

EDGEWORK: GETTING CLOSE, GETTING CUT, GETTING OUT

by Bradley L. Garrett

References: ¹ Hunter S. Thompson, *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales From a Strange Time*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003); ² Stephen Lyng, *Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking*, *The American Journal of Sociology*, 95 (1990), 881-886; ³ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Athlone Press, 1988); ⁴ Scott Smith, *Glitched Out* (Online: Changeist, 2012); ⁵ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); ⁶ Stephen Graham, *Olympics 2012 Security: Welcome to Lockdown London*, *Guardian*, 12 March 2012; ⁷ William Gurstelle, *Take smart risks* (Online: Wired, 2009); ⁸ Stephen Lyng, *Edgework: A social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking*, *The American Journal of Sociology*, 95 (1990), 881-886; ⁹ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (London: Vintage, 1987). All link src: "Bradley Garrett" year="2010-2012" format="digital photography"

BIO: **Bradley L. Garrett** is a researcher, writer, photographer and filmmaker with a nocturnal second life as an urban explorer. He holds a PhD in social and cultural geography from Royal Holloway, University of London. His new book, *Piece Hacking: Tales of Urban Exploration* will be released by Verso in the Fall of 2013. Details of his recent research, film projects, and a list of current publications can be found at www.piecehacking.co.uk

[Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you.]
Jean Paul Sartre

November, 2010. My body was jammed in a heaving mass of people climbing through a large ground floor window at London's Millbank Tower. Terrified workers fled the Conservative party headquarters as angry students flooded in to temporarily occupy the building. Next to me, a line of severely outnumbered riot police were having their Alamo moment—holding their ground whilst being pelted with signs from the rabid throng. Some looked scared, and others like they were loving the action. Voices cracking, protesters bounced office furniture out of the remaining windows; papers and rocks, and then a fire extinguisher, flew off the roof. It was all pretty dramatic, as England goes.

The process of nudging my way into what felt like a progressively unstable situation—walking the edge of my personal chaotic capacity—was enticingly liberating. It had a visceral effect that registered, slightly erogenously, in an undulating energy flow between my heart and bowels. It was my first encounter with a new kind of urban edgework—a lusty, breathless clutch that left me itching to feel it again. In the months after Millbank, I folded that neural dawn into my everyday life as an ethnographer amongst urban explorers—groups of people sneaking into places they are not supposed to. I fell in love with London all over again, with the community we had there, and with the rush of working the edges of fear and desire.

'Edgework' was first coined by gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, he uses it to describe people's need to push boundaries in their search for personal fulfilment.¹ The idea is to work as close to the 'edge' as one can, without getting cut—or at least not too deeply. The sociologist Steven Lyng later appropriated 'edgework' in the 1990s as a blanket term for anyone who "actively seek[s] experiences that involve a high potential for personal injury or death."² Lyng went on to explain edgework as a negotiation between "life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, and sanity and insanity."³

Thing is, edges are like rainbows. As you approach them, they put the moves on you and shimmer away to a new location. And as urban explorers, we have put a lot of effort into 'getting cut' over the last few years—running down Tube tunnels after the trains have retired to their yards, and scaling skyscrapers in the middle of the night to teeter over the glowing, throbbing city partying below. While these tendencies to embrace terror may, from a societal perspective, reveal a deep personal dysfunction—or simply mark us out as the geeks we always were—our taunts with death also induce an unhinged euphoria. The ability to create situations of controlled chaos hones the edges of life experience, and the 'everyday' is shifted into previously impossible formulations. It demonstrates that "what we make history with is the matter of a becoming, not the subject matter of a story."⁴

The human body undertaking edgework is a becoming body, a body on the verge of interior supersapienism. Through time, this has been the allure of exploration, from the prehistoric nomad striking out into the unknown to find new food sources, to the polar trekker confronting a lonely, shitty, icy death to be the first to stand on a peak, to the modern urban citizen wiggling through a grate on a side street to abseil down an airshaft into a transportation network, because no one else had ever tried. This becoming body—the exploratory body—is a vulnerable body. It is under constant threat of capsization through sensory overindulgence and instantaneous evolutionary cognitive capsule bursts that create new situations, new awarenesses, and new places.

Take a moment to consider the *ensō*. It is, in Western terms, an imperfect circle, and suggests a lifetime of contemplation, exploration, encounter and ingestion; a 'perfect' embodiment of subjectivity. The perfect circle, in contrast, is a deeply inscribed space—a space of order, cleanliness, rectilinear stasis

and geometric certainty. Together, these figures represent being and becoming. The *ensō* also embodies the beauty of decay, the wonder of overflowing emotion, the terror of a cracking social façade, the messiness and impossible imaginations of childhood. In other words, the *ensō* contains far more edges than the perfect circle, and the inscription of the form is a process of actualising a fracture, rather than a result of completing a composition.

Since that day at Millbank, I have decided to embrace *ensō*; I have learned to fracture the inscribed circle of London to create approachable edges. Every fracture point

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rewires conditioned flow into a rouge urban circuitry, as we risk taking temporary control of proprietary spaces and off-limits architecture to create new neurological pathways that are manifested right in that kundalini hum zone. We've got allies, past and present, fighting the battle to slip the net on the streets and in cyberspace.

"In 1982, we ... could jam a screwdriver into the circuits because we faced no retribution. We could trip the computer and watch it fall, because it couldn't respond in kind. Now, in 2012, we can be bullied and controlled. We awake to news of drones laying waste to those on our terror watchlist. We are virtually stripped naked at airport security. We are witness to car accidents, prostitution, and murder on Google Earth. We are denied a loan because the formula says no. In short, the noose of technology has become tighter. We're developing a grudge. And when we dislike, we mock. We photobomb the system. We parody. We use code to avoid the encoded. Our current power politics are built on

technology, which is why many clap with glee when masked jokesters hack corporate Web sites, when mustachioed avatars front takedowns of intelligence agencies, when former Russian spies do lad-mag shoots, and hackers get talk shows. We get a chance to see these tools of power corrupted against 'the system.' Power structures: 932, people: 5. It's an unfair fight, but we can sleep at night knowing that the machine has a flaw, somewhere. Its vision is faulty, its logic not watertight. "⁵

Anthony Giddens notes that "if we mostly seem less fragile than we really are ... it is because of long-term learning processes whereby potential threats are avoided or immobilised."⁶ In other words, the neoliberal, privatised city suppresses embodied potential; it's making us weaker, and easier to control. And now, in the run-up to the 2012 Olympics, geographer Stephen Graham cautions us that London will enter into a new state of military urbanism.⁷ Surface-to-air missile systems will be installed on apartment complexes. Drones will dominate the skyline, and electric fences the eyeline. An aircraft carrier will dock in the Thames; snipers will scope us out. Whether or not these securitisation features make us any 'safer' is debatable. But the 'point' of this mobilisation is rather to instil terror in *us* and *them*, to push the one clean, clear, (dare we say circular?) plot found on every train: *Do not take any risks*. Cheers for the concern, but I'll take the plunge.

The twin aural tropes of 'mind the gap' and 'please stand behind the yellow line' are a hand on the collar of the knowledgeable, willing edgeworker. What I want to argue is that "done artfully and wisely, living dangerously engages

our intellect, advances society and ... makes us happier."⁸ Short-term loss of safety, allowing room for people to undertake life-affirming risks on their own terms, cultivates the creative city that the Olympic Delivery Authority wishes it could purchase.

This is our new circuitry. When we splice self and place, we invoke an uninvited meld of bodies into the urban body—whether through a headless, throbbing mass penetrating a politicised tower block, or through small teams of subversionists slipping through gaps and cracks, and gliding through the arteries of the city. We create new, vibrant urbanisms, the likes of which may never have existed, had we remained behind the yellow line. The creative city always resides at the edge defined by those honing it; pull the thread, and watch it unravel.

Processes of exploration don't just spawn affective desire; they also reveal urban abortions, mistakes, aberrations, and omissions. Rather than being embarrassed—as Transport for London seems to be about those faultlines—we might see these moments as opportunities to make mistakes while going into, getting out of, and dealing with those discoveries. Death chases us, and we fight back. We win until we don't anymore, life bubbling over the brim until the last dash. When Dan Osman, the edgeworker who jumped off cliffs on homemade rope swings, was asked if he had a deathwish, he responded, "no, I have a lifewish." As Lyng rightly points out, "risk taking [is] necessary for the well-being of some people," as individuals work to "develop capacities for competent control over environmental objects." Edgeworkers are thus inspired to "sometimes speak of a feeling of 'oneness' with the object or environment while undertaking these risks."⁹ That's why everytime I leave my house, London winks at me.

Indeed, the places with which many of us feel we have inscribed the deepest relationships with are where risks have been taken, social codes broken, new templates drawn up from desire and the fear has been transcended, or a suppressed passion discovered. I want a margin for error. I want to make mistakes. I want to learn on my own terms. I want to fuck it up sometimes. I want to die trying someday. I want to encounter this world, and my city, through this body I have on my own terms; I want the London direct feed pumped straight into my central nervous system when I am cut and for the meld to begin, where bodies and minds are neither substances nor subjects, but 'modes' of becoming. Urban subversion will always be more valuable than security, shopping opportunities, and smooth space to the edgeworker.

Urban explorers enrich collective capacity for sparkling pandemonium and, at the same time, foreground relationships to place and create geographies of affective desire. We are coercive emotion machines that produce breaks and mobilise flows, nude in sewers, hanging from cranes, in love with the endless accelerations of material layering that keep cracking open underneath the weight of seven billion human bodies. The city moves with us, constantly challenging us through its ceaseless mutations, sometimes cutting sweetly when we make a wrong move, and other times slapping us with the flat edge—back across the line to reassess our motives. I continue to wake up twisted in the sheets, panting, until our next bit of edgework is complete and the edge has been relocated. Edges, like rainbows, don't reappear, and the "the city knows only departures, not returns."¹⁰ See you out there on the whirling brink.

