', Philip says. 'You gonna have a lot more time to look for that comb if you keep coming like that', Merritt tells him, looking straight in his eyes. Philip, taking Merritt seriously, looks a bit put-down.

In some contexts, where social control is already well established, dress codes are experienced as primarily two-dimensional. School uniform rules often specify how long a skirt must be, how high pants must be worn, how short hair must be, which colors are acceptable, the signs that must and may not be worn. At CAA, the appearance rules are three-dimensional because dangers of eruption and penetration are omnipresent.

In schools that require uniforms, dress codes stay two-dimensional as authorities inspect fine details at the boundaries: is that color grey or blue?; is that skirt above the knee?; does that boy's hair fall to touch his shoulders? One powerful way that the dress code at CAA becomes three-dimensional is that, to mobilize it, adults must look intimately at the bodies of young people. In both of the last instances, Merritt interrupts a basketball game, singling out these specific young men while many others sport earrings and/or braids. Note the connection between the intrusiveness entailed in enforcing appearance rules and the enforcer's expressiveness. As enforcers of such rules, the staff invade student bodies with extraordinary intimacy. This is not a matter of commenting on student work ('You got the wrong answer') or even conduct ('Stop that!'). The variety and innovativeness of student appearance makes enforcement work a matter of virtually touching student bodies from top (prohibited hairstyles) to bottom (prohibited shoe wear), of shaping the appearance of everything from ears to *derrières*.

At the same time, each act of appearance enforcement reveals the direction and detail of the enforcer's attentions. The social process of enforcing appearance rules runs three-dimensionally in two directions, at once both invading students by gazing on buttocks, into cleavages and at the insertion

of jewelry through body parts, and revealing that not only have adult authorities been looking at student bodies closely, they have been looking with a sort of passion that passes as moral but always might be something else. In the way they mobilize enforcement actions, the staff does not deny the intimacy of their involvement. Instead, as exemplified by Merritt's use of the format of humor with David and his combination of humor and a 'dare/confrontation' format with Philip, the staff in effect covers any ambiguity about the nature of their personal involvement by highlighting a more acceptable emotion than some that might otherwise be suggested.

On another occasion, Merritt virtually strips layer after layer from a student. The interaction reverberates with his situational wit. In three short sentences, each delivered as a punchy exclamation, Merritt at once reveals an insistently probing gaze, generates a situational dynamic that moves from intimate collaboration to a distancing exertion of authority, and ends with deposits of a student's contraband appearance. Daniel starts to leave the office telling Merritt of a fight he has just witnessed. Merritt and Danny lean in close, whispering to each other, and then Merritt tells him 'All right, now get to class!' 'And take off that hat!' he adds, as Daniel leaves. 'And the one underneath it!' Daniel has a stocking cap under his baseball cap, and he leaves both on top of the files in Merritt's office as he walks out to class.

The three-dimensionality of the dress code is also a matter of the character implications that enforcement throws back on the enforcer. Enforcers show the kind of people they are in terms of their feelings, sensibility, kindness or meanness. Despite all the strategies used by school authorities, every day students can be easily found at CAA who violate some feature of the dress code. The potential for enforcement, and for making 'exceptions' that indicate a staff member's sympathetic character, are infinite. About a half hour after Daniel has deposited his two head coverings on top of Mr Merritt's file cabinet, two pregnant Latinas came up in short, tight summer dresses, bare in the back except for a thin ribbon of cloth used to tie the garment. Mr Merritt looks at them, sighs and slaps down his hands on his thighs. 'Do you know what day today is?' They look at him and shake their heads innocently. 'How do we usually dress on Tuesday?' he asks. 'I wasn't even going to come here today. I was going to go to college', Maria says.[7]

Merritt: So why didn't you go?

Maria: I got up too late, so I decided to come here.

Merritt: You know we have a dress code here.

Maria: I know. It's just I was already dressed, and I didn't want to change.

Merritt: All right, get to class. But don't forget next time!

They walk out.

Note that by granting an exception, Merritt can keep his express focus indirect; he refers to the dress code, he sighs and slaps his thighs in a brute but unspecific negation, he refers to 'how we usually dress'. He does not say anything like, 'You should not come here looking so sexy.' This non-exercise of authority leaves the students with their appearance unaltered and relieves the staff member of revealing the intimacy and sensual implications of their attentions.

The regulation of appearance is ubiquitous at CAA. As we have already seen, everyone gets involved, not just the teachers and administrators but all students and all adults present, and enforcement is deeply involving. For all who might exert authority, not being repressive is a way of demonstrating a basic sympathy with the students. Sometimes, by intervening on behalf of a student, office secretaries show that they, and by inference the institution as a whole, have a heart. Tammy has been sent to see Mr Merritt by a teacher who objected to the skimpiness of her dress. She's wearing a violet one-piece outfit, low cut at the top, revealing cleavage, and extremely short, falling just below her buttocks. Although the dress is so short that not only her chest but the bottom of the dress could be covered by the white zip-up sweat jacket she also wears, Merritt sends her out of his office to sign out of school for the day. This attracts the attention of all the office staff.

Sally: That's not too much.

Ms Smith: Just zip up your jacket.

Jennifer: He can't just send you home for that.

Ms Smith: Last year, we had a girl here in a BIKINI! Now that was too much. But this? This isn't that bad at all.

Toni: (zipping up her jacket) How's that?

Ms Smith: That's just fine, dear. (The others nod in agreement.)

Sally: Now you just go back to class and we'll take care of this.

It is clearly too simplistic to say that the adults present are antagonistic to youth styles. The adults have various needs in their relations with the students; identifying with youth styles can be useful as a way of showing personal sympathy, which in turn can be useful for building authority relations over students. One substitute teacher, a petite Anglo woman who plays in a rock band at night, reports with pride how she has come to know some of the kids, like Vester, an especially dark African-American young man with 'corn rows', tightly braided lines of hair running close along the scalp. She says he was pretty distant with her until she told his girlfriend that she has a good-looking boyfriend; then he was nicer. She says she has complimented him on his hair today.

Appearance rules make the culture of the school emotionally provocative when rules are enforced, when exceptions are granted and when uncertainties are debated. Uncertainties are an important, recurrent basis of the embodied life of the dress code as a social phenomenon. Uncertainties emerge in part because the regulatory regime must hustle to keep up with the evolution of youth styles. On the belief that styles which reveal gang affiliations constantly change, appearance rules must also change. One rule that did not exist when Garot visited the school in 1997, but did exist when he returned in 2000, concerns braids in the hair. African-American young women are allowed to have as many braids as they wish, but young men are limited to two braids. It takes some acumen to characterize hairstyles in these ways. At times, Garot would think a young man is wearing braids, but he would be told, 'these are twisties', in which the hair is twisted into flat rows, rather than braided into them.

Since rules change so often, and are frequently overlooked, many students share these uncertainties. Doogan asks, 'What's the thing about wearing braids here? Is there a rule against that?' 'Let me see, how many braids do you have?' Garot asks, looking at his head. 'Just two? That should be fine.' 'Not what they told me', he says. 'They told me I couldn't have any braids', he exhales, shakes his head and shrugs his shoulders. 'Do you know why they told me that?' 'I have no idea', Garot says. The enforcement culture sets up a rich, everyday, sensual culture of exploring appearances that constantly threatens to displace the pedagogic culture that the school is mandated to serve.

Some students mockingly take the role of a moral entrepreneur (Becker, 1963), finding delight in using the rules to chastise others. Once, during nutrition, Garot is the target of this as he stands by the snack machine with Gerome. Natania comes up and says, 'You're not wearing black and white!' 'Oh. Well, my shirt is a combination', Garot says, holding out his grey shirt. 'That's not good enough!' she proclaims, then runs away laughing.

Students are fascinated to draw attention seemingly to every region of their bodies that they can design: hair, ears, rear ends, feet. . . . In a way, they are complementing the fashion market, which can raise prices by expanding the features of appearance that can become materials for 'design'. (For example, eyeglasses have entered the 'design' area relatively recently.) What makes student appearance provocative is not the regions of the body that are shaped nor even the substance of the designs used. The prohibitions are not focused on 'sexy' or 'threatening' fashions. The problem for authority is that the designs come from student culture, which evolves and celebrates a logic independent of school concerns. It is not inevitable that educational institutions address matters of student appearances. In general, US universities have no appearance rules. But in pre-university schooling, in private as well as in public schools, appearance is widely regulated.

Students enter CAA already defined as problematic with regard to social control. CAA authorities challenge students not only in all regions of their body but also where they apparently have their heart: the constantly evolving character of student appearance shows that it is a central youth concern. Instead of standing for the irrelevance of appearance in favor of 'the life of the mind' (as some universities like to phrase their values), CAA takes on students where they are, joining in their focus on their bodies but through repressive regulation. Students seem to intuit the concession that dress codes represent. They respond triumphantly by playing with adult rules, using them to draw even more attention to their designed bodies.

How conflict brings clothes to life

The contested items of personal appearance at CAA, the clothes and hairstyles and jewelry, are lifeless in themselves. What is striking is how thoroughly involved all parties become in the texture of struggle over appearance culture. Through ceaseless efforts by students to provoke and of school authorities to control, the outermost layer of personal identity is made to resonate profoundly, in multiple interaction situations, and with great consequence both for the careers of students and the staff. Here we can study how specifically symbolic and ontologically inert aspects of appearance become 'flesh', that is, a lively way of sensing and being sensed that shapes experience and defines identity.

Social control interactions over appearance construct appearance as flesh by investing a rich array of appearance details with far-reaching ramifications. These ramifications can be anticipated individually, enabling the simple act of putting on a hat to reverberate with prospective energy. And actions of social control will often be reviewed widely; the appearance of bystanders and those who hear of incidents later also vibrate with meaning by juxtaposition. Consider the following incident. When getting ready to board the bus for a field trip, Mr Thurman tells a group of African-American young men, some with beanies or caps, to take their hats off. They simply look at him. 'I mean it', he says. 'Why do we have to take our hats off?' one asks, his head tilted sideways and eyebrows raised. Thurman tells him that's what you have to do to stay out of trouble. One takes a hat off, complying, then puts it on again, defying the spirit if not the letter of the command. The rest don't take theirs off, and they leave them on in the bus as well. Thurman ignores them.

The authorities as well as the students are trapped by a social world in which symbolic appearance has become an irresistibly real form of being. What are a teacher's choices in such a situation? Basically only two. One

would be to escalate the situation to compel conformity. Making such a demand transforms a pedagogical experience (here, a field trip) into a minor battle in an endless war, consuming a great deal of a teacher's time and energy. On the other hand, the teacher may choose to 'let it ride'. But this alternative also comes with great risks. If the teacher, having attempted enforcement, concedes to defiance, he has effectively lost face and has weakened his authority. If he cannot compel a student to remove a hat, how can he convince him to revise an essay or complete a homework assignment? The upshot is a battle between the defense of authority's face and the defense of student appearance.

Confronting such options, how do administrators respond? As soon as the students are on the bus, Mr Thurman and Ms Reynolds, the principal of the school, stand outside and briefly discuss their problems. Then Ms Reynolds gets onto the bus and announces, 'I'm very disappointed we found a lot of cell phones and CD players.' She adds that she is also disappointed in their hats, their hairstyles and language. Then she says, 'Starting Monday, we are going to start enforcing all the school rules. So make sure you comply with them on Monday.' The following week, signs are posted on eight and a half by eleven paper, announcing that students must wear black and white on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and that pagers, cell phones, CD players and braids (for young men) will not be allowed. Hence, rather than continuing to confront the students wearing hats (who were described by two teachers as being gang members from Central), Reynolds opts for a temporary retreat to muster her forces for a full attack on Monday. The hat incident per se is forgotten, but not the symbolic contest.

One of the ways that appearance becomes flesh is by breaking down the possibility of understanding appearance as simply a tool or a lifeless symbol employed by a self that is independently defined. Responsibility for the vibrant meanings of appearance is systematically blurred at CAA. Teachers, staff and administrators cannot ignore hairstyles, hats and the like; when they do not enforce prohibitions, non-enforcement will be noted by their peers and by their youthful subjects. On the student side, appearance details are ways of provoking others, and in turn, of provoking a self that responds to others' responses. It may be that the others the students have in mind when they shape their appearance are peers, not school authorities. But if so, then in this manner as well, appearance takes on a life of its own.

Note the rich ambiguities over who is responsible for the moral character of appearance in the following incident. On a spring day in 2001, Danny, a stocky African-American, comes into the office and stands at the counter, waiting to be searched so he can enter. Security searches, routine here, were occasions for checking compliance with the appearance codes. Danny wears overalls with blue shoulder straps drooping by his knees and a shirt sporting

the designer name 'Fubu' over the number '5', white at the top, fading to blue lower down. Mr Merritt sees him and demands, 'What do you think you're wearing up here?'

D: This is black and white.

M: No sir, that is not black and white.

D: Well just give me a blue pass then (to go home).

M: I will not. You tuck in those straps.

D: I can't tuck in the straps. It doesn't go that way.

M: You're going to tuck in those straps or go home.

D: I'll go home then, because it just doesn't look right with the straps tucked in.

M: Suit yourself, there's the door.

D: Where's my blue slip?

M: I'm not giving you no blue slip.

Danny leaves.

Danny's first interaction at school on this day is marked by the Vice-Principal's demand for an account for Danny's putative infraction. Danny's explanation is troublesome: anyone who sees Danny and recognizes the color 'blue' can see that he is not wearing solely black and white; if there is any doubt, Merritt resolves it explictly. Danny's response invites a dismissal for the day. In this setting, where dismissal for the day is a constant possibility, Danny's wearing of these clothes, plus his demand for a 'blue pass', is readily interpreted as an effort to receive an excused absence from school which he could then show to any police personnel who might stop him outside school grounds as a truant. Merritt refuses to grant the pass, but, initially, offers Danny a tacit compromise by asking him only to tuck in his blue shoulder straps. Danny refuses to make this accommodation since 'it doesn't look right'. Merritt then invites him to leave the school, an 'offer' which Danny accepts.

Did Danny come to school intentionally wearing the wrong clothes in order to receive a blue slip? If so, the dress code merely provides a way for him to attempt to manipulate school authority. If not, if Danny is merely upholding his pride in a fashion sense that is pitched to his peers, then the imposition of the dress code undermines the possible educational value Danny would have obtained by staying in school for the day.

Although it is often clear that efforts at discipline are transforming a docile, eager, intelligent student into one who is angry and rebellious, it is

almost always clear that the importance of appearance is clearly provided by the student in the first instance. One African-American student was remarkable for his dignity and composure as much as for his isolation. A former model for major fashion designers, Gerome says that he had been kicked out of his house in a suburban area by abusive parents. As a minor while still in high school, he found an apartment with room-mates and paid for rent and bills until this became too burdensome. Then he came to the inner city to live with his grandparents until he could earn his diploma. On one morning, Garot sits in the waiting room as he enters with another student and is challenged by a school secretary, Sally, who asks pointedly, 'How come you didn't wear black and white today?' 'This is black and white', he says. She points to his conservative long-sleeved shirt with a button-down collar, with thin plaid strips of white, black and blue. 'They told me that was OK!' he protests. 'Well it isn't. Here, you'll have to sign this, which is what everyone who doesn't wear black and white has to sign.' 'Man!' he says, squinting his eyes in deep disgust, as he sighs. 'And that attitude is unnecessary. There's no call to talk back to me in that way!' she says forcefully, and he glares at her hard. Garot feels it getting tense and looks away. 'You should see Ms Reynolds [the principal]', she says.

The force of social control in vesting appearance with life is created not just by what is said by enforcement authorities but by where in social process they say it. Gerome, like Danny, is not greeted with 'Good-morning' or 'Welcome', but instead is called to account for his violation of the dress code. Student appearance is immediately given the power to undermine civil rituals that sustain a communality independent of social status differences.

Like Danny, Gerome here responds, 'this is black and white', yet he is on firmer footing than Danny, since his shirt contains only thin stripes of blue which had passed muster on previous occasions, a fact which he proclaims with an astonished, outraged tone. Sally dismisses his protest and then records his infraction, to which Gerome responds with 'Man!' Naming this as 'talking back', Sally makes the power struggle for the institutionally appropriate definition of Gerome's dress into a palpable tension. Perhaps Gerome dressed this morning with non-school audiences in mind. Perhaps he was headed somewhere after school where his appearance would be significant to him. In any case, once Sally challenges his color scheme, there is an unavoidable challenge not just to appearance details but to 'face' (Goffman, 1967), which is a moralized, emotionally laden matter. Now, throughout the day, Gerome can anticipate that others may perceive his clothing as potentially defiant. An outward layer of self which may have been shaped for its effects in some other time and place now becomes alive as a sensed part of the self potentially consequential for interaction throughout the school day.

Confirmation of the ongoing liveliness of his dress soon comes to Gerome. Note that even the following relaxed interpretation of the rules sustains the liveliness of their social meaning as something that will be subject to interpretive debate. Garot stands at the doorway to Ms Reynold's office as she speaks to Gerome. 'Why didn't you wear black and white?' she asks him. He stands up tall, in an imposing manner, and simply makes a slight shrug. 'Let me see what you're wearing. Oh, that's not too bad', she says, her eyes wide and somewhat surprised. 'Just next time, try not to have any blue in it.' He nods his head ever so slightly, obviously annoyed. 'Now get to class, and be sure to wear black and white on Thursday.' He leaves stoically, a slight 'pshaw', of air escaping his mouth.

Directly afterwards Garot asks Gerome if he'd like to do an interview. He is happy to participate. About 40 minutes into the interview, he complains about how CAA 'wastes my time'. As a fashion model, appearance is hardly irrelevant to Gerome. But appearance is so important to him professionally that its meanings in school are essentially irrelevant to him. From his perspective, the school ironically imposes meaning on his appearance when he specifically comes to school to get a delimited educational benefit.

> This morning, I haven't been sleeping much at all, but she just kind of made me really mad. I never snapped at her at all, but she kind of pissed me off today. . . . What teachers don't understand is that I don't care. They can put me in trouble, they can suspend me. I don't really care. To sit there and throw a fit would be something a little kid would do. You wanna suspend me? I'll just go to work. I'll just spend some time in gathering my thoughts. I don't care what you do. You can sit me into a room, I don't care. Just give me some work to do. Don't waste my time like that. . . . I don't like when they talk to me like a little kid, like a little teenager. You don't talk to me like I'm just another ordinary teenager, 'cause I know that I'm not.

The logic of school control of student appearance is to insist that educational culture trump youth culture on school grounds. In Gerome's case, this seemingly simple construction of the struggle is inadequate, because Gerome has been successful by exploiting his youth appearance in the marketplace. In effect, the market for clothing has made youth fashions so important that, for someone like Gerome, shaping appearance is not a childish or adolescent diversion from building a successful adult career, it is a proven resource. Gerome dismisses the entire interaction as 'a waste of time', describing the enforcement of the dress code as belittling because he has been addressed 'like a little kid, like a little teenager'. For most students, appearance has meanings in relations with peers, meanings that they bring to school but that, school authorities seem to hope, can become transparent or irrelevant on school grounds. But the enforcement of dress codes paradoxically keeps appearance vibrantly alive, even for someone like Gerome

who, in a kind of ultimate irony, is so deeply committed to adult-managed meanings of appearance outside the school that he agrees with the school that his appearance while in school should be irrelevant.

What dress means for students: uncertainties, creativity and emotional provocation

What is at stake for students in the struggle to control their appearance? At CAA, and as has been commonly noted in social commentary (Anderson, 1999; MacLeod, 1995), inner-city adolescent dress is rich in class-oriented fashion statements. Often young men, usually African-American young men, praise each other's choice of clothes, or describe where they purchased their clothes and how much they cost.

But many items of youth appearance at CAA have great significance without any apparent class or affluence meanings. An economically irrelevant but affirmative stance toward clothes is exemplified in a gesture that has also been enacted in a number of recent African-American films: to 'flip your collar'. After Garot had seen many young men flipping each other's collar, and even flipping his, he asked Bill, one of the security officers, what it means: 'Oh, well' (smiling, trying to find the words), 'it means you're sharp, you got it together.'

Moreover, there are many aspects of appearance that directly undermine a 'class orientation' interpretation. Despite indications of respect for fashion, there was no sanctioning of non-fashionable appearance. In other words, these students do not put each other down for dressing down. Students at school often simply wore sweat pants and a sweater without any apparent negative consequences.

It is much too simplistic to reduce the meanings of dress for young people in the inner city to class-oriented fashion statements. There are multiple other rich meanings that bring appearance to life on an everyday basis. Dress indicates many non-class affiliations. As many others have noted, gang styles involve particular modes of dress (Huff, 1996; Vigil, 1988). Even so, dressing like a gang member does not mean one is a gang member; many 'gang members' do not dress in ways that assert their gang membership. What is constant is a playing with appearance. Indeed, the lack of any systematic class or gang meaning to appearance is evidence that the creative use of appearance is what is most important to these young people.

Consider, then, the elaborate misperception by school authorities of youth appearance meanings. As a 19th-century institution, the contemporary school tries to cultivate abstracted, internal dimensions of identity in part by insisting that external commitments be abandoned at the school

gate. 'Public' schools should create members of a general public, and thus must insist that at least some external affiliations (father's occupation, wealth, neighborhood, sex, etc.) not be considered in the formation of curriculum and the evaluation of student performance. Attacking the most external layer of the self is a way of insisting that external culture not control school authority.

For the students, on the other hand, appearance has no simple, one-to-one coordination with outside status. Not only do inner-city CAA students blur the meanings of gang and class clothing, but in white, middle-class schools, inner-city and ethnic minority appearance details are often embraced. What is at stake for students in the shaping of appearance is a construction of internal capacity, something more abstract, a kind of potential or creative force. In effect, the reason that dress codes do not work is not because students are committed to alternative codes but because students, like school authorities themselves, want to see through clothes to personally distinguishing features of competency and sensibility.

If school authorities often misperceive the meanings of youth appearance, they are not alone. Many of the young men interviewed spoke of being mistakenly identified as a gang member by other young people. In the following conversation, Ernest, a Latino who works over 30 hours per week at a Latino grocery store and breeds pit bulls in his spare time, tells of an instance of mistaken identification in response to Garot's stock question, 'So the whole time you were growing up, if anyone ever came up to you and said where you're from, what would you say?' 'I would say, "I don't gang bang" and that's it.' Yet, Ernest continues, once when he was returning home from school, the confrontation became violent. Ernest sees his baggy clothing as the provocation.

> But one time, you know one time they did. They put mace on my eyes. They came up to me, you know, they told me, 'Hey, fuck 18th Street!'; they told me like that. They probably thought I was 18th Street, probably confused me, you know. I used to dress with baggy clothes. Not these jeans, you know. I used to dress with those kinda pants right there, 'Ben Davis',[8] you know, stuff like that. They probably confused me, you know. It was two guys, you know, 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.

This is a common tale from many interviews: one is 'hit up' by others looking for action (Garot, 2003). That looking like a gang member is perilous is not accidental. Baggie pants for Ernest were associated with attracting girls. As Jaime, a Latino, states:

> 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.

Or as Antoine, an 18-year-old African-American, stated, 'It seems like all girls, they like a little thug in their man.'

While Ernest is Latino, Peter, who immigrated from Belize as a teen, describes below how he faced a similar challenge in interaction with African-American gang members. Garot stayed in contact with Peter for several years, at times visiting at his house and inviting him to his wedding. Peter claimed an affiliation with the Crips, a gang known for wearing the color blue. At one point Peter had conflicts with his father that led him to move into his sister's residence, which was in a Blood neighborhood. As notorious rivals of Crips, Bloods are known for wearing red. In one of our early interviews, he discussed walking down the street in his new neighborhood.

> *P:* 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, whatever.
>
> *RG:* Mm hm. How many were there?
>
> *P:* 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 school, they are just as liable to happen inside school, especially with a new student. Outside school, the chances of meeting strangers are increased and so are the chances of misinterpretation. But misinterpretation is a constant possibility, embedded in cultural presumptions about the meaning of appearance.

The very fact that these youths' appearance is not unambiguous for peers or for adults keeps this outer layer of the self alive as a kind of probing/sensing skin. Put another way, part of *what keeps the meaning of appearance a lively uncertainty is a widespread culture that asserts unambiguous meanings for appearance.* Assertions that youth appearance has unambiguous meanings are common on the part of adult authorities, whether in school administrations or in police departments; among the young people themselves; and on the part of social 'authorities'. Thus Norma Mendoza-Denton (1996: 62) states:

> . . . in order to be 'mistaken' for a gang member by other members, [one] would have to follow highly stylized rules of speech, hair, make-up [for girls], style of clothing, and even a certain gait, in which case there wouldn't be much of a 'mistake.'

And one of my consultants, Erick, also implies that gang identity is unambiguously conveyed and read with the following comments:

> 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.

Ironic uses of clothing and other features of appearance are both common and easily misperceived as non-ironic. In response to a multitude of attractions that the youths themselves may not have made into explicit reasons, it is not uncommon for adolescents to strike up a gang appearance without being gang members. And when they do, as Ernest's experience indicates, it is not surprising that others will mistakenly impute gang affiliation.

In any case, uncertainty is a powerful device for sustaining sensitivity around a dimension of the self. The skin of a hand at rest soon merges into what it rests upon. Conversely, teasing and flirting are familiar ways of using uncertainty to raise corporeal sensibilities. A sure way to bring attention to any part of the envelope of the self is to put its contact with the world into risky motion. Youth appearance comes alive not through the fixed nature of its meanings but specifically because of the dramas of interpretation set up by ironic uses and pressured imputations. It is through their creativity that youths make a living, probing/sensing flesh of the rapidly moving realities of clothing, posture, hairstyle and other infinitely miscellaneous adornments.

Youth appearance is made into the home of the self by being a central uncertainty in social interaction. We have seen sources of uncertainties in the impossible effort of school regulations to keep up with changing youth styles; in intra-staff jockeyings through which some school officials, by exercising leniency in rule interpretations, show sympathy to students and a lack of sympathy with other staff members; in the efforts by students to comply with the letter but not the spirit of rules; in the ironic, playful and power-enhancing uses of provocative affiliation symbols; in willful misreadings; and in the erroneous presumptions voiced by adults, social analysts and the youths themselves, that the meanings of appearance are straightforward. But these sources of uncertainty only scratch the surface of the situational

uncertainties of youth appearances. Many other sources of uncertainty add to the scratchings that make appearance a lively seat of the self.

There is the changing social geography of the self. In arguing for bringing a gang intervention program to Cleveland, Walker and Schmidt (1996) note how students would carry their clothes in bags so that they could change into conforming colors as they cross gang boundaries. Peter (discussed above) faced a similar problem as he rode the bus from his sister's house, in an area where the governing color is red, to CAA, where street elites mandate the color green. After Garot buys him lunch one afternoon, they sit in Garot's car in front of Peter's sister's house. The brick wall in her back yard was tagged with red paint after Peter moved in. He understands a threat. 'I guess they want to see if I'll cover it up. I don't touch it.' He says he has to watch what he puts on in the morning; he can't wear Crip colors by his home, but he can't wear Blood colors at CAA. As he talks, Garot notes what he wears today: a long sleeved, collared shirt with thin blue, red and green stripes; black pants secured with a Jamaica-colored knit belt. Could he wear blue jeans around his neighborhood? He says he has many pairs of nice blue jeans, but he can't wear them on his way to CAA, so he usually wears black pants.

Then there is the fact that for some whose symbolic affiliations are presumed obvious within their social circles, appearance rules can be ignored. Garot next asks Peter if Bloods wear blue jeans. If red is for Bloods and blue for their enemies, the Crips, then Bloods should not wear blue jeans. But Peter says they do; it doesn't matter too much if you're already a Blood. Thus it seems that a known 'Blood' may well dress more freely than might be imagined, secure that his reputation will outweigh the apparent implications of his clothes. Such an established gang banger would likely be overlooked by a police officer seeking to identify 'Bloods' by their colors. The same officer might instead erroneously pick up somebody like Peter, who is simply trying to blend in so as to make his way safely to school.

One of the most insightful informants on matters of dress was Frank. Frank describes how he adopts some gang styles because they are fashionable, but modulates them so that they will not be recognized by gangsters as being gang affiliated. About 30 minutes into the interview, Garot says, '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.

> *RG:* Do you, in the clothes that you wear, do you try to not to look like a gangster?
>
> *F:* Yeah, mm hmm. 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.

RG: Creases in the t-shirts.

F: 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 . . .

RG: Uh huh. So you can wear your clothes baggy but not too baggy.

F: 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[9] 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 the attribution depends on a whole gestalt gleaned from all elements fitting together (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Working the ambiguities (Davis, 1992) 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 says elsewhere in the interview, by appearing somewhat like a gangster he can appear in style and attractive to girls, but he can also avoid being mistaken as a gangster by those who can read the ambiguities. Unfortunately, the police and teachers are rarely among those who can appreciate such fine distinctions.

Such nuances are not limited to Latin gangs, and since they are ever changing, students need to be kept up to date by peers about shades of meaning. For instance, once in history class Tim, an 18-year-old African American, shows a group of about five other African-American young men how the way you wear your cap can give away gang affiliation. He puts his baseball hat on with the bill on the left, and says 'Crip'; he puts it with the bill on the right, and says 'Blood.' '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', to the right, 'Bloods', and then front and back, 'square'.

In a follow-up interview four years later, Garot sits with Frank in his car in front of the school. It is 9:00 in the morning. He has just finished working his all-night security shift. With his baby cooing in the back seat, Frank relates how he subsequently increased his sense of safety by allowing his hair to grow into a long pony-tail down his back. Ironically he had to cut

off the pony-tail in order to get a security job. This was a difficult change for him, since, as he puts it:

> *F:* 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 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.
>
> *RG:* So how did you dress before?
>
> *F:* I used to dress more New Yorker style.
>
> *RG:* What is that?
>
> *F:* 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.
>
> *RG:* So your clothes aren't as baggy anymore?
>
> *F:* Not anymore. They're smaller. Once in a while, [I want to wear] like some baggy pants, but I don't really like to wear them, because my head looks clean. You get gangsters looking at you.
>
> *RG:* So now that you're balder, you have to wear tighter clothes.
>
> *F:* Yeah. Don't even try to provoke the gangsters.
>
> *RG:* Just by being baggy and bald. That's funny that that would provoke them.
>
> *F:* Yeah, I know. It's crazy.

Of course, school dress codes have no inkling of such nuances. The code specifies 'no baggy clothes', although it does not specify crease, and it cannot specify all the possible combinations of 'baggies with Nikes', 'baggies with Nikes and bald' or 'Ben Davis baggies'. Moreover, at no point during field research was bagginess actively made an issue, although it was forbidden according to the dress code. In the first research immersion, staff focused on young men's earrings; in the second immersion, the only items singled out as forbidden were braids for African-American young men and colors other than black and white for all students on Tuesday and Thursday. Uniforms could be seen as one way of avoiding this problem altogether, yet, as informants explain below, even the most conservative dress can be seen as gang-related, depending on how it is worn.

Doing non-gang

Aside from a sensitive folk sociologist like Frank, other interviewees who were especially perceptive about issues concerning dress were those who have left gangs and were consciously working on re-molding their identities. Earl and Johnnie are both 18, stocky and of medium height. Earl is African-American, and hopes to become a gospel minister. When interviewed in 1997, he was wearing black pants, leather loafers and a red, zippered shirt with a black collar that was cinched at the top. Johnnie was CAA's premier rapper when interviewed in 2001. An Asian-Pacific Islander from a family of 10, he was wearing a red t-shirt sporting a surfing logo, baggie jeans, tan worker boots and a centimeter-wide gold chain around his neck. Both young men speak of leaving gangs as a matter of changing clothes, a seemingly simple process of change that they have found to be surprisingly difficult.

Earl: You can't really say you from the hood no more. Once you give it up, that's it.

RG: Was that hard?

Earl: 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.

RG: 'Cause you had to buy new clothes?

Earl: 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'?

RG: Just boots.

Earl: 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.

RG: I don't have it tucked in or anything [I laugh].

Earl: 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.

It is not what Earl wears but how he wears his clothes that he had to

learn to change. He artfully describes how, with a few alterations, the clothes the researcher wears could be taken as gang affiliated. It was not a matter of expense. Although 'new clothes automatically come', Earl took over a year to learn how to wear them; to his surprise he found that at times others pointed out that he still looked like a gang member. Below, Johnnie provides insights similar to Earl's.

> *J:* 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 –
>
> *RG:* Tell me about that, the way you carry yourself. What was it about the way that you carried yourself?
>
> *J:* 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.
>
> *RG:* Do you dress differently or walk differently than a Blood walks?
>
> *J:* I walk as somebody who would be affiliated with, you know what I'm sayin', a gang or some'in.
>
> *RG:* Oh, OK.
>
> *J:* Motherfuckers 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]
>
> *RG:* Right.
>
> *J:* 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.

As Goffman (1967: 252) states:

> minor behaviors can be employed as a serious invitation to a run-in or showdown. 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.

'Mobbing', typically done in a large group, is the signifier of gang affiliation par excellence; yet no school code outlaws this type of behavior.

On the other hand, some who do not comport themselves as gang members claim that they need not worry about gangs. For instance, Antoine,

an 18-year-old African-American, tells how his appearance shows 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 gangbanger.' Ben believes that his round shape and friendly demeanor simply preclude gangs from approaching him.

Misunderstanding appearance

An earring, cornrows, baggy pants, t-shirts with creases, t-shirts with creases and Nikes, tattoos, mobbing: adults rarely know what these styles signify. They respond on a gut level with fear when they encounter a student who appears somehow defiant, his hair perhaps in braids, 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 that the rules should be further elaborated and they should be more consistently applied. Yet, as the thrust of Garfinkel's (1967) work makes clear, such an effort would lead to infinite regress. Even if each and every possible detail of student dress could be specified and enforced, it would not begin to address how students *do* their identities. For gang affiliations and other discouraged appearances are not merely marked simply through wearing particular objects but through how clothes are embodied. By enforcing dress codes, school officials are trying to outlaw an embodied way of being; they seize on features of dress in a desperate effort to find something concrete to regulate. Meanwhile the students appreciate the misfit between such object-focused regulation and their creative ways, an appreciation that creates even greater distance between them and the school. (On related processes of developing 'oppositional cultures', see Hyman and Snook, 1999; McNeil, 1988; Willis, 1977.)

Infinitely more challenging is the task of understanding how appearance comes to be the live, throbbing, probing, constantly resonant interpretive place where these young people dwell. It is too facile to blame the ready targets: school authority and the consumer marketplace. The interaction uncertainties that keep young people living in and through the details of their embodiment of their appearance are sustained vigorously outside of school and through manipulations of appearance that are engaged in day after day, in situation after situation, without incurring any conventional

form of expense. In contemporary schools, where the institutional objective is the development of various kinds of abstracted and inner competencies, the youthful focus on living identity at the material surface of the self suggests a strategy of resistance, a general defiance towards a philosophy of institutional power. But the lived realities of appearance management are rooted outside any institutional confines, and there is no simple explanation for the students' motivations in making hairstyle, dress and body adornments into the dramatic flesh of their everyday selves. Our objective has been to push the traditional symbolic analysis of interaction in a phenomenological direction in order to clarify that the problem to be explained is not a set of signs or even a series of interaction maneuvers but an embodiment of appearance that young people in this inner-city school setting naturally find to be a compelling place to center their everyday lives.

Notes

When used in reports of fieldnotes, 'I' and 'RG' refer to Robert Garot. Prior drafts were delivered to the American Sociological Association Annual Conference in Chicago, 2002, and to the Cleveland State University Department of Sociology, whose members also provided helpful feedback.

1 Alternative schools such as CAA have been conceptualized as an increasingly common response to school safety concerns. In a national survey of school boards (National School Boards Association, 1993), 66 percent of responding boards claimed to have an alternative program or school in place as a setting for placing violent students who have been expelled from a traditional school setting. Eighty-five percent of urban districts report having such a program in place, 66 percent of suburban districts and 57 percent of rural districts. Many policy makers advocate such settings as an alternative to expelling students, thereby balancing the rights of violent students to receive a free education with the rights of all students to a safe environment. Leo Klagholz (1995), the New Jersey Commissioner of Education, states:

> The removal of violent students through long-term suspension or expulsion is neither immediate nor guaranteed. The severity of these measures and their denial of educational opportunity render them ineffective as means of helping students who are violent or disruptive, or protecting all students . . .

This leaves alternative schools as a viable remedy. Many students at CAA have been transferred there for frequent episodes of fighting and violence, although others were transferred for dealing drugs, and others are simply drop-outs from traditional high schools, who have sought out CAA as a

means to achieve a high school diploma. Michelle Fine's (1991) thorough examination of the ways inner-city schools produce drop-outs, and Deidre Kelly's (1993) detailed study of the history and contradictions of continuation schools provide an apt backdrop of the milieu of social and political issues in which alternative schools are located.

2 The US federal judicial system is divided into district courts where trials are held and appellate courts that review trial court decisions within different regions of the country.

3 In the Fraser case, the Supreme Court upheld a school's 3-day suspension of a young man who, for student government elections, made a nominating speech replete with sexual innuendo. In the 1988 Hazelwood case, two years after the Fraser decision, the Supreme Court upheld a school principal's censorship of a school newspaper.

4 Garot originally visited CAA in 1995 while conducting an evaluation study of school-to-work programs coordinated by the University of California at Los Angeles. In early 1997 he returned to the setting as an informal tutor, working with students on basic skills and conducting interviews. As he came to know students better, Garot began driving them to appointments and attending their parties. For a detailed methodological discussion of the ups and downs of entrée and such issues as the relevance of race for members and for the researcher, see Garot (2002: 24–75).

5 Twenty to 30 of the students at CAA are parents. As part of the federal grant which established CAA, their children are provided for in a daycare center on the school grounds.

6 On such shoes, the corporate logos 'BK' or 'CK' have been interpreted by some youth as respectively signifying 'Blood Killer' or 'Crip Killer'. Bloods and Crips are names of local rival gangs.

7 Maria, like many high school students, receives credit by attending courses at a junior college, an institution that in this state is open by right to all who wish to enroll.

8 This is a brand name of pants popular among inner-city Latinos, often associated with gang membership.

9 Nikes and Filas are shoe brands; at the time of the fieldwork, the former were associated with gang adornment.

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