Introduction

Real Men, Real Gangs

Before our interview, I had been told that 28-year-old James\(^1\) was “a real thug.” I had also heard he was “a gangbanger,” “a Blood,” “in and out of jail,” “tatted up,” and “a drug dealer,” but I still wasn’t quite sure what to expect. True to form, his gang’s symbols and colors, as well as a version of its name, were tattooed on his temples and the areas surrounding his eyes. To further show his loyalty, he was dressed almost head-to-toe in red: red shirt, red leather sports jacket, red shoes, but dark grey jeans. He wore his hair in dreads, but they had grown out from his scalp somewhat. I started by asking him about his family growing up, to which he exclaimed, “Family, fuck that.” He proceeded to tell me about a difficult childhood that included his father’s absence and his own physical and sexual abuse. I then asked about his neighborhood, which he described as “rough,” violent, and riddled with drug activity. He went so far as to suggest, “somebody can die right in front of you, and like, it’s just another day.” Fatalistically, he described his negative experiences growing up as “typical Black male shit.”

With 12 years of gang involvement under his belt, James had one of the longest gang histories of all my research participants; 3 of those years were spent in prison. During the interview, he pulled out a palm-sized bag of weed and began to roll blunts (marijuana cigars) and subsequently smoke them, his speech sometimes becoming muffled because he was trying to speak without exhaling. I learned that he also sold weed, and he described it as the job he used to support his son, though he mentioned that he wanted to stop spending money on “stupid shit” and become an “entrepreneur” by starting his own janitorial business.
This scene isn’t unique for gang researchers. Stories of neighborhood conflict, participation in violence, drug selling, and incarceration are common in our work. However, James and I also spent time discussing how he came to realize that he was attracted to other men, his long-term relationship with his boyfriend, and his desire to come out as bisexual to his family of origin and his fellow gang members, all of whom were heterosexual. It would seem that this wrinkle *does* make James’s story unique, as there is virtually no research that has documented the lived experiences of gay gang members. On the contrary, however, James wasn’t the first of my research participants to share these revelations: he was referred to my study by his boyfriend, who was also involved with another straight street gang, and I had already interviewed dozens of other gay or bisexual gang members. In fact, there were a few other gay gang members in the apartment waiting for us to finish up the interview, and several more who would join us later that evening to attend a hip hop-themed night at a local gay club.

I should note that this is not a case of queer² Columbus exceptionalism: “homo thugs” and gay gang- and crime-involved men have been referenced and depicted in documentaries, television series, reality shows, music, and print media over the last several decades, probably the most well-known being Omar Little from *The Wire*. It’s just that they have received little to no attention in scholarly works, and thus are poorly understood and incompletely portrayed.

After the interview, we joined the rest of the guys in the living room. James went to the fridge and cracked open a Budweiser. I couldn’t help wondering if this was his drink of choice because of the red label. He slowly paced between the kitchen and the living room, beer in one hand, his other hand near his low waistband, and still never took off his coat. This all made me think he wasn’t completely at ease with this crowd, or was on his way out the door. Despite this, he participated in the conversation somewhat, though his contributions were less animated than
those offered by the other speakers. His boyfriend, Spiderman, walked by and quietly said something to him. They went into the hallway, out of view of almost everyone else, presumably to talk privately. I happened to see them sneak a quick kiss so I immediately looked away, feeling as though I saw something intimate that I was not meant to see. They joined us in the living room shortly afterwards, and the conversation resumed.

Later that evening, several members of the Royal Family, an all-gay gang with at least 15 members, came over to eat the dinner Ricky cooked before we headed to the club. James had left by that point. One of the Royal Family’s members is Imani, a 21-year-old African-American man I’ve known since he was 15 or 16. We had met in 2006 at the LGBTQ drop-in youth center. Although I am several years older than he is, at the time we met, we were both seeking services and opportunities for gay activism; this is also true for the other members of the initial group of participants in my study. This youth center is located in Columbus, Ohio, the city where I grew up and the same city where I recruited these young men to participate in this study.

One of my earliest memories of Imani was when he came to the center and told us about a confrontation with several young men on his way home from school. After two instances of them harassing him for being gay, following him, and attempting to jump him, he felt compelled to fight back. During this fight, Imani ended up cutting one of the assailants. I had not thought about this incident in several years, until he recounted the story in detail during his interview a couple of months prior to this particular evening. Imani had recently joined the Royal Family after a chance physical encounter with a group of college-aged men who harassed him and his friends, calling them “faggots” and following them on a public street in a gay-friendly part of town. Several of his relatives were deeply immersed in street gangs, but he had never joined these groups. He supported himself financially with small-time hustles and help from his parents,
with whom he lived and who were fully aware of his sexual orientation. On the weekends, Imani competed in a semi-underground dance scene, referred to by different people as “vogue,” “ballroom,” or just “balls,” where he typically wore gender-bending outfits. He had even “dressed up” in women’s clothes to sell sex. He always has been talkative, boisterous, and flamboyant, which belies his willingness to fiercely defend himself and his friends.

James and Imani—and their gangs—clearly are very different from each other, but on the whole, they each share many similar experiences with other young men in gangs. However, their gay sexual identities complicate criminology’s portraits of gangs, gang members, and gang life. Although gay gang- and crime-involved men have entered the broader consciousness thanks to popular culture, criminology scholars remain stuck in a “heterosexual imaginary” where assumed heterosexuality is not questioned, where queer folks don’t exist, and the possibility of men such as James, Imani, and Omar seems at best unlikely and at worst, impossible.

This book is a response to two specific assumptions that pervade much of the existing criminological research: first, that male gang members and active offenders are exclusively heterosexual; and second, that gang membership and violence are ways to construct stereotypical masculine and heterosexual identities only, typically at the expense of women/girls, gay men, and folks who don’t seem to follow society’s gender “rules.” These assumptions likely have resulted from the association of violence and other criminal behavior with traditional scripts of masculinity. In many ways, illegal pursuits such as street robbery and violence are described, by criminologists and many perpetrators themselves, as essentially “masculine games.” More specifically, street gangs are regarded as hypermasculine groups, and may even have prohibitions against same-sex sexual activity. Indeed, some of the early and influential works in criminology, such as Walter Miller’s articulation of his “focal concerns” theory, outline how
gay bashing, using “fag” and “queer” as epithets, and an expressed disdain for effeminacy (often associated with gayness) are components of the masculine toughness valued by delinquent peer groups. These scholarly works exist alongside cultural stereotypes of gay men as effeminate pacifists, which has also influenced where they do appear in criminological texts: as victims of anti-gay bias crimes, homophobic bullying in schools, and intimate partner violence.

Additionally, historian Allen Bérubé argues that the political strategies used by the mainstream gay rights movement perpetuate stereotypes of gay men as white and middle-class in order to win “credibility, acceptance, and integration.” All of these influences have kept the gang and crime lives of young gay men largely unexplored by scholars.

I seek to critically interrogate these assumptions by investigating the experiences of 53 gay gang- and crime-involved men. I will provide an in-depth understanding of how these men construct and negotiate both masculine and gay identities through gang membership and criminal involvement. In order to produce such an understanding, I explore the neighborhood, peer, and familial contexts of these young men’s lives, but especially as they relate to forming, disclosing, and negotiating gay identities. I combine qualitative data generated by in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork with gay gang- and crime-involved men with threads of criminological scholarship, such as research on masculinity construction through gang membership and crime commission and the impact of organizational characteristics (in this case, gang sexual orientation) on gang members’ experiences. I also frame these analyses with concepts from other academic disciplines, as criminology and criminal justice scholarship alone lacks some of the tools necessary to understand these men’s lives.

Performances of Masculine Identity
This study is guided by symbolic interactionism, a social science theoretical framework which argues that actions and the meanings we assign to them are socially situated and are performed for real or presumed audiences. Gender is one such performance, where we are held accountable for our displays of masculinity or femininity and whether it conforms to society’s expectations. Transgressing these boundaries can get you stigmatized, laughed at, ostracized, or worse. The ways we are expected to “do gender” can be affected by other social statuses, such as our race, class, and sexual orientation. Men are especially bound to rigid standards of masculinity, where they are expected to exert power over women and achieve prestige within institutions—for example, “climbing the corporate ladder”—which might include using aggressive behavior or force. This concept is often referred to as “hegemonic masculinity,” and is perpetuated most often by white men in power. Normative masculinity, including heterosexuality, is what is considered standard, idealized, and expected, and becomes the yardstick by which men are measured. Within this meaning system, men who do not follow these standards are given less status and respect than men who do. Much of this book deals with how gay men make sense of, respond to, and resist this imposed masculinity and heteronormativity.

Some scholars argue that members of less powerful groups, such as non-white and/or poor men, perform masculinity that places a higher value on violence or on gaining respect through ways of making money that might not be fully legal, because they are often excluded from legitimate employment. Masculine performances could include the “cool pose,” in which Black males exaggerate heterosexuality in order to gain status and prestige when other avenues are blocked or absent. Markers of masculinity include respect, violence, independence, sexual prowess, and the exclusion of gay males. Furthermore, urban sociologist Elijah Anderson notes that when symbols of success such as employment are difficult to acquire in poor, urban areas,
respect becomes the currency of the street. In the extreme, a violent death may be preferential to being “dissed.”18 In these contexts, young men may perceive that the potential of “being labeled a punk” exists “every time you walk up that street,”19 which produces the motivation to project aggressive attitudes. Men who enact these forms of masculinity may view themselves as resistant to the dominant cultural system (even when their behavior looks pretty close to the “mainstream” version),20 but such options need more exploration. Sociologist Jody Miller notes that the emphasis on typical gendered actions prevents an understanding of how these acts are responses to exclusion of varied forms.21 Nearly all forms of masculinity contain many of the same basic “masculine norms,” which include dominance, power over women, physical toughness, pursuit of status, and “disdain for homosexuals.”22

The tension should be clear: race- and class-based differences have been theorized, but what about the masculinity of gay men? Gay men may value the honor-based masculinity valued by heterosexual men, but they may have to do additional “identity work” because their sexuality is in opposition to the traditional masculine ideal. Gay men arguably have fewer resources with which to perform traditional masculinity (such as a lack of sexual relationships with women), though they may not value this masculinity over other forms. They also may be the target of violence committed by other men in search of masculine status. Gay men’s claims to masculinity are therefore more tenuous, and the risk for status challenges is ever-present. This risk is heightened when their mannerisms are inconsistent with what is expected of men, and perhaps even more so for non-normatively gendered gay men of color. By appropriating the aggressive masculinity implicit in the “cool pose,” gay men can attempt to protect themselves from those who may wish to challenge feminine men. Of his own identity work, one gay, Black, New York City club goer commented to a Village Voice reporter: “A lot of people don’t like faggots. There
are all these myths about faggots being soft and feminine, like you’re lacy and wear chiffon and listen to Barbra Streisand. Straight-up homies, nigaz, and thugz can do what they want. You can walk through projects and be gay. But you can’t walk through the project and be a faggot, because that’s when they’ll mock and harass.”23 Acutely aware of what was culturally expected of him as an urban Black male, the speaker avoided harassment with this performance of “thug” masculinity.

Of course, the literature on masculine performance is in no way limited to criminology. Indeed, most of the scholarly work on gay men’s constructions of masculinity and gay identity appears elsewhere. Diverse sources evaluate important topics such as gay men’s experiences and challenges as fathers,24 their negotiations of race, culture, and sexuality,25 reconciling religion with gayness,26 and their resistance strategies via avenues such as mainstream LGBTQ political movements.27 I argue that, in order to be seen as fully realized individuals, analyses of gay gang- and crime-involved men should focus on the methods they use to construct masculine and gay identities, including but in no way limited to gang membership and crime commission. To draw from the examples above, how does James reconcile being a gang member, drug dealer, and a bisexual (though mostly closeted) man? How does Imani marshal masculine resources to prove his fortitude, in light of negative assumptions about him as an openly gay man? In terms of criminological or other social science work, there is little from which to draw, which makes prioritizing participants’ own meanings to be of central importance.

Gay Men Becoming Visible

Why are gay men mostly absent in criminology and criminal justice research? First, the literature focuses on gay men’s victimization and thus implies that gay men have little agency.
That is, many scholars assume gay men have little choice or power to control interpersonal interactions, and are fairly silent on whether or not gay men engage in serious crime, including violent street crimes, for comparable reasons as other similarly-situated men. Second, this coverage provides an incomplete picture regarding their involvement in gangs, violence, and crime, not only by a lack of attention to these issues, but partially by obscuring factors relating to identity construction. For example, existing research is of little help in illustrating whether gay identity plays any role in a young person’s decision to join a gang, or in considering what type of gang to join. And, further, it provides very little insight about how urban gay men perceive their own criminality in light of expectations within criminal subcultures about hypermasculinity.

How do marginalization and exclusion shape attitudes towards femininity and gayness, which could be either downplayed or celebrated in the course of young men’s daily lives and their gang/criminal involvement? These are but a few of the unanswered questions that hold promise for better understanding the meanings, identities, and social worlds of gay gang- and crime-involved urban young men.

To be clear: it is commendable that scholars have given attention to the victimization of LGBTQ people, and I am indebted to the pioneers who came before me and blazed new paths regarding research on anti-LGBTQ victimization, same-sex intimate partner abuse, and the experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools. However, I encourage moving beyond victimization’s patterns, characteristics, and effects, and seeking understanding about responses and resistance to victimization. For example, the literature includes little information on whether or not gay men “fight back” against their attackers, despite a cultural context where men are encouraged to defend themselves aggressively and to correct emasculating scenarios. Some research has discussed LGBTQ young people who physically retaliate when they are homophobically bullied
in schools, but it’s much more common for research to focus on bullying’s consequences like negative school outcomes and increased depression, suicide attempts, and substance use. Although these are fundamentally important issues to consider, these experiences have largely been disconnected from other findings regarding LGBTQ youths’ avenues for resiliency and agency, or even their defensive strategies. For example, research suggests sexual minority youth are more likely to engage in fighting and weapons carrying than their peers, but the extent to which these acts are defensive in nature is unclear. Although I am fully aware that blurring the lines between victims and perpetrators can be less than savory from a sociopolitical standpoint, investigating responses to structural or situational exclusion, with attention to intersecting social statuses, is necessary to provide a more dynamic portrait of how people are actually responding to or participating in violent encounters.

Finally, there is virtually no academic research on gay gang-involved men; the research that can shed any light on gay-identified gang members suggests they participate in gay-bashing incidents to construct masculine personas and to conceal their sexual identities from their gangs. The research on gang-involved young lesbians suggests the opposite—gang involvement to fight back against school-based, anti-lesbian harassment. In light of the existence of so few sources to give us insight about queer peoples’ gang membership and how heterosexism contextualizes those experiences, nuanced analyses are critically important.

Such heteronormative and victim-focused scholarly coverage of gay men in particular has likely resulted not only from a de-coupling of gay identity and hegemonic masculinity, but the subsequent assumption that all hypermasculine men must be heterosexual. Even the sources that flirt with queer peoples’ agency and involvement in violence focus on their school-based experiences, without similar investigation into the experiences of queer young people in their
neighborhoods and communities. This is especially true for urban queer people of color.\textsuperscript{38} Having seen firsthand how resilient and strong LGBTQ people can be, I am particularly struck by such static depictions. By being represented solely as passive victims of bias crimes, intimate partner violence, or homophobic bullying, they are regarded as lacking the ability to respond to and resist their victimization. I and other scholars centrally involved in the development of queer criminology refute these assumptions and argue that LGBTQ persons should be seen as fully realized citizens with the same capabilities as others—including those for gang and crime involvement.\textsuperscript{39} In my days as a young queer activist, I couldn’t have predicted that I’d now be repeating, “We CAN be gang members and we CAN commit crimes!” Radical gay liberation groups such as Queer Nation have encouraged LGBTQ people to fight back, both literally and figuratively: against society’s devaluing of their lives and in scenarios where they might be actual victims of violence.\textsuperscript{40} Resistance can take many forms, and this book explores some that have been vastly underrepresented or explored. I draw from the sensibilities that characterize queer criminology: providing deep and nuanced investigation into LGBTQ people’s experiences with crime, victimization, and the criminal justice system; critiquing mainstream criminology’s assumptions, which are reproduced in its theories and studies; and working towards reducing invisibility, inequality, and injustice.\textsuperscript{41}

Experiences with victimization, discrimination, or marginalization likely play important roles in decisions to enact violence, join gangs, participate in illicit economies, and/or commit other crimes. However, without exploration into individuals’ responses or resistance to their exclusion, these experiences remain unclear, and our understanding partial, continuing to render LGBTQ peoples’ lives as less than whole.
Voices that Matter

The guiding framework for this book is that identity construction is an interactive process, sometimes called “identity work.” Sociologist Amy Best notes that much of the scholarship on young people’s identity work views identities not just as “interactional work” but as “projects,” which are “formed out of the discursive repertoires youth use to make sense of, interpret and narrate their worlds.” Repertoires can include symbols and sites, as well as practices and ritual enactments. In this case, symbols might be manners of dress or tattoos; sites might be gay bars, homes, public streets, or vogue balls; and practices and ritual enactments might be gang involvement, selling drugs or sex, dancing, dating, and fighting back. I was able to see some of these symbols and practices and be present in these sites, but I draw extensively from young men’s narratives to understand repertoires more thoroughly.

Performances of identity include narratives as a way to “create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept.” Also known as “personal myths,” narratives are acts of imagination that integrate the past, present, and future in order to make a “compelling aesthetic statement” or an evaluative point about the self. Self-narratives also provide a way for us to make sense of our lives. In our self-stories, we aim to present ourselves as individuals who are consistent, competent, and moral; to do so, we must justify any untoward behavior with a socially situated account that seeks to assert the positive value of the act despite evidence to the contrary. By using speech to create accounts, our words have “the ability to throw bridges between the promised and the performed.” Accounts, or motives, reflect awareness of the possible consequences. Justifications, then, are meant to cognitively transform conceptions of the harmful behavior from “culpable” to “righteous” by arguing its social or moral value.
Common in narrative “identity work” is boundary maintenance, an impression management technique. Boundary maintenance is a way for us to present ourselves the way we’d truly like to be seen. We might stress the social distance between ourselves and other groups, especially those whom we personally deem less worthy of respect.\textsuperscript{51} Enforcing social distance may be especially important for individuals who already have little social status, and find it necessary to distance themselves from individuals or groups with whom an association would taint their claim to decency. For example, a drug user may characterize himself as a “hustler” but not a “crackhead”;\textsuperscript{52} a drug dealer may refer to himself as a “broker” or a “middleman” as opposed to a “real dealer.”\textsuperscript{53} The semantic boundaries narrators construct represent symbolic boundaries, or conceptual distinctions made by people in order to acquire status and claim group membership.\textsuperscript{54} In part, we define who we are by defining who we are not. The construction of identity is a constant interactive process.

The men in my study often considered the ways they would be perceived by others as a guiding concern in their performances of identity. Were they acting too gay or too feminine? Too weak or too inexperienced? The list of considerations was long. They endeavored to negotiate identity within a complex meaning system that in some ways necessitated forays into unfamiliar cultural territory. They wanted to lay claims to authentic, or “real” identities, by showing to what extent they were “real men,” members of “real gangs,” and whether their “realness” as gay men allowed them entitlement to masculine and gay respectability.

Men’s identity work that is present in the data includes a series of seemingly-contradictory propositions. Although gay men are perceived as weak and passive in popular culture, my participants were willing to advocate for themselves violently. Some joined straight gangs even though they knew they were gay, and many actually found a same-sex-oriented
underground world, even within these primarily-heterosexual gangs. However, they still presented traditional masculine personas to their gangs. The young men who joined gay gangs may have danced competitively, “dressed up” in women’s clothes to sell sex, and voiced deeply-held affection for their fellow gang members, but still brawled with, cut, and shot at their enemies, many of whom were in rival gay gangs. Moreover, for all of my research participants, their behavior went against several salient aspects of the masculine ideal, but they simultaneously endorsed many of these ideals and attempted to patrol the femininely-gendered behavior of other gay men. They fought to defend members of the gay community, even those who they deemed to be “fags,” despite an apprehension and distaste for these flamboyant men. They resisted stereotypes of gay and Black men as deadbeats and offenders, but in order to not be financial deadbeats themselves, they sometimes offended. Their social worlds and constructed meanings were contested, fluid, and context-dependent. These are the major themes that will be traced throughout this book.

Gay Gangsters in Columbus, Ohio

The men who will be described in this book ranged in age from 18 to 28, with an average age of 21.5. The sample was racially diverse, but the majority were men of color (77% Black or African-American, 11% white, 2% Latino, and 9% biracial). Over three-quarters had been arrested and over half had been incarcerated (77% and 55%, respectively), with a wide range of 2 days to 8 years of total incarceration. Forty-eight (91%) identified as a member or an affiliate of a gang, crew, clique, set, posse, or organization at some point in their lives. The remaining five men had also engaged in repeated criminal activity as part of a group, but denied that their groups were gangs. The eligibility requirements for the study included being 18 or older, male,
gay or bisexual, and either a gang member or involved in illegal activity. Participants selected their own “code names” for use in the study, some of which are quite stylized. Gang pseudonyms were also selected with participants’ help.

I met these men in a variety of ways, but primarily by getting in touch with people I used to know in Columbus—like Imani—and first interviewing them. I conducted face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each of the 53 participants, and spent additional time with about half of them to better understand their lives. This study is primarily interview-based, but also partially ethnographic. I also asked the initial sample to refer other men who fit the criteria and might be interested in talking to me. The Methods Appendix explains my data collection in fuller detail, including the sampling strategy, interviews, fieldwork, and sample.

During the interview, I asked each participant about his life history, his relationships and sexual identity, his gang and/or criminal experiences, his experience with the criminal and juvenile justice systems, and what it meant for him to “be a man,” among other topics. I spent considerable time with participants discussing their identity construction as gay men, including their masculinity. For example, I talked with each about how old he was when he first considered himself to be a man, what made him a man, and which words he would use to describe himself as a man. I also asked what qualities make someone a “real” man, whether they knew people who were not real men, and what qualities those men lacked or possessed. However, prior to my asking these questions directly, participants made many comments about “real men.” They also wanted to focus on other dimensions of realness: “real gangs,” men who were gay but who were not out, and which openly gay men were worthy of respect based on their behavior. In the analyses that follow, I try to capture the nuances of participants’ narratives.
Though I focus on identity construction and negotiation in this book, this focus is set within the context of most participants being gang members, many of whom were still actively involved. Participants represented 38 different gangs, with some belonging to multiple gangs over time. In order to evaluate differences in gang structures and their effects on the gang experience, I sought to compare gangs based on their sexual orientation composition, or their ratio of straight to gay, lesbian, or bisexual members. So, I asked participants to estimate what percentage of their gang’s members were gay, lesbian, or bisexual.\(^56\) Much variation existed among gangs with a majority of heterosexual members, ranging from “0% besides me” to nearly 50%. Several majority-heterosexual gangs had a substantial proportion of GLB members (one-quarter to nearly one-half), though most had a smaller proportion of GLB people (or at least identifiably or known gay members).\(^57\) Among the gangs with a majority of GLB members, they made up 100% or nearly 100% of the gang. Of the 48 current or former gang members in my study, 26 participants were or had been members of gangs with 100% or nearly 100% GLB members. I refer to these gangs as “gay gangs,” to the gangs with a critical mass of GLB people as “hybrid gangs,”\(^58\) and to the gangs with a small percentage of GLB members as “straight gangs.” This book is partially structured by these direct gang comparisons.

All of my participants lived in central Ohio, all but one living in Columbus’s metropolitan statistical area. Columbus is Ohio’s capital and is a very large city—the 15\(^{th}\) largest city in the U.S.,\(^59\) to most people’s surprise. Columbus is sometimes referred to as the “GLBT mecca of the Midwest,” as its gay pride parade draws 200,000 spectators and is one of the largest Pride festivals in both the Midwest and the country.\(^60\) Since 2010, the parades have regularly lasted two hours or longer, with a mixed bag of participants, including local community agencies, gay-owned or gay-friendly establishments, LGBTQ groups from large corporations,
elected officials, and candidates for public office. There are many places to go that welcome and celebrate the LGBTQ crowd, typically evidenced by rainbow flags or other visible LGBTQ symbols.

However, despite the existence of vibrant and enduring gay communities in several Ohio cities, as recently as 2007, Ohio as a whole ranked 51 out of 50 states and the District of Columbia on an index of legal protections and tolerance for LGBT individuals. In 2004, Ohio voters passed Issue 1, an amendment to the Ohio constitution that defined marriage as a union between one man and one woman. This measure banned performing same-sex marriages and recognizing such marriages performed in other states. Sixty-two percent of all Ohio voters supported Issue 1; fifty-two percent of voters in Franklin County (which houses Columbus) supported it. The percentage of voters who supported Issue 1 in Franklin County was smaller than any other county in Ohio. Although Ohio passed a version of the Comprehensive Safe Schools Act in 2012, it did not specifically enumerate protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Nearly all (98%) of sexual minority students surveyed in Ohio have heard “gay” used in a negative way. And it was a plaintiff from Ohio whose marriage equality case made it all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States as the history-making Obergefell v. Hodges (2015). All of this suggests that Ohio has some distance to travel in order to be a safer and more welcoming place for queer and gender non-conforming people.

What about gangs in Columbus? As it is a major city, Columbus is not immune to gang problems. Larger cities are more likely to report long-standing gang problems than smaller ones, but Columbus is not classified as a “chronic” gang city. Instead, it is classified as an “emergent” gang city because its gang problem arose after 1985. Criminologist Ronald Huff argues that by 1985, Columbus’s political leaders could no longer deny the gang problem after
several highly-publicized incidents, including gang-related assaults on both the governor’s daughter and the mayor’s son.67

Today, political leaders no longer deny the problem; they use it as a platform. In a 2011 interview with The Columbus Dispatch where he announced his intent to run for a fourth term as mayor, incumbent Michael B. Coleman identified “the gang problem” as an area of focus in his upcoming campaign and possible continued tenure as mayor.68 Attempts to suppress gang activity in Columbus include “sweeps” of public areas where gangs are believed to sell drugs, such as downtown parks.69 While Columbus gangs might call themselves Bloods, Crips, or Gangster Disciples, research in Columbus has revealed most gangs to be “homegrown” and not “chapters” of gangs from chronic gang cities (such as Los Angeles or Chicago) or connected to a nationwide network of gang members.70

Despite being in tune with the existence of gangs in Columbus, the gay gangs have not garnered any media attention that I am aware of. An issue that I consistently grapple with when talking to other people about this research is whether the groups represented in my sample (especially the all-gay ones) are “real” gangs, and whether my participants are actually gang members. I have lamented this issue elsewhere—multiple times, in fact71—and it is no doubt related not only to stereotypical expectations about gang members but also to the thriving debate in the gang literature about what constitutes a “gang,” and a recognition that members’ self-descriptions of “gangs” may differ between and among different groups. I should specify that no matter which definition of gang is used, nearly all gangs and gang members in my sample fit with the dominant criminological definitions of gangs, such as the Eurogang Programme of Research definition: they are durable, street-oriented youth groups whose identity includes involvement in illegal activity.72 They even square with many law enforcement definitions of
gangs. For example, each is also an “ongoing formal or information organization, association, or group of three or more persons” that has common identifiers, a pattern of criminal activity, and the commission of criminal offenses as one of its primary activities. I note instances where participants’ gangs depart from some attribute of these two definitions in later chapters, but I reiterate that such instances were extremely rare.

Beyond this, my research participants self-identify as gang members, though many prefer to use an alternate term for their group, such as “posse” or “clique.” According to criminologist Finn Esbensen and colleagues, the self-nomination technique has been found to be “a particularly robust measure of gang membership capable of distinguishing gang from nongang youth.” And still other definitions situate gangs within the social structure. In their definition of a gang, David Brotherton and Luis Barrios propose characteristics such as providing “a resistant identity, an opportunity to be collectively and individually empowered, [and] a voice to speak back to and challenge the dominant culture.” My analyses also include reflection on these elements.

Resistance in Action

In the chapters that follow, I explore these men’s identities and social worlds. Though I do discuss their gang activities and behavior, I focus more on what life is like for gay men who are gang involved: their experiences, how they see themselves, and their relationships with others, all through the lenses of being male, gay, and gang affiliated. Part I focuses on constructing and understanding gay identity, with Chapters 1 and 2 exploring the cultural messages participants have been exposed to and internalized regarding gay men and “fags,” framing these analyses within the context of men’s early life experiences, coming out stories, and personal opinions about such matters. Part II presents a comparative portrait of the experiences.
of men in gay, straight, and hybrid gangs, evaluated in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, respectively. Such experiences are largely determined by the sexual orientation compositions of their gangs. I investigate dimensions such as getting into gangs, activities engaged in with gang members, and how being either “out” or closeted structures the gang experience, particularly as it related to negotiating gay identity. In keeping with the theme of negotiating acceptable and unacceptable gay male identity and resistance, Part 3 explores two possible forms of resistance. Chapter 6 details participants’ violent responses to anti-gay harassment and threats of violence, which I call fighting back, and these responses’ role in identity construction. I round out the analyses with an exploration of participants’ involvement in underground economies in Chapter 7. I discuss how these men balanced stereotypes and participation in illegal money-making activities in order to construct respectable masculine and gay identity in the face of structural constraints. I end the book by reflecting on boundaries in the Conclusion, both as they relate to academic work and to the tensions and contradictions present in participants’ narratives. Throughout, I contextualize participants’ narratives as responses and resistance to exclusion.

With this book, my hope is not to talk about gay gang members in ways that exoticize them, but in nuanced ways that provide a better understanding of their daily lives and social worlds. My goal is to complicate what we think we know about gang members and gay men, because it is quite easy to believe that gang members behave one way and gay men behave another, with little overlap between the two. Indeed, James and Spiderman can’t share that kiss just anywhere, and not all urban young gay men are as self-assured as Imani. However, these three men and dozens more wanted to speak to me about their lives, suggesting a desire to bring their experiences out of fuzzy shadows and rumors and instead into focus, to confront stereotypes and claims made about them, and for us to instead take seriously the claims made by
them. This isn’t just a book about gay gang members in Columbus, Ohio, but an attempt to provide some insight into what it means to be gay in contexts that seem like they provide little opportunity to do so. The men in my study make their own way when a path doesn’t seem to be available. This book is a story of these paths toward empowerment.