

**The Injury of Nostalgia,  
or  
The Stories a Gang Tells Itself**

Laurence Ralph





The Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science are versions of talks given at the School's weekly Thursday Seminar. At these seminars, Members present work-in-progress and then take questions. There is often lively conversation and debate, some of which will be included with the papers. We have chosen papers we thought would be of interest to a broad audience. Our aim is to capture some part of the cross-disciplinary conversations that are the mark of the School's programs. While Members are drawn from specific disciplines of the social sciences—anthropology, economics, sociology and political science—as well as history, philosophy, literature and law, the School encourages new approaches that arise from exposure to different forms of interpretation. The papers in this series differ widely in their topics, methods, and disciplines. Yet they concur in a broadly humanistic attempt to understand how, and under what conditions, the concepts that order experience in different cultures and societies are produced, and how they change.

Laurence Ralph is an Assistant Professor in the Departments of Anthropology and African and African American Studies at Harvard University. His research interests include: Urban Anthropology; Gang Formations; Disability; Medical Anthropology; Masculinity; Race; Theories of Violence; Popular Culture and Hip Hop. Laurence is currently working on an ethnography entitled *Half Dead: The Unexpected Ways We Injure the Urban Poor*. This book grapples with the consequences of the “war on drugs” together with mass incarceration, the ramifications of heroin trafficking for HIV infected teenagers, the perils of gunshot violence and the ensuing disabilities that gang members suffer. By investigating this encompassing, *Half Dead* details the social forces that make black urban residents vulnerable to disease and disability.



## The Injury of Nostalgia, or The Stories a Gang Tells Itself

At the West Side Juvenile Detention Center, inmates never notice your face—it's almost like you don't have one. When you walk into a cellblock at recreation time, the attention moves quickly to your shoes. They watch you walk to figure out why you came.

I imagine what goes through their heads:

*"Navy blue leather boots...reinforced steel toe...at least a size 12...must be a guard."*

The glass door swings open again.

*"Expensive brown wingtips...creased khakis cover the tongue...a Northwestern law student come to talk about legal rights"*—Yup.

Mr. Gregory wears old shoes. Still, the cheap patent leather shines; and after sitting in the waiting room for nearly an hour and a half, the squeak of his wingtips as he comes to take me back is a relief: "I've been coming here for five years now," he says, explaining his weekly visits as a Bible study instructor. "It's a shame, but you can just tell which ones have their mothers and fathers at home. Most of these kids don't. Their pants gotta sag below their waist, even in prison garbs. You sit around and listen to these kids...all they talk about is selling drugs and gym shoes."

Though I generally don't agree with what Mr. Gregory has to say about today's young people, his comments today warrant a nod of acknowledgment. His observations are, if not quite accurate, at least astute. There's a revealing relationship between jail clothes and gym shoes—and gang renegades are at the center of it.

Until recently Mr. Gregory couldn't tell you what a gang renegade was. I know because I educated him on the topic when he overheard inmates tossing the term around for sport. Renegades, I tell him, are young gang affiliates, typically teenagers. Seasoned members claim that renegades don't have the wherewithal to be in the gang. According to their leaders, renegades are the reason why the gang is not functioning as it should.

What I don't tell Mr. Gregory is this: the way in which older gang members see renegades is similar to how church leaders like himself—not to mention prison guards, teachers, and even scholars—view the urban poor, more generally. Chicago's renegade problem, in other words, is a parable for how we see the urban poor. In what follows, I complicate the assumptions that many have made about the structure, decisions, and perspective of renegades, by examining subjective versions of the contested and contestable gang history. Examining the gang's fraught past in a Chicago community called "Eastwood" will then help us understand the problems of the present. In the midst of unprecedented rates of incarceration, the anxieties that gang members harbor about the future of their organization are projected onto the youngest generation of gang members, and onto the globally circulated objects that they consume and create.

For gang members who are currently 40 to 60 years old, the emergence of gym shoes signal the end of an era when affiliates pursued grass roots initiatives and involved themselves in local protest movements. Meanwhile, for the other cohort of gang members who came of age during the “war on drugs”—those who are 25 to 40 years old—gym shoes connote an era of rampant heroin trafficking, where battalions of young soldiers secured territories within a centralized leadership structure. As they remember it, this was a moment in which loyalty translated into exorbitant profits. That these two oldest generations of the Divine Knights hanker for a centralized gang structure where authority was more clearly ordered, places an enormous amount of pressure on the youngest generational cohort, gang members aged 15 to 25 years old.

Hence, we’ll see that just like the game of shoe charades that inmates play in jail, renegades and their footwear yield key insights about a person’s place in the world.

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The renegade’s shoes are important cultural icons in present-day Eastwood.<sup>1</sup> Within the Divine Knights’ organization, wearing the latest pair of sneakers is seen as the first status marker in the life and career of a gang member. From the time a person joins the gang, having a fashionable pair of shoes signals one’s position as a well-established affiliate. As a gang member, after you reach your late teens and twenties, success is measured by whether you can afford a nice car or your own apartment. But since most of the teenagers they call “renegades” have yet to matriculate to that stage, having a fashionable pair of gym shoes is the pinnacle of possession.

Even though their gang leaders claim that, nowadays, the fashion trends of young gang members are too beholden to mainstream dictates—that their style is no longer definitively the Divine Knights’ own—gym shoes are the badge of prestige that renegades covet most.<sup>2</sup> Young renegades find numerous categories and distinctions to parse between various shoes. They speculate about how exclusive a person’s shoes are (whether or not they can be easily purchased in ubiquitous commercial outlets like Foot Locker, or only in signature boutiques) or if they are “retro” (models from another era). And, the more colors and textures that are woven onto the canvas of one shoe, the higher the prestige.

To be sure, renegades in Eastwood hold similar opinions of footwear as teenagers all over the country, urban and suburban alike, gang members and not. But despite the fact that the kind of shoes renegades buy have gained a reputation in broader society—through the dominance of market capitalism and, in particular, the prevalence of hip hop culture—one cannot reduce the suburban white student’s and the black urban gang member’s predilection towards gym shoes to the same rudimentary obsession. In a community like Eastwood, where 75% of males between the ages of 15-45 have a criminal record—and 57% of all men and women have been incarcerated—the stakes are simply higher for the poor black gang member, and sneakers far more integral to the life

of these teenagers who have far fewer possessions (and on a broader level, far fewer possibilities).

When it comes to the Divine Knights, gym shoes signal the host of contradictions entailed in gang nostalgia since members of the pre-renegade era can recall, down to the year (sometimes even the day), when they purchased the same model of shoes they currently see young renegades wearing. That older gang members hypocritically hassle renegades for possessing the same consumer fetishes that they used to hold dear bolsters the point that, at present, gym shoes have accrued additional symbolic value—they've come to stand in for uncertainties about the future. The problem is that gym shoes—like many gang symbols—have a double quality: they articulate highly charged notions of social mobility for one generation, and, for another generation, simultaneously recall a sense of cohesion and nostalgia.

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The sentiment of nostalgia has been used to connect forms of social injury to the physical reality of the body, from the beginning. The term was invented by a Swiss doctor, Johannes Hofer, in his 1688 medical dissertation. It describes “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.”<sup>3</sup> Among the first to become debilitated by and diagnosed with this disease were Swiss soldiers who were hired to fight in the French Revolution. Upon returning home, these soldiers were struck with “nausea, loss of appetite, pathological changes in the lungs, brain inflammation, cardiac arrests, high fever, and a propensity for suicide.” Among nostalgia’s most lingering symptoms was an ability to see ghosts.<sup>4</sup>

To cure this sickness, doctors prescribed anything from a trip to the Swiss Alps, to having leeches implanted and then pulled from the skin, to a healthy dose of opium. Nothing seemed to work. The experience of ensuing eras only confirmed the difficulty, if not impossibility, of a cure. By the end of the eighteenth century, the meaning of nostalgia had shifted from a curable, individual sickness to an incurable “historical emotion.”<sup>5</sup> The burdens of nostalgia, and the weight of its historical emotion, are still very much with us. Interrupting the present with incessant flashes of the past, nostalgia retroactively reformulates cause and effect. Nostalgia refigures our linear notion of history.

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We can't see much on nights like this, but that doesn't stop us from sitting on the stoop and watching the corner. The lights on Mr. Otis' street either don't work or are never on. In fact, they wouldn't serve any purpose at all, except that the lamppost at the street's end provides a mount for a police camera. The device rests in a white box, topped with a neon blue half-sphere that lights up every few seconds; residents dismissively refer to it as



the “blue light.” Stationed to surveil the neighborhood, the blue light fulfills another, unintended purpose: in the absence of working streetlights, the intermittent flash almost illuminates the entire street. It is a vague luminescence, but just enough to make out the molded wood boards of the vacant houses across the street. You can also discern the occasional trash bag blowing in the wind, like urban tumbleweed; and you can spot the tee shirts—everyone in white tees. But that’s about all the blue light at the end of the street allows us to see from a porch in the middle. From where we sit, you can’t discern the owners of those tee shirts: their faces aren’t perceptible, not even their limbs—just clusters of white tee shirts, floating in the distance. Like ghosts. From Mr. Otis’ perspective—a 72 year-old veteran of both Eastwood stoops and Eastwood’s oldest gang—these ghosts are a fleeting image of the “good ol’ gang,” as he calls it, about to sink into oblivion.<sup>6</sup>

As Mr. Otis sits, his slight hunchback angles him forward; he watches the street intently, as if he’s being paid for the task. And in a sense he is; central to his work as a counselor at a local violence prevention program is to attend to the comings and goings of his neighborhood. His street credentials, however, are far more valuable than anything he can see from his stoop. Mr. Otis was one of the first members to join the nascent gang in the 1950s, during the second Great Migration when African Americans moved from the South to Chicago, and settled in European immigrant neighborhoods. Back then, black youths traveled in packs for camaraderie and to navigate streets whose residents resented their presence. Since they were known to fight their white peers over access to recreational spaces, the popular image of black gangs emerged as a group of delinquents. Mr. Otis became a leader of the gang in the 1960s, by the time he was 26, and has remained prominent both in the gang and in the community for the next forty years. Nowadays, Mr. Otis speaks about his youth with a mix of fondness and disdain. The two great narratives of his life, community decline and gang devolution, are also interwoven.

“See, things were different when we were on the block,” he continues. “We did things for the community. We picked up trash...even had a motto: ‘where there is glass, there will be grass,’” he sings whimsically. “And white folks couldn’t believe it. The media, they were shocked. Channel Five *and* Seven came around here, put us on the T.V. screen for pickin’ up bottles.”

In these lively reminiscences, Mr. Otis connects the Divine Knights’ community service initiatives to the political struggles of the civil rights movement. When he was a youngster, Otis was a part of the gang that claimed that they wanted to end criminal activity. They hoped that their gang would be known for activism instead. At around the same time, in the mid-1960s, a radical new thesis, articulated by criminologists and the prison reform movement, gained momentum. These researchers argued that people turned to crime because social institutions had largely failed them.<sup>7</sup> Major street gangs became recipients of private grants and public funds (most notably from President Johnson’s War on Poverty) to do community organization, develop social welfare programs, and enter into profit-making commercial enterprises.<sup>8</sup> The Divine Knights of

the 1960s opened community centers, reform schools, and a number of small businesses and management programs. Such possibilities were in full bloom when Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. relocated his family to a home near Eastwood.

In June of 1966, the Divine Knights were persuaded to participate in the two marches Dr. King led into all-white neighborhoods during the Chicago Freedom Movement's open-housing campaign.<sup>9</sup> Inspired by the movement's demand that the Chicago City Council increase garbage collection, street cleaning services, and building inspection services in urban areas, the Knights organized their own platform for political action. They scheduled a press conference with local media outlets to unveil their agenda on April 4, 1968. King was assassinated just before the reporters arrived. Less than 24 hours later, Eastwood burst into riots. The fires and looting that followed King's murder destroyed many of the establishments along Murphy Road, Eastwood's major commercial district at the time.

Many storeowners left the neighborhood when insurance companies cancelled their policies or increased premiums, making it difficult to rebuild businesses in their previous location. This cycle of disinvestment affected all of Eastwood's retailers; by 1970, 75 percent of the businesses that had buoyed the community just two decades earlier were shuttered. There has not been a significant migration of jobs or people into Eastwood since World War II.<sup>10</sup>

In the decades after the massive fires and looting, Mr. Otis and other gang elders insist, the Divine Knights lost most of their power because they could do little to stop the other factions from rioting. Neighborhood residents not affiliated with the gang were likewise dismayed, believing that King's murder proved that the injustices the Divine Knights alleged to be fighting were, in fact, intractable. From Mr. Otis' perspective, the disillusionment that accompanied King's death, and the riots that followed (not to mention other assassinations, such as that of Black Panther leader Fred Hampton), ensured a downward spiral. The stunning promise of the civil rights era was shattered, its decline as awful as its rise was glorious.

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As I sit and listen to Mr. Otis, I notice how his nostalgia for the political gang is a yearning for the past, as much as it is a desire for a different present. In his lamentations about the contemporary state of the gang, structural changes in the American social order are reduced to bad decision-making. Mr. Otis and gang members of his generation fail to acknowledge that the gang's latter day embrace of the drug economy was not a simple matter of choice. The riots also marked the end of financial assistance for street organizations that wanted to engage in community programming.<sup>11</sup> The reality that the gang was, in fact, renowned for petty crime and feared for its revolutionary potential is cleansed in the romantic histories that Mr. Otis resurrects, in which he invokes civilized marches along the same streets that are now dusky and vacant. In his telling, there is no

mention that even during the civil rights heyday there were gang members who were not at all civic-minded or that a substantial number of gangs were still occupied by their own parochial and selfish concerns.<sup>12</sup> Whether or not this glorious conception of a political gang persists, or even if it never existed in the way Mr. Otis imagines, it is deployed nevertheless.

And so it is, like the shiny new surveillance technology that transforms a person's visage into a ghostly specter at night: the civil rights-colored lens through which Mr. Otis views the gang helps fashion the image that haunts him.

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In Eastwood, the passionate longing associated with nostalgia is not unique to politically-oriented gang elders. The following generation is beset by devotion to the same era that Mr. Otis sees as the beginning of the end.

The interview unfolds in a west side Chicago barbershop as Red Walker, the short, stocky, tattoo-blanketed gang leader, reminisces about what it has been like to grow up in a gang. He has been a member of the Knights since he was nine years old. Now, as a captain of the gang set, Red feels that the organization's biggest problem is a lack of leadership.<sup>13</sup> He compares the gang of old to the one he now commands. This comparison begins with a rant about gang patriotism—or perhaps patriotism, more broadly:

“Obama? *Really?*” Red says as he watches the boy he employs to sweep up clouds of hair. “...I mean, I ain't got nothin' against the brother: He's black. He's from the Chi. But I ain't gonna be walkin' 'round here wit Obama shoes on like the campaign is payin' me.” It's fall of 2007, and Red is referring to the then-potential nominee's face, as it has appeared, in hologram form, on the most fashionable sneakers some of the young renegades wear—Nike Air Force Ones. “I don't know what Obama's gonna do if he does become President, but I know this—he can't do *much*,” Red asserts.

“See, when I was his age,” he continues, again referring to the teenage boy who has just left, “the *gang* was my *nation*. We were a nation of Knights. I ain't wear no red, white, and blue Nikes with no politicians face on 'em. Nah. We kept it plain and simple. Our flag was orange and blue.”

Taking advantage of Red's nostalgia, I ask him about the differences between his and the latest generation of Divine Knights:

“Mr. Otis, that's my neighbor,” I say to Red. “You call these young boys ‘renegades’; you say they only care about gym shoes. But he told me that you guys were the same way—he said y'all were ‘good-n-crazy’ when you were younger.”

When he hears this comment, Red switches off his clippers: “Yeah, we were crazy,” he reminisces, “but you know what the difference is? We were some close-knit crazy folk,” Red puts his clippers down on the countertop.

“We used to wear colors. Remember that? What happened to colors?” he says, questioning no one in particular. “All of my clothes were orange and blue, from head to foot,” he says. “We used to cock our hat to the side. What happened to that? *Huh?* When we rocked those expensive jewels, when we had on name brand clothes and new shoes, it meant that we earned it. *Hustling*. We all looked fly cause we all got money. *Together*. We got it together.” He picks his clippers back up, waves them at me. “See man, that’s the difference. And you can tell Mr. Otis I said it.”

As Red reminisces about cocking his hat to the side, while clad in his orange and blue uniform, the fact that he is bothered because one of his workers wears Obama Nikes demonstrates the potency of the gym shoe as a historical symbol. For Red, gym shoes conjure a time when gang leaders commanded a centralized structure in Eastwood, where every person knew his place; yet, he fails to acknowledge that, since his childhood, social transformations have contributed to the demise of the gang’s centralized form.

The present-day demise of the 1980s gang structure can only be understood in terms of the context that gave rise to it. The Divine Knight Gang emerged as a full-fledged drug dealing enterprise in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the void left by the Italian mafia and lack of police presence in the inner city presented an opportunity for them to mobilize around the drug trade. This was also around the same time that the national economy contracted. In a climate in which bustling factories turned into empty steel labyrinths, joblessness was tied to crime, and the specter of urban violence became a potent element of the American imagination. As politicians spread images of inner-city danger, the specter of black crime seemed to justify the logic that longer and more severe drug penalties would curb street violence. As segments of the urban poor—particularly the mentally ill, alcoholics, drug addicts, and the impoverished low-wage working class—became increasingly visible, their very presence motivated a crackdown in urban communities, inaugurated by Ronald Reagan and continued by Presidents Bush and Clinton. A number of scholars have pointed out that during the 1980s and 1990s it was impossible to know the extent to which crime rates had actually increased. One of the ironies of the period is that the growing politicization of crime itself contributed to higher reporting rates.<sup>14</sup> In the last few decades, as government agencies have begun taking reliable records, we’ve learned that violent crime has actually declined in the United States since 1993, and this downward spiral has continued into the new millennium. Still, members of Red’s generational cohort have been greatly impacted by drug legislation.

From the time Red joined the gang in 1988 to the time he went to prison ten years later (for a two-year, drug-related bid), the prison population in Illinois increased by 138 percent.<sup>15</sup> That number pales in comparison to the 400 percent rise specific to drug offenders during that same stretch. In 1988 (when Red was around the same age as the renegades he now rebukes), drug offenses made up less than 17 percent of all prison sentences in Illinois. In 1999, Red’s final year in prison, drug offenses accounted for 40 percent.<sup>16</sup> The next year, when Red was promoted to gang leader, 29 per cent of all the

inmates locked up in the state of Illinois were from Eastwood. The 13,000 Eastwood residents Red left behind when he was released weren't all gang members. Yet, the drug legislation passed by pointing to the "drug problem" had the consequence of transforming their community—Eastwood—into a prison pipeline. Hence, whether he fully acknowledges it or not, Red's nostalgia for a golden era is not exclusively about his gang or a diminished ethic of collective hustling. It's about an entire generation of adults, exiled from a neighborhood through the scapegoat of urban violence.<sup>17</sup>

Nostalgia—that cunning historical emotion—has inverted cause and effect once again: Renegades are seen as responsible for the neighborhood ills, as opposed to their precarious subject position resulting from them. But while seasoned gang members rearticulate the past to make sense of an anxiety-filled present, renegades literally refashion the circumstances—and objects—of the present to make sense of a vastly uncertain future.

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I consider it an ethnographic coup when I realize that, eight months into my time in Eastwood, several key leaders in local schools, churches, and gang prevention agencies have become familiar with my research. Even if the practitioners of these organizations do not know the full extent of my thesis, many are aware that my work involves gangs. Monique, a youth worker at Eastwood Community Church, asks me, one day, if I would be interested in talking to students at Brown High School as part of their Career Day. Once I agree, she informs me that I will be in a classroom with sophomores who the administration has tagged as gang members.

The morning of Career Day is crisp and blue. After a continental breakfast of bagels, muffins, and hot coffee, I make my way up a concrete staircase to room 208 where two white male teachers greet me. One, Mr. Flynn, looks to be in his mid-twenties, the other, Mr. Drake, is a bit older. As we enter the room, thirty unimpressed eyes turn to stare at three "professional" black men: an anthropologist, a corporate attorney, and a probation officer.

After the older teacher, Mr. Drake, more or less successfully, gets the attention of the class, Mr. Randall, the probation officer, begins: "I work for Cook County Courts. Every day, I deal with kids that look like you..."

One boy is sitting directly in front of Mr. Randall, drawing on his desk in loopy cursive with his pencil eraser. As soon as his ears catch the word "you" he bristles:

"*What* did you say?" he responds abrasively.

"No, not *you*...I'm not talking about *you* specifically," Randall apologizes, "I'm talking about 'you,' in the sense that they are around your age, they live in neighborhoods like this, they are black..."

Finding this a sufficient answer, the scribbler, whose name, I find out later, is Jemell, responds with a dismissive (but affirmative) head nod and continues his table traces.

“...One of the things I oversee is an educational program in the juvenile detention center...”

“Oh, you mean Jump Start,” Jemell interjects almost involuntarily.

“Yeah, you been there?” Mr. Randall asks.

“Umm, no...” he mumbles, looking around nervously, “...but some of my friends have.”

“Well, hopefully you won’t have to go there,” Mr. Randall says, “but if you do, you can still get an education. Another thing I do,” he continues, “is monitor home incarceration. Do any of you know what that is?”

“House arrest?” Two kids from opposite ends of the class chime in simultaneously.

“Yeah, that’s right...and I’m a let you in on a lil’ secret.” He leans forward, cupping the right side of his mouth, “Probation officers who monitor people on house arrest are off every other weekend and on holidays. Do what you want with that information.”

The class erupts. Students begin bouncing on the edge of their plastic seats.

“Aww, man! So which weekend will they come?” a boy asks. He has been staring out of the window until now.

“It don’t matter,” says another, “if they come one weekend, you know they off the next, right?” he replies, begging for confirmation.

“That’s right,” Randall says. “Man, what’s your name?”

“Danny,” the boy replies.

“That’s right, Danny.”

Just then the younger teacher, Mr. Flynn, informs the class that this would usually be the time when students can ask questions. “But we will save that for later,” he explains, “because we’re behind schedule. Right now, we’ll move straight into the activity period.”

In light of the 2008 political season the teachers decide to hold a classroom debate. The younger teacher opens a manila envelope, takes out a sheet of paper, and reads a debate topic from it.

“*Jay-Z is more powerful than Barack Obama,*” is the first topic. The teenagers are initially hesitant to take sides, so the thirty-something teacher, Mr. Drake, begins by arguing in favor of the rapper, Jay-Z:

“You guys know all his songs. You know everything about him. You don’t know hardly anything about Barack or what he stands for. Last night was the nineteenth presidential debate. Who has seen a debate so far?”

All of the adults raise their hands. None of the students do.

“Exactly. I asked you earlier, and you guys didn’t even know his wife’s name...But what’s Jay-Z’s real name?”

“Shawn Carter,” the kids say in unison.

“Who’s his wife?”

“Beyoncé,” they say in rhythm.

“See what I mean?” Mr. Drake says, smiling.

“But I think Barack is more powerful,” Danny says, interrupting his teacher’s happy experiment, “...because he’s tryna be *president*. Jay-Z’s just tryna be rich. And plus, Barack, he got plans and stuff for how to improve our lives. He tell us about change, how to change the world, ya know? All Jay-Z tell us about is how to hustle, how to sell drugs, how to live in the hood—which we already know,” he says, gesturing towards the window which overlooks one of the poorest areas in Chicago.

“Jay-Z got clothing lines,” Jemell intervenes. “He got a record label, he produces movies, he got a restaurant, he got his own shoes.” In making the case, he gestures towards another student’s feet, which are adorned with pearl white ‘S. Carter’s’—Jay-Z’s signature shoe. “People in the hood...we want that. We want to dress like Jay-Z, eat what he eats, be on his label.”

“But Jay-Z is a *rapper*,” Danny roars, “A rapper can never be as powerful as the president. The president can raise taxes, lower taxes. A president can send us to war, make us go in the draft,” Danny says, gaining steam, “...a president can send *Jay-Z* to war if he wants to. If we get evicted, what’s Jay-Z gonna do? When you livin’ in your car that don’t have no gas, and don’t work—can’t even turn on the radio. How you gonna listen to Jay-Z? What then, *huh?*”

The room goes silent.

“Danny for President!” Mr. Randall yells out.

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After a few more activities, complete with a school assembly and a keynote speech by a local city councilman, Monique and I leave Brown High through the parking lot. One student, looking out the window from the school’s top floor, yells: “Goodbye, now. Have a nice day!” He talks in the nasal voice that black comedians use in exaggerated imitations of white people.

Another student, switching to his actual voice, howls, “Now get in your car and drive home!”

“And don’t come back,” blasts another.

“Aye, man...aye...aye...*aye!* Is that your girl?” one continues to heckle while we walk, stoic and unconvincingly deaf.

“You hear me talking to you, man! Why don’t you get the *fuck* outta here!”

“Bye-bye, now,” another says, returning to his uptight white-person voice.

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As we left Career Day just a few minutes earlier, I had felt a small blossom of nostalgia. I remembered why I had been drawn to education as a teenager: the times when unexpected lessons from strangers became more fulfilling than what I was learning in

history books. This created in me the sense that I could amend what I was being taught with a more experiential understanding of how the world worked. Although most of the time it seemed that the kids were barely listening to me throughout the day, I felt a palpable sense of accomplishment. The window hecklers, however, quickly deflate my pride. And yet, I am more surprised by the hecklers' resentment than I should have been. These students, flagged as gang members, are encouraged to discern exactly what is possible by referencing disparate prototypes of power—embodied on this day by a successful rapper and a potential presidential nominee. Although many people hope that Obama will serve as an icon for boundless possibilities, political, personal, and social alike, gang affiliates like Jemell fit him into the narrow frame reserved for successful athletes and rappers who “just want to be famous.” Others, like Danny, achieve the distinction that the school administration hopes for. Still, “professional” blacks, entertainers, and politicians nevertheless represent a paradoxical existence for Eastwood youth—seemingly familiar in skin color and yet fundamentally unrecognizable in future prospects. The students who taunt us articulate a struggle against the middle-class morality that conceives of Career Day as a feasible response to permanent unemployment and escalating school drop-out rates.<sup>18</sup> Their taunts respond to the event by making respectable adults feel uneasy about swooping into their school for a day, telling them how to conceive of the future, only to abscond after a few hours.

There is little doubt that part of the influence that a gang leader has over a young renegade is that his commitment extends far beyond a single day. A gang leader's aims are no doubt self-serving, and yet he and other leaders are a far more constant presence in the daily lives of Eastwood teenagers than “successful,” professional blacks. Still, both gang leaders and Career Day speakers face resentment when attempting to socialize young urban residents. Our window hecklers offer one kind of resentment, a scornful disdain of our fly-by-night charity work. But within the gang, a second kind of resentment surfaces—and it is symbolized through and by re-fashioning gym shoes. This is how young renegades establish their own brand of belonging during moments of political and economic transition—moments that prove to be confining.

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When I told Danny, a few weeks later, that I wanted to interview him for my research project, I never dreamed that the majority of our conversations would take place in the West Side Juvenile Detention Center. I have been waiting here for an hour, largely unnoticed. As I scan the room, my eyes meet a guard's and he views me suspiciously. His glare is ironic, standing in striking contrast to the diverted eyes of the inmates who never notice your face at the juvenile detention center.

Upon entering the facility, everyone is issued the same uniform: dark grey khakis, a green t-shirt, and in winter, a green sweatshirt as well. The clothes come in different sizes; but these garments all fix a person's status as an inmate. As the confines of their



Plexiglas encasements become home, these kids have only to look around to be reminded that they are incarcerated. That is, unless they look down.

When teenagers are arrested and sent to the detention center they are stripped of everything except the shoes they are wearing when they arrive. Because the county can't afford to equip each arrival with new shoes, inmates keep the ones they are wearing when arrested until their trial date, when they are either transferred to a prison or released. As a result, icebreaker conversations center on what kind of shoes you wear in your neighborhood, the number of pairs you have at home, and the type of shoes you plan to buy when you get out.

By now, I am aware of the characteristics of shoe-talk in the juvenile center and beyond, so when I spark a conversation with Danny during his visitation period, I begin by mentioning the brand of footwear that he currently wearing:

"At least you came in here with new Tims; they've gotta be giving you some kind of respect, right?"

"Coulda been worse," he says playfully. "My friend Scooter got arrested in flip-flops."

"So how you doin'?" I ask.

"Not so good...not good at all. My lawyer says they tryna move my charges up to attempted murder," Danny replies.

I pause for a moment to receive the blow. I don't know what to say since the case against Danny seems so devastating.

The circumstances of his arrest are as follows: One day, Danny was walking his girlfriend, Tasha, home while holding his gang leader, Kemo's, gun. Leaders like Kemo often roam without drugs and guns because the police recognize them and subject them to random searches. Plus, if a minor like Danny is caught with contraband, he will receive less time. As Danny walked, he noticed that a squad car was tailing him so he asked that Tasha pretend to drop her cell phone to see if the gun was visible from behind. She agreed and confirmed that the handle was protruding from the small of his back. Danny kept walking, hoping the cops would drive away. But, when the couple stopped at Tasha's doorstep he realized the officers were approaching. He took off running.

Danny rounded a corner and threw Kemo's gun over a fence. The gun, which had a broken safety, discharged as it hit the ground. It is this event that threatens to ratchet up his charges from gun possession to attempted murder. The prosecution claims that Danny was shooting at the police. Ironically enough, the sound of the gun blast made Danny think the police were shooting at him so he kicked into high gear and ducked through an alleyway. He escaped to his older brother's apartment.

The next day Danny got word that Kemo was looking for him. He and other gang leaders wanted to meet. During the conference, Kemo explained that the incident the day before had already brought unwanted attention to his drug operation and that, as a result, the rival gang was profiting and he was losing money. He told Danny that he must face sanctions.

The burly Kemo landed a swift right-hook to the side of Danny's face. Then, pleased with this exercise of brawn, Kemo looked toward his team and began to snicker. With Kemo's back turned, Danny grabbed a pipe and told his fellow gang members to stand down. He walked backwards until he reached a shelf and then exchanged the pipe for another of Kemo's guns, pointing it at the owner.

"You run now, and it'll be ten times worse when we catch you," Kemo ranted.

But Danny didn't listen. He backpedaled through the garage, reached the street and ran feverishly, as he had the day before. Only this time he dashed to the house of his best friend, Cook. His confidante explained that the police had been at Danny's home and his school with a warrant. He advised Danny to turn himself in.

With the police and the gang after him, Danny took his friend's advice—but with a caveat. Before hitching a ride to jail, the young renegade borrowed Cook's brand new Timberland boots. He knew what to expect inside the detention center.

\* \* \*

My conversations with Danny at the detention center exemplify the social constraints under which young gang members struggle in the contemporary moment. In this context, shoes symbolize the renegade's precarious balancing act. On the one hand, young gang members are viewed as disloyal to the gang, but, on the other, it is not as if this dissidence improves their life conditions or permits them to reach middle-class standing. Instead, renegades are stuck: running from law enforcement to their gang leader's garage, only to flee back into police custody, and return to the juvenile detention center, where mass incarceration lends a more pointed meaning to the mass production of their footwear. We've learned that it's easy to criticize young gang members and their obsession with shoes. The experts who circulate in Eastwood all seek to understand how these kids can spend so much time literally staring at their feet. The comparisons abound: when I was your age, many scholars and guards and preachers no doubt think, I picked up trash and marched in picket lines. These kids, by contrast, are utterly confounding, self-obsessed, and directionless to boot. Their bearing, tough yet lackadaisical, suggests that their current decision to sell drugs is a matter of personal choice alone; indeed, they seem willfully ignorant of the larger social forces that have led them to hustling on the corner, or into the confines of the detention center, as if their gang's shift into increasingly diffuse factions is not linked to an era of mass incarceration. And yet, as I overcome my desire to shake these teenagers into reality, I see that Red Walker and Mr. Otis have the same blind spots. The history of the gang that these longstanding members acknowledge also erases key social and historical processes that have transformed the ways traditional membership is experienced. When the gang is perceived to be *less political* or *less profitable* than it once was, the focus of attention (and especially the blame) falls on the attitudes, orientations, and behaviors of those who are not yet locked up for

long periods of time—often the youngest members—who older members view as key to the gang’s future.

This is how gang leaders and jail guards, Bible study instructors and well-meaning professors alike fail to understand the young urban poor: we don’t deem their jail house conversations as worthy of reflection; we don’t see these conversations as ripe with nostalgia and historical consciousness; we don’t see how they speak to anxieties about living in a society that contains no feasible fulfillment for your hopes and desires. But, at the West Side Juvenile Detention Center, I hear these kind of conversations on a daily basis, as young renegades fashion their future out of what little material they have left:

“Dem Air Force Ones?” Scooter says, as I am about to leave for the day. He’s inspecting my black Nikes, scrutinizing their green and yellow highlights.

I hesitate because I know the make, but not the model, of my shoes. I could check the tongue, but I don’t want to seem insecure.

“Nah man, those some Dunks,” Danny says, saving me. “Everybody on my block rocks them. Those are cool,” he continues, eyes still glued to my feet, “but as soon as I get out, I’m a cop dem new Jordan’s.”

Scooter smiles and nods, “Yeah, me too.”

## ENDNOTES

1. See also Pattillo-McKoy, Mary. 1999. *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril Among the Black Middle Class*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 156-59, as well as Chin, Elizabeth. 2001. *Purchasing Power: Black Kids and American Consumer Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 126-27.
2. My analysis of shoe culture is meant to point out that, indeed, poor urban youth are influenced by the same consumption trends as many segments of American youth. In this regard, my work is indebted to Carl Nightingale, Al Young, and John Hagedorn. In arguing against the “culture of poverty” thesis, they have pointed out that poor urban youth are not beholden to an “oppositional” or “street” culture, but are deeply affected by the contradictions of American culture. The difference between them and their more privileged peers is that they have fewer resources and far fewer choices.  
  
Nightingale, Carl. 1993. *On the Edge: A History of Poor Black Children and their American Dreams*. New York: Basic Books.  
  
Young, Alford. 2004. *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men: Making Sense of Mobility, Opportunity, and Future Life Chances*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
3. Boym, Svetlana. 2001 [2006]. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, xiii.
4. Ibid, 3-4.
5. Ibid, xiv.
6. On ghosts, see: Boym 2001 [2006], 3. Here, Mr. Otis’ discussion of ghosts is meant to capture what John Hagedorn has previously referred to as a sense of alienation amongst gang members. Crucially, the feelings of nostalgia and alienation that both Hagedorn and I reference are linked to a context of economic restructuring in which deindustrialization and social forces such as mass incarceration have changed the urban landscape, making it hard for urban youth to find their place in the world. Hagedorn 1988.
7. Dawley, David. 1992. *A Nation of Lords: The Autobiography of the Vice Lords*. 2nd ed. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 103.
8. Ibid, 103.

9. The Chicago Freedom Movement lasted from mid-1965 to early 1967. Led by the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), one of the primary goals of the movement was to end slums in American cities. It organized tenants' unions, assumed control of a Chicago housing project, and rallied black and white Chicagoans to march into segregated areas of the city. Some of the movement's major demands were to have real estate boards and brokers issue public statements that all of their properties would be available on a non-discriminatory basis; to have banks and savings institutions issue public statements pertaining to non-discriminatory mortgage policies; to create an ordinance giving ready access to the names of people who owned and invested in slum properties; and to institute a requirement that elected officials live in the precincts in which they were elected (Ralph 1993).
10. Another severe blow to community investment came when major industries and employers began to close their doors. International Harvester Tractor Company closed in 1969 causing a loss of an estimated 3,400 jobs. In 1974, Sears Roebuck moved its headquarters to downtown Chicago, significantly reducing its Eastwood facility. Ten years later, Sears completely pulled out of the community. During the 1970s, 80 percent of the manufacturing jobs in the community disappeared. Most have never been replaced.
11. Notice here that the riots become a pivotal moment in the subjective history that Mr. Otis tells. City planners similarly use the riots of the 1960s to make the implicit claim that black urban residents have destroyed their own community—a community whose local economy was robust in the 1960s when working-class white immigrants lived on Chicago's west side. It's important to point out that, like Mr. Otis', this rendering is also problematically nostalgic. Amanda Seligman's study, *Block by Block*, brilliantly demonstrates that the deterioration in west side neighborhoods began well before black inhabitants moved in to communities like Eastwood. She argues that the riots that erupted on Chicago's west side stemmed from "the legacy of accumulated neglect after decades of white occupancy"—not merely from the tribulations specific to urban blacks.
 

Seligman, Amanda. 2005. *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
12. See, for example, Sullivan, Mercer L. 1989. "Getting Paid": *Youth Crime and Work in the Inner City*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 245.
13. The Divine Knights Gang is split into segments, referred to by gang members as "sets." Gang sets have many of the characteristics of the gang itself: each has its distinctive name (i.e. the Orthodox Knights, the Roving Knights, the Anonymous Knights, etc.),

its common sentiment (as expressed in gang literature, such as *The Divine Knights Constitution*), and its unique territory (though the area controlled by one gang set need not be clearly divided from another). Since 2000, there have been approximately eight gang sets of the Divine Knights dispersed throughout Chicago. These sub-groups are overwhelmingly male and African American. The four major gang sets in Eastwood are: the Anonymous Knights, the Roving Knights, the Orthodox Knights, and the Bandits. Each of these gang sets control a ten to fifteen square block territory, and range from thirty to forty members. Of this membership, crews of four to six members serve as “foot soldiers,” responsible for street level dealing in open-air markets. Approximately eight to ten members fulfill other drug-related duties (i.e. runners, muscle, treasurers). The rest of the affiliates may or may not have an explicit connection to the gang’s drug distribution network. For them, the gang is primarily a social group.

14. Mauer, Marc, and Sentencing Project (U.S.). 2006. *Race to Incarcerate*. 2nd ed. New York: New Press, 93. See also: Kelley, Robin D. G. 1997. *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 99.
15. La Vigne, Nancy G., Cynthia A. Mamalian, Jeremy Travis, and Christy Visser. April 2003. *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Illinois: Research Report*. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Justice Policy Center.
16. Ibid.
17. As a number of scholars have discussed, only two years after Reagan’s 1984 crime bill (one of the most severe anti-crime measures since the Nixon era), legislation that affected the inner city poor reached new heights. Politicians reacted abrasively to the arrival of a new drug: crack-cocaine. The most significant piece of legislation implemented to deter drug dealers was the Federal Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, which imposed a total of twenty-nine harsh new sentence guidelines for drug related offenses. The community of Eastwood was still greatly impacted by longer sentences because they targeted the specific form of “rock” cocaine most often sold by street-level dealers. The alarming frequency of arrests and imprisonment, starting in the mid 1980s, caused the Divine Knights’ leadership structure to become increasingly decentralized. As the gang lost its centralized structure, by the late 1990s it shifted into a diffuse organization comprised of competitive gang factions.

Venkatesh and Levitt (2000) also discuss how Chicago gangs splintered into a number of sub-gang “sets” to fill the void in central leadership in the mid 1990s as the “franchise model” gained popularity. Under this economic structure, each faction controls its own drug sales and wages, while competing with other “sets.”

Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi, and Steven D. Levitt. 2000. An Economic Analysis of a Drug-Selling Gang's Finances. *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 115, no. 3: 755-89.

Additionally, Marc Mauer has pointed out that no one actually knows the extent to which crime rates have actually increased. One of the ironies of the period is that the growing politicization of crime itself contributed to higher reporting rates.

See: Mauer, Marc, and Sentencing Project (U.S.). 2006. *Race to Incarcerate*. 2nd ed. New York: New Press, 93.

18. The neighborhood's unemployment rate and high school drop-out rate were both mentioned in publications advertising Career Day. Over the course of my fieldwork, Eastwood's unemployment rate was 13 percent—three times as much as the rest of Chicago. Thirty four percent of residents between 18 and 24 years of age lacked a high school diploma or GED and 70 percent of the population never finished high school.