

Chapter Title: Known in Naptown

Book Title: Real Gangstas

Book Subtitle: Legitimacy, Reputation, and Violence in the Intergang Environment

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Published by: Rutgers University Press. (2012)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjfvv.9>

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CHAPTER 5

Known in Naptown

WHILE I WAITED FOR Shawn and Layboy in Aaron's apartment, I sat on an older black loveseat and listened to music blaring from a nearby stereo. Considering the close proximity of neighboring apartments, I was always surprised at how loudly the boys played music during the day. Given that windows were ajar and a sliding back door was fully open, the music drowned out any attempted conversations and left the confines of the apartment for all to hear. I recognized the song; it occasionally played in my car when we drove around the city. It was written and performed by a local rapper, E-Weez, or the Prince of Nap, who had not managed to get a record deal or get his music on local radio but was gaining popularity in streets of Indianapolis, or Naptown.¹ Shawn and Layboy had somehow gotten a copy of his mixed tape (CD) as it was being passed around at a party, club, or another other forum used by rappers seeking to become popular in the streets. The song insightfully captured the struggle for legitimacy in both the streets of Indianapolis and in the lives of Shawn, Layboy, Aaron, and other DFW Boyz. As usual, those around me rapped along with the song.

I'm a real nigga, ain't nothing fake about me
A lot of niggas doubt me
But shit I yell it proudly
"I'm a real nigga"
"What?"
"I'm a real nigga"
"Who?"
"I'm a real nigga"
"How 'bout you?"
[Chorus 2X]

You niggas rap about the whips² and the guns and the clips³
 Rap about moving work, getting chips⁴
 Keep it real nigga, you ain't really 'bout that
 26s sitting high⁵
 You ain't never had that
 You ain't never sold crack
 You ain't had a pistol cocked ready to react on anybody
 talking about getting at cha'
 I guarantee that's a fact, bra'
 I ain't never killed but I swear push me to that stage I'll
 detach ya'
 Leave ya' skull fractured
 All that tough talking going get ya' ass clapped, bra'
 Handcuffing bitches, don't know how to act bra'⁶
 Hair and nails did, trickin' off ya' last, bra'⁷
 You ain't never killed shit
 See the hood going feel this
 Maybe if you hear this you'll go rewrite ya' songs and talk
 about some real shit
 'Cuz ya' niggas fiction and I ain't feeling it
 Why?
 'Cuz I'm a real nigga

The lyrics focused on a street identity that was broader than being a gang member, yet those around me closely related to the basic message. Their lives seemed to be consumed by a constant need to validate their authenticity. Although the issue of being a "real nigga" or a real man is a salient concern for many young minority males living in poor urban communities (see Anderson 1999; Hannerz 1969; Oliver 1994 and 2006; Wilkinson 2001), the dominance of the dilution narrative in Indianapolis ensured that gang members experienced this concern more intensely than their non-gang counterparts. And interactions between members of different gangs often involved, either directly or through the subtle subtext of communication, the statement "I'm real, how about you?"

Much like the rapper, Shawn and Layboy were eager to demonstrate their authenticity and prove to a skeptical environment that they were,

indeed, real gang members. They were equally willing to publicly disparage other people's claims to gang membership. For the boys, however, authenticity was difficult to prove or disprove. Amid an uncertain environment characterized by innumerable self-serving definitions of "street gang," they had to convincingly communicate their gang identity to peers. Although self-defined gang members often questioned superficial displays of gang status, and there were no other clear methods for demonstrating affiliation, individuals immersed in the intergang environment did embrace a common expectation: gangs and gang members should be willing and able to use violence.⁸

Public displays of violence could legitimize one's place in the intergang field, but violence was not immune to the dilution narrative. As a result, legitimacy was often gained not through violent events but through the establishment of a widely accepted reputation for violence. The larger the number of environmental participants who accepted a focal gang or gang member as being willing and able to use violence, the less likely he or she was to be viewed as illegitimate.

VIOLENCE AS AN ENVIRONMENTAL EXPECTATION

The expectation of violence in the intergang environment is closely linked to a broader cultural system that emphasizes hypermasculine ideals of toughness, respect, and the use of violence to resolve disputes (see Anderson 1999; Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Horowitz and Schwartz 1974; Oliver 1994; Papachristos 2009). The intergang environment, after all, is part of the general street environment, and it embraces similar ideas. For gang members, however, violence is not just an accepted consequence of violating aspects of the street code, nor is it just a normative response to being disrespected. It is a defining trait of the real gang, and one's capacity to establish legitimacy in the intergang environment is often grounded in his or her willingness and ability to use violence.

The expectation of violence is developed and reinforced through routine interactions between environmental participants. Self-defined gang members routinely discuss the legitimacy of other environmental participants. A gang member's relative position in the intergang environment often depends on his or her willingness and ability to use

violence.⁹ Thus, external symbols of gang status become somewhat irrelevant if one's capacity for violence can be verified. Self-defined gang members who are perceived to be violent are accepted as authentic, while those perceived to be soft or weak are summarily dismissed. Moreover, gang members continuously reinforce the centrality of violence by advertising themselves as violent. Although such advertising includes a requisite physical demeanor that is embraced by many street participants (Anderson 1990 and 1999), overt discussions about one's own violent exploits is a more important factor. Gang members talk and act as if they are ready and willing to use violence. These routine performances are designed to communicate legitimacy to peers, but they also reinforce the centrality of violence to one's conception of a gang. Each environmental participant is, therefore, routinely subjected to social interactions that communicate the expected association between gangs and violence. Each gang member also participates in communicating that expectation to peers.

Violence and legitimization are also linked through more practical considerations. In the Indianapolis streets, gang symbols, speech patterns, and licks may be dubious, but an act of violence resonates clearly. Violence is unambiguous (Anderson 1999; Jacobs and Wright 2006). When violence erupts, there is usually a clear winner and a clear loser. Furthermore, violence often occurs in public settings, where peers observe the violent event and ultimately judge the outcome. An individual's capacity to publicly humiliate another person through violence resonates with observers who will probably not question his or her status as a legitimate gang member. When symbols and speech patterns lead to disagreement and confusion, an act of violence does not. In the moment, violence is impervious to the dilution narrative. Peers observing the act become fully aware of the actor's capabilities and unquestioningly accept his or her status as a gang member.

Despite the inherent clarity of violence, a violent event has only a limited impact on one's position in the intergang environment. Violence is momentary and witnessed by a finite number of people. The clarity of violence, therefore, wanes over time and social space. A violent event is not going to become known to all environmental participants. Peers who are unaware of a violent event cannot use it to develop an accurate characterization of involved parties. In this case the aggressor is

still subject to assessments of illegitimacy. Some peers who did not witness the act of violence will undoubtedly hear about it, but their understanding of the event may not accurately reflect the actual events. Through gossip and evolving versions of the event, the precipitating events are altered, the victim can become the perpetrator, or the aggressor can become demonized or idolized. Stories of the event become distorted, and the aggressor may not reap the legitimizing benefits of the violent act. Confusion remains, even when the intergang environment establishes an agreed-upon expectation that can be used to validate membership.

BEING KNOWN

Given that an act of violence is limited in its ability to demonstrate legitimacy to the intergang environment, gang members must cultivate a violent reputation that transcends their immediate social setting.¹⁰ This endeavor is largely governed by one's ability to become known to a broad array of environmental participants. The street, after all, is an arena where one's identity is displayed for all to see, hear, and evaluate (Anderson 1990 and 1999; Fagan and Wilkinson 1998; Garot 2007b and 2010; Wilkinson 2001). In public spaces, individuals observe and interpret the actions and mannerisms of people they encounter. However, interactions vary considerably. Some are brief, while others are extended. Some interactions involve people who are familiar with each other, while other interactions involve complete strangers. Familiarity stabilizes the interpretive process, as a history of encounters has already allowed both parties to form opinions of their counterparts. When two acquaintances meet, they usually do so with a preset understanding of each other, and their interaction will not drastically alter the relationship. This history does, however, significantly shape the immediate encounter. Hostility breeds conflict and increases the probability of an explosive outcome. Mutual admiration typically leads to more mundane, congenial interactions. In either situation, identities have been previously established and are unlikely to change in the course of one encounter. Both parties have already assessed their counterpart's capacity for violence in addition to his or her position within the intergang field. Yet not all interactions are grounded in familiarity. When strangers meet, subtle behaviors cause both parties to form opinions. During this

formative stage of the relationship, interactions alter relational dynamics, but the effect lessens over time. Hostilities gradually become engrained, admiration is reinforced, likes and dislikes become routine, and jealousy and anger or intimacy and respect are forged. Relationships are malleable, but less likely to drastically change if familiarity is high.

In an uncertain environment marked by skepticism and dismissive assessments, gang members strive to become known to other environmental participants. Being known reduces uncertainty by establishing a preset understanding that is relatively stable. Thus, gang members struggling to gain and maintain legitimacy in the intergang environment rely heavily on this basic dictum to overcome the dilution narrative: the larger the number of environmental participants that are familiar with and accept a focal gang as being legitimate, the less likely the group is to experience dismissive appraisals. Being known in the streets is vital to the gang or gang member, but it does not guarantee legitimacy. Gang members also need to adequately control how peers view them (see Horowitz 1983). The lives of gang members often focus on building and establishing reputations that are congruent with the environmental expectation of violence. If members of a group are known for being weak or soft, large numbers of environmental participants will dismiss them as being frauds. Thus, self-defined gang members experience constant pressure to broaden the number of peers who accept them as being real gang members.

Small Social Circles and Reputational Agreement

Most people routinely interact with an established and relatively small group of people, so relational familiarity is common. This is generally true among the youths in northeast Indianapolis. Most hang out with peers from their neighborhood and apartment complex. In these places, groups of youths and young adults congregate in public spaces like corners, sidewalks, front porches, or gas stations. Within a limited geographical area or one's primary social network, issues of identity are well established. Here, acquaintances come and go as they please without worrying much about questions of legitimacy. Youths remain concerned with their relative position among close peers (see Anderson 1999; Whyte 1981). Some youths are seen as weak, while others are seen as strong. But reputations are additive, shifting only slightly in most interactions.

In these limited social networks, everyone is known, and each person has gained a reputation through the collective appraisals of his or her peers. One's reputation within one's neighborhood, apartment complex, or primary social network is important for negotiating that immediate social environment. Reputations provide some youths with a competitive advantage while placing others at a significant disadvantage. In the streets, these advantages lead to concrete rewards like sex, money, and invitations to parties, or intangible benefits like esteem and respect. Although numerous personal attributes are admired and demand respect (see Oliver 1994 and 2006), gang members' behaviors must be congruent with the environmental expectation of violence. If not, they will be seen as illegitimate and become routine targets for mockery and violence.

In smaller social circles, reputations for violence are clear and well established. Some street participants are known for being willing and able to use violence, while others are known for being weak or soft. Individuals known to use violence gain some esteem from peers they are good to have around when conflicts arise. They are also granted some respect from peers who fear being the targets of that violence. For example, during one conversation, Shawn, who was standing in his front yard, motioned to a house two doors down and spoke fondly about how his neighbors did not mess around during conflicts and how they were quick to use guns. Within thirty minutes of his comment, one of his neighbors walked past us in shorts and a winter coat and stood at the end of the road just beyond Shawn's yard. Confused as to why someone would have a winter coat on in the middle of summer, I must have looked puzzled. Shawn seemed to recognize my naïveté and explained that his neighbor had a gun in his jacket. Apparently, someone involved in a street beef with Shawn's neighbors had been seen in the neighborhood, and his neighbor was planning to address the problem if necessary. Shawn did not look concerned, and he seemed to think this behavior was normal for his neighbors. It was consistent with their reputation. Moreover, everyone on the block could reasonably expect that challenging, disrespecting, or threatening Shawn's neighbor would lead to a violent response.

Not all youths benefited from the familiarity created by their immediate social setting. Just as some youths developed reputations for

violence, others were known for being soft (see also Wilkinson 2001). This reputation was most problematic for youths who tried to embrace street life but could not demonstrate to others that they belonged. James, for example, was an awkward eighteen-year-old who did not seem particularly intelligent or tough. He appeared insecure when interacting with peers, and they, in turn, seemed annoyed by him. James was not a teenager who would have been popular in any social setting, but he desperately wanted to fit in. Having dropped out of school, and being unable or unwilling to find a job, he did not have access to conventional outlets for establishing friends. In fact, he often spent his days in his mother's house smoking marijuana. His desire to fit in led him to the streets, and he made efforts to hang with the youths in his neighborhood. James's social deficiencies only made his softness more transparent, and, as the following story suggested, his peers targeted him accordingly:

Ok, I was over there chillin', and then I am getting ready to leave and this dude, he loses his dope. I am leaving, so everybody thinks I got it, since I am leaving now. So I gets halfway home, and then they comes talking about, "Let me check your pockets" and whatever, with a gun pulled out on me. So I let them check my pockets and they didn't find it. So we goes back into the house and look for it. They ain't find it. So I am on my way out, leaving the house, and this dude hit me in my eye. So I kind of like stumbled a little bit. And then I stumbled into some bushes to hold myself up. Then that's when three more people came and started swinging on me. But I was like ducking and blocking my face so I wouldn't get damaged up a lot. And then when they got off of me, my momma had came outside and she broke it up. Then found out the next day the boy ended up finding his dope on him. 'Cause my momma talked to his momma about it, and she was like, "He claimed he had found it on him."

Through routine interactions, James had developed a reputation among the youths in his neighborhood. In addition to being socially awkward, he was not threatening, and he was not closely affiliated with anyone willing and able to use violence. As a result, neighborhood youths could unjustly target and assault him without fear of retaliation.

The only consequence in this situation was that they upset his mother. This assault would not have happened to Shawn's neighbor, as everyone involved would have known his reputation for responding with aggression.

Unfamiliar Social Settings and Reputational Ambiguity

Although youths spend most of their time in these smaller social networks where familiarity is high, there are ample opportunities to encounter a relatively unknown person on the streets. This is especially true in communities that are not socially isolated and where youths move about the city interacting with different people. At parties, clubs, or when walking down the street, gang members routinely encounter people they do not know. These interactions are dominated by uncertainty, and both parties warily observe each other. In most situations, everyone involved has little desire for conflict, but problems occur frequently enough that people stay sensitive to events around them (see Anderson 1990). Even without the advantage of familiarity, most of these interactions are not problematic, as people merely intersect and continue past each other. Typically, those involved in these brief interactions observe, interpret, and assess the behavior of their counterparts, but the process leads to little usable information. Most teenagers and young adults in poor urban areas adopt general patterns of public presentation that are common in the streets (Anderson 1990 and 1999). Baggy jeans, colorful shirts, large cubic zirconium earrings, and tattoos are all customary signals that communicate to people passing by that one belongs on the streets. Teenagers adopt offensive speech by swearing profusely and saying "nigga" or "nigger." They talk loudly enough in public settings to make outsiders feel uncomfortable and walk with a confident air to communicate their toughness to peers. This style of presentation is so universal that without additional information even local residents often cannot discern individuals who are heavily involved in street activities from individuals who are not. When encountering an unknown person, these cultural cues are an accepted form of presentation, and they are not immediately perceived as threatening.

The meaning of an interaction significantly changes when someone implies gang membership. This claim is accompanied by an expectation

that gang members are willing and able to use violence. This expectation transcends the intergang environment and is embraced in the streets and beyond. Therefore, in most social contexts, claiming gang membership is perceived as a statement that one is prone to use violence or associates with people who use violence. Yet this claim remains difficult to verify. When people don't know the claimant, his or her willingness to use violence is truly not known until he or she either engages in a violent act or submissively avoids a conflict.

Some youths enter social situations where they are unknown, and they claim gang affiliation. A claim to gang affiliation can lead to the desired effect if peers are unwilling to risk being victimized by questioning that claim. Yet uncertainty still remains, as peers are unsure of the individual's capacity for violence. Is this a person like Shawn's neighbor who will aggressively respond to a challenge? Or is this person like James, the socially awkward teenager who is claiming gang affiliation because it evokes images of violence and demands respect? Such questions do not exist in one's immediate neighborhood or more intimate peer networks where familiarity is high and the claim of gang affiliation is accompanied by a history of encounters.

When entering new social situations, a person may benefit from his or her alleged ties to a street gang, but for many self-defined gang members, being unknown is a problem. Without an established reputation, they are especially vulnerable to the dilution narrative. Peers who are looking to be held in higher esteem and are emboldened by a supportive group of peers may openly mock an unknown person claiming to be a gang member. This may involve a direct affront, or the circulation of gossip through information back channels. Or, confident in their ability to handle the situation and fueled by the belief that most youths falsely claim gang affiliation and are unable to defend themselves, they may initiate physical aggression. As gangs signs are displayed and hood or clique names are shouted, actions are being observed, assessments are being made, and the seeds of future conflicts may be planted. Being known alleviates this problem. The potential for conflict may still exist, but at least everyone involved proceeds with an established understanding of their counterparts. Familiarity breeds certainty and affords the gang member a set of expectations that allows him or her to negotiate potentially hostile or violent interactions.

REPUTATION: THE INTERPLAY OF VIOLENCE
AND PEER ASSOCIATIONS

Being known greatly enhances a gang or gang member's ability to negotiate the paradox of legitimacy. Theoretically, if all environmental participants are familiar with a group or person, interactions are guided more by history or reputation than by misguided assumptions. Furthermore, if a group is universally known as being willing and able to use violence, there will be little doubt that it is a gang. All environmental actors will place that group within the boundaries of the intergang field. Individuals genuinely invested in gang life, therefore, become pre-occupied with ensuring that their reputation for violence is known as broadly as possible.¹¹ These efforts are not guided by a formal agenda or goals, but rather by a constant awareness that they are being observed and assessed. Reputations are gained and lost both in social settings and through social contacts. Being known in the Indianapolis streets requires the use of violence, often in public spaces, and a broad network of associations that can transmit a reputation beyond one's immediate social network (Horowitz 1983).

Scholars consistently note that developing and managing reputations is integral to gang life. For example, Ruth Horowitz (1983) argues that status concerns among gang members are intimately linked to their capacity for developing well-known reputations for toughness within their peer environment. Moreover, although these reputations are developed and maintained through public behavior and conflicts with other gangs, they are rather fragile and subject to change. Gang members are, therefore, motivated to promote and/or defend their reputations in social settings. Similarly, Andrew Papachristos (2009) argues that a gang's social status is largely contingent on its ability to establish a proper, or honorable, reputation in the streets. Honor is accrued when a gang demonstrates, through intergang interactions, that it can protect its members, act as a cohesive group, and respond aggressively to external threats or public slander. Any intergang interaction is an opportunity to build, maintain, or lose social standing in the intergang environment. These ideas certainly translate to Indianapolis, where concerns about legitimacy are seemingly ubiquitous, and the need to develop a well-known reputation for violence is essential for gang members.

Throughout my time with the DFW Boyz, members consistently told me or talked about how well they were known in the streets of Indianapolis. These descriptions seemed exaggerated, as the boys claimed to be one of the most known cliques or gangs in the city. During one recorded conversation with Layboy and Shawn, I tried to get a better understanding of how the group had become known. My initial question improperly assumed that being known was a rational goal pursued by the group.

“You said the point of your clique is to represent and be the hardest, the most known. How do you become the most known?”

“Most known,” Shawn paused as if I had overemphasized that being known was an openly stated goal of the gang. “See, we been out here, everybody know us because somebody say something smart and we jump, we all take care of that problem.”

Layboy reminded me that, “Police have a file stacked against us like this [showing me with his hands].”

“Get money,” continued Shawn, “walk around with our names out. Another clique say something smart, cliques come out and talk, everybody going to hear about it.”

Their pursuit of being known in Indianapolis paralleled that of an average teenager with aspirations of popularity more than an organization in pursuit of a formal goal. To Shawn, being known was an inevitable consequence of his role in the streets. Everyone knew who he was, and everyone knew the DFW Boyz. Police attention apparently validated the boys’ claims that they were heavily invested in the streets, and this was a piece of evidence used to convince a potentially skeptical researcher. They used different techniques to convince other possible skeptics. Although remaining visible in the streets and at parties was important for building and maintaining a reputation in Indianapolis, as was using social settings to shout out gang or hood affiliations, the DFW Boyz proclivity for violence ensured that they were known in the streets. They took care of problems and effectively dealt with other cliques that talked too much or talked negatively about the DFW Boyz.

To develop a reputation for violence, a gang or gang member had to successfully control the perception of a wide range of peers. Shawn’s statement “Everybody going to hear about it” provided a clear reminder that discussions or events within a group or between groups became part

of the environment's general conversation. Many youths tried to reinforce their reputation by rapping, or talking negatively, about other gangs. At times, this negative talk occurred in a public place and was directed at someone close by, but this type of talk more typically occurred during public conversation when the rejected person was not present. The information then entered the teenage gossip channel and eventually got back to the targeted individual. In each situation, both parties gained, maintained, or lost their reputation. If insults were not addressed properly, they could become a fixture in the general street knowledge base. Members of the DFW Boyz were highly motivated to manage that information system and control their reputations.

If group members were willing and able to use violence, public dismissals could be opportunities to reinforce and broaden their reputation. If their response was brutal and observed by peers, that information quickly spread through the streets. A set of individuals became fully aware of the gang's violent capabilities, and peers who were only mildly familiar with the group increasingly accepted its identity as a serious gang.

Seeking more information, I asked, "So how do you take care of a situation or problem?"

"How do we take care of it?" Shawn habitually repeated my questions as he thought through his response. He always seemed to analyze questions and situations. He responded casually, "You could go either way. You could go gunplay or you could fight it out. It really don't matter."

I hesitantly prodded the boys for more information. "Do you want to share any situations from the last year?"

"Oh yeah, we got a lot of situations. A lot of them," replied Layboy.

Man, Shawn was at a party. It was me, him, and some other friends from another clique that we was claiming. We was out on the east side. One of the dudes in our clique from Post Road, and there a lot of people from Post Road at the party. So we in there claiming DFW Boyz, and they claiming Post Road. We claiming Haughville or whatever, but they don't know that some of the people from our group is from Post Road too. So Shawn gets to the party and screams out "Haughville." They claim Post Road. He turns around,

and the dude hits him in the back of the head. So this is where I come up. I hit the dude, and everybody starting to fight at the party. The main thing is we get outside. He, Shawn, busts out the dude's window. So we deep, but they deep too. They call a lot of Post Road people to come over there, so it's basically Post Road against me and him. The other dude in my group is from Post Road, so he's trying to break it up. So we stay apart, and we go back over there and do what we have to do. Since then they ain't said nothing. That's one way how we got our name out there.

We got into it with a lot of cliques. We fight a ton. Most cliques respect us because we don't start nothing, we cool. A person walking around and they claiming stuff, we don't say nothing. We not like "f that, f that." We don't do that. Other cliques do, but we don't. We just cool. 'Til somebody disrespect us. Then we got a problem.

The vagueness of this response ("we do what we have to do") was indicative of the boys' hesitancy during the earlier stages of research. They trusted me, but not enough to tell me all the details of how they handled such situations. In the ensuing months, they loosened up and described rare occurrences of gunplay, but not at this juncture. Fearing that I might alienate the boys, I was not ready to ask them to explain. Still, violence was intimately related to the process of becoming known in the streets of Indianapolis. The individuals initiating the violent episode were unaware that Shawn, Layboy, and the DFW Boyz would respond aggressively. The initial violence was either caused by resentment that an unknown person was claiming gang affiliation or by ingrained hostilities between two hoods. Either way, the boys used the situation to clarify their capacity for violence to a new group of peers and reinforce or broaden their reputation for violence. During the incident that Layboy described, people at the party became more familiar with Shawn and Layboy.

Layboy's assertion that the DFW Boyz did not instigate conflicts was somewhat inaccurate. In other conversations, Layboy and some other DFW Boyz admitted that they liked to "talk shit" about other groups. They certainly were not bashful about mocking or dismissing the members of other cliques. These criticisms were usually based on a history of

interactions, and the boys did seem to refrain from such activities when they or someone else was not known. In this sense, they did seem less aggressive than other groups. Some self-defined gang members, according to the boys, incessantly “talked shit” about anyone they encountered. When they did this to the DFW Boyz, problems emerged and reputations were developed further.

Although violence was an essential component to establishing a reputation in the streets of Indianapolis, violent behavior did not ensure that one would become known. Some individuals routinely resorted to violence, but if they had no means to transmit that tendency beyond their closest associates or immediate neighborhood, the breadth of their reputation would be limited. Reputations for violence could only be transmitted through street gossip, as expansive networks of teenagers and young adults continuously discussed events in the streets. Two mediums allowed individuals to efficiently communicate their violent tendencies to a broad social environment. The first involved the establishment of widespread social relationships. Expansive personal networks provided the means to communicate beyond the neighborhood to other parts of the city. Each acquaintance represented a transmitter of street gossip capable of spreading vital information to new people. The second involved orchestrated behavior in public spaces. When large numbers of peers observed a person’s behavior and formed an opinion of that person, each peer was capable of transmitting that opinion to a broader audience.

A few weeks later, I was standing around with Layboy and Shawn in front of their mother’s house, but this time we were accompanied by their younger brothers and fellow DFW Boyz Dre and C-Note. With the tape recorder on, we discussed the boys’ numerous moves over the previous few years. Gangs are stereotypically territorial, and the boy’s movement from the west side to the far east side and again to the northeast part of Indianapolis could have been cause for concern. But mixed interactions in the streets of Indianapolis produced expansive social networks that seemed to make stereotypical gang territories somewhat irrelevant.

“How did that move go for you?” I asked, referring to their latest move.

To my surprise, C-Note replied, “It went cool. It’s cool.”

"Nobody cares?" I asked, trying to figure out why a group of teenagers claiming both a west-side hood and an active clique did not have problems in their most current location along the east side of the Thirty-eighth Street corridor.

"Nah, everybody knows who we is," clarified C-Note. Apparently their reputations were not limited to a small geographic area in Indianapolis.

I replied by asking, "How do you get known?"

C-Note responded, "I got known because my brothers." An individual's reputation in Indianapolis was often connected to the reputation of their older relatives. If Layboy and Shawn were known in Indianapolis, C-Note would have experienced the benefits of this.

"I just do me," added Shawn as if to dismiss the notion that he needed any help in building and maintaining his reputation.

"Plus, like, we move constantly," said Layboy. "We live in a lot of places so everywhere you move people is going to know you. Plus we put in work, so everybody know us."

This last point was especially relevant to the establishment of their reputation in Indianapolis. As they moved from place to place during their formative years, Shawn, Layboy, and other DFW Boyz established a far-reaching network of associates. In each place of residence, they established a reputation with peers in their neighborhood, apartment complex, or immediate social network that was predicated on "work," or violence. When Shawn and Layboy moved away from a neighborhood, their contacts remained. Although Layboy and Shawn lived and operated on the northeast side of Indianapolis, my time with them was not limited to that area. We spent time in select west-side, near north side, far east side, and near south side neighborhoods. Their associations were wide-ranging, and a large number of peers would have known that Shawn and Layboy were prone to violence.

Although Layboy and Shawn had an expansive social network at their disposal, the connectedness of the DFW Boyz was even broader. Founded in one neighborhood, the group had dispersed over time. The group's interaction patterns were less dense than in previous years, but the scope of their influence was much broader. As members moved into different areas, they maintained the gang's name but started their own independently operating subgroups. Shawn and Layboy closely

interacted with a small group of DFW Boyz who lived with or around them, and they continued to attract new members. This fracturing and expanding of the gang also happened with other members of the DFW Boyz in other neighborhoods. The entire gang got together periodically, but most members spent their days hanging around with a few select members.

This expansive but loosely affiliated network was ideal for building and maintaining reputations. As a general rule, information is diffused more efficiently through loose but expansive social networks (Granovetter 1973 and 1983). In contrasting networks that are characterized by dense routine interactions, members spend most of their social energy on each other, and they do not routinely interact with people outside the group. Therefore, information tends to circulate quickly throughout the group, but it does not flow beyond the group. When social ties are loose, however, each group member interacts with people outside that group. Information circulating within the group is more likely to be disseminated to a broader social environment through the loose but expansive social ties. Layboy and Shawn's response to the aforementioned fight probably circulated throughout the extended DFW Boyz' network. Moreover, the story was told repeatedly at social gatherings with old acquaintances who were eager to hear about the latest street gossip. As more people heard about their exploits, the reputations of Layboy, Shawn, and the DFW Boyz became solidified to a growing number of people. They became known in Naptown.

"We put in work," agreed Dre. "When you say, 'DFW Boyz,' people just know."

I knew what "work" meant, but I wanted them to clarify the meaning of the term, so I asked, "What's work?"

Dre responded, "What's work? A lot of work. Fighting people, hanging around letting people know who we is."

"Walking around all day," added C-Note. "You know, if someone asks who we is, we tell them who we is. We let them know. They ain't going to try nothing."

For clarification I asked, "Is fighting how you got your reputation?"

"Something like that, something like that," responded Dre.

Shawn, always in tune with the nuances of social life, also acknowledged the role of relationships in developing his reputation. Likability

mattered in the streets, even if one was disposed to violence. His reputation, though grounded in a propensity for violence, was greatly enhanced by a broad network of people who liked him and remained in contact with him. "I wouldn't say that's how I got my reputation. Me being me, doing what I do, I play lots of sports, so people know me from that too. Me just standing my ground wherever I go. I been to almost every IPS [Indianapolis Public Schools] school, put out for fighting basically. And that's it. I done lived in a lot of places anyways. What we did, moved from house to house, grandma, aunt, uncles and all that. I was just about everywhere, I know just about everybody. From south to north—it really don't matter."

"I earned my reputation in school," said Dre. "Being bad, clowning in school."

"So how did you get your reputation in school?"

"Clowning in school," replied Dre.

"Doing what?"

Dre attempted to clarify, "Talking back to the teachers. Clowning, clowning on people who think they hard."

Shawn, aware that we sometimes spoke a different language, directed Dre, "Explain clowning, he don't understand clowning."

"Ho'ing [embarrassing] people basically," he clarified. "Ho'ing people who think they hard [tough]. Walk around the hallways, skip class all day. Get with friends all day."

School is a staging area (see Anderson 1990). It is a public place where a large number of peers come together and struggle to establish reputations. Interactions, especially those that are violent or intended to intimidate, occur in front of a sea of peers who are eager to tell others about the unfolding drama. Identities are presented, assessed, challenged, and maintained or destroyed (Garot 2010). For the boys in this conversation, the school setting was a great place to both embarrass peers and become known.

"How many fights have you been in at school?"

Layboy ended his silence by answering, "I haven't been in that much at school, like three. Three, four, like three."

Shawn explained how his willingness to fight in middle school established his reputation, and he did not have to fight anymore. "Well, back in the day I used to fight all the time in school but lately I ain't. Last

time I been in a fight was eighth grade, 'cause I used to fight all the time in middle school. I used to fight all the time in the streets. When a new kid came to school he don't really know a lot about what's going on. Biggest dude in the school, everybody like, 'Shawn slap him real quick, see what he going to do.' He like 'Don't touch my face,' but you know, me being me, I slapped him anyways. He pushed me against some tables. I sat there and thought about it real quick. Should I bang him up and get suspended for five days or should I let him slide? For one, me being me, everybody like, 'He pushed Shawn and he didn't do nothing. He got ho'ed in front of everybody.' So I had to turn him around and bang him up. After that everybody already knew so during freshman year everybody like 'there he go' whoopity woo woo. Spread the word. Everybody already know me from middle school anyway."

"Do you have any problems going into other parts of the city where people don't know you?"

"Sometimes," replied Shawn. "It depends on how we going over there. If we going over there disrespectful type stuff, then you going to have problems. If you just going over there to walk around, then somebody, whoever thinks they the hardest will come up to you, 'who is you, who is this?' Know what I'm saying? Other than that, some people is neutral, they cool. Somebody might give you a little look, might not say nothing, though. If we go over there all wild, if we go over there with some problems and be hyper or whatever, then we go over and start something."

Layboy again reiterated, "We don't talk though."

Shawn agreed, "We ain't about to go over there and rap to people."

Layboy responded, "We don't rap to people, actions speak for themselves."

"We about to go outside and split him right here [beat up]," agreed Shawn. "It's going to be that, plain and simple."

"There's all those niggas that just be rapping," said Layboy with a noticeable amount of disdain.

"So you just react?"

"Yeah. Be down for whatever."

This was the message that members of the DFW Boyz wanted to communicate to the rest of the intergang environment. They were down for whatever. Too many self-defined gang members embraced the

superficial symbols of gang members. The so-called gang members were willing to talk like gang members, question other members' affiliation, and even threaten or demean other groups, but they were not real gang members. They were wannabes who were unable to support their ganglike performances with actual acts of violence. The DFW Boyz, by contrast, demonstrated a willingness and ability to engage in violent activities. They were known for violence and were, therefore, considered legitimate gang members. Anyone not recognizing this fact was either trying to look tough by talking shit or was ignorant of the Indianapolis streets. The behavior of the boys was congruent with environmental expectations, and, according to their accounts, many in Indianapolis accepted this to be true.

Still, developing a wide reputation did not happen quickly. Shawn and Layboy confidently maintained that the DFW Boyz quickly became known in the streets of Indianapolis, but their reputations had not become fully established. I once asked Michael, who was a few years older and loosely associated with Shawn and Layboy, about the boys' reputations.

"Are Shawn and Layboy individually known?"

He affirmatively responded, "Yeah, they individually known. I talk to people who know them. They like the leaders of the thing [DFW Boyz]."

"What's their reputation?"

"It's decent," Michael replied, but then added, "They ain't too big because they young. But I give them a few years doing the same stuff. Because DFW Boyz just started not too long ago. So I give them a few years and they be known all over the place."

For teenage gang members in this study, the struggle to become known was a continuous endeavor. As their reputations for violence expanded, their legitimacy in the intergang environment also increased. When Shawn and Layboy entered unfamiliar social settings where peers questioned their legitimacy, their need to expand their reputations continued. Even if they were to establish themselves as legitimate gang members within the intergang environment, maintaining that status would become a paramount concern. Legitimacy in the intergang environment could be lost, so reputations had to be cultivated and safely guarded. As long as the boys remained invested in their position within

the intergang environment, the need to build and maintain their reputations would never cease.

CONCLUSION

In a skeptical environment where participants employ innumerable subjective and self-serving definitions of gang, one's capacity for violence can potentially clarify any ambiguity. An act of violence effectively communicates to both the victim and outside observers that a gang member's behaviors are congruent with environmental expectations. If a gang or gang member is subject to dismissive appraisals, an act of violence is a proper and effective retort. However, violent behavior is not impervious to the dilution narrative, as time and social distance can mute the effect of a single violent act. Gang members must work to establish well-known reputations for violence. They must become familiar figures in the intergang environment and continuously convince peers that they are willing and able to engage in violent behavior. They must use peer networks to disseminate information that supports their claims of gang affiliation.

A reputation can become widely embraced in the intergang environment, but it may not always reflect one's actual willingness and ability to use violence. In the streets of Indianapolis, as in other social environments, some gang members are adept at self-promotion, while others are not. Some gang members are able to convince peers that they are willing to use violence, while others are not convincing. To some extent, this ability is grounded in one's actual proclivity for violence. The few gang members who demonstrate an extreme capacity for violence presumably do not have to work hard to cultivate a reputation. Conversely, extremely passive gangs or gang members are probably limited in their ability to generate a believable reputation for violence. Most gang members, however, are neither extremely passive nor extremely violent. Most gang members sporadically engage in violent behavior, in part to build or maintain a reputation, but they also use those episodes to create an exaggerated reputation for aggressiveness. The perceived ubiquity of violence in the intergang environment is, therefore, both a reality and a myth. Relative to their non-gang counterparts, gang members do engage in exceedingly high levels of violence, they talk about violence, and they are always aware of the threat of violence.

But, for most gang members, actual acts of violence rarely occur in the context of day-to-day life. Indeed, the need to cultivate a reputation for violence is more salient than the need to actually engage in violence.

Most reputations in the intergang environment are loosely based on gang members' actual behavior. This is good in the sense that gang members' violent public personas tend to be more extreme than their routine behaviors, but it can also be problematic. If building a well-known reputation in the intergang environment offsets environmental uncertainty, questions about the accuracy of one's reputation undermines a gang member's pursuit of legitimacy. Like the status of being a real gang member, one's reputation can also be questioned. Gang members continuously work to become known in the streets, and they try to control how they are known. Short of engaging in excessive levels of violence, there is no guarantee that gang members will be able to fully control how others perceive them. Lacking this control, many gang members may not be able to fully resolve the paradox of legitimacy. Skepticism and derision continue even as they become known to a greater number of environmental participants. They are left pursuing an illusion of legitimacy, which, they believe, will come as they convince skeptics that they are indeed willing and able to use violence.